

Could this be mourning? Although not bereft, was I in mourning?

It is told that a king set out on an adventure and was instructed to traverse a dreadful burial ground in search of a corpse dangling from a tree, cut it down and carry it back across.<sup>1</sup> Upon finding the tree, the king climbed the branches, cut the rope and let the corpse fall. It gave a moan. The king, thinking there must still be life in it, began to grope over the rigid form. A shrill laugh broke from its throat, and the king realized that the body was inhabited by a ghost. *“What are you laughing at?”* he demanded. The instant he spoke, the corpse flew back to the limb of the tree. Resolute, the king ascended again and cut the body down. He lifted it without a word, placed it on his shoulder and began to walk. Along the way, the voice in the corpse posed a riddle to the king in the form of a tale and bid him: *“If you know the answer and do not reply, your head will burst into a hundred pieces.”*<sup>2</sup> The king, fearing for his head, gave the answer he thought correct upon which the corpse, *“groaning in mock agony”*<sup>3</sup> vanished from his back and flew to the limb of the tree from which it hung once again. The king returned, cut the body down and carried it again across that morbid ground. The voice in the corpse posed another riddle to which the king gave an answer. The corpse vanished only to be cut down yet again from that fateful tree. It was not until the 25<sup>th</sup> run that the king found himself befuddled by the riddle posed by the speaking corpse. Carrying his burden, the king was unable to find an unequivocal answer. He was finally struck dumb by the enigma. The king walked in silence *“with a remarkably buoyant stride, bemusing the problem in silence.”*<sup>4</sup> The voice spoke again. *“Sir”* it said, *“You may have this corpse... Take it with you. I am about to quit it.”*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zimmer, Heinrich, *The King and the Corpse; Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series XI, Princeton University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1956, pp. 202-235.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 213.