



Source: Kamal Taha, AFP, 'Deadlock breaks as Maliki endorsed', *The Australian online*, 23/04/06.
Tags: [child/parent](#), [disease](#), [chance](#), [fortune](#)
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These are the things that tell him who he is now: a greenish mark upon his thumb; calluses upon his hands; a threadbare coat and trousers and a pair of worn boots, none of which are his own; a three-month growth of beard.

The man tries not to think of a life before this, except to brood about his wife and two children. It is three months since he last saw them and he has heard nothing of them since he left. He had told her that he would contact her, that he would send word of where he was so she could come to him, but that was in a time when he owned a warm coat, a fur hat and had gold coins stitched into the lining of his trousers. He had been relieved of these by bandits on the banks of the river, where he waited with five others for his 'agent' to arrive and ferry him across.

Of this moment he will allow himself only the memory of the cold earth beneath his newly bare feet; he remembers this because the sensation reminded him that he still lived. The leader of the bandits had laughed at the sorry little group clad in nothing but their long underwear: 'Cheer up comrades!' he had shouted over his shoulder to them, 'At least you were robbed by gentlemen who had the decency to respect your modesty!'

And so he had arrived at last on the other side. He thought of his nakedness as somehow appropriate, befitting a rebirth into a new life. He had not wanted to associate himself with his travelling companion, the former merchant, who cried out in the refugee committee headquarters, 'I call upon you, my brothers, to witness what has been done to us!' To still be alive, and to be free, seemed all that a man could wish for; and if, as he had often argued, a man's life should consist of more than simply survival, his survival alone at that moment seemed like a blessing.

Someone had told him about the sacking factory where they often took unskilled labour. Not being able to speak the language, the work there would suit him, since not much speech would be required. The work was only temporary, they had to fill an order, but there was enough for a couple of months if he wanted it.

He had to cut and stitch the sacks by hand, and it was difficult to push the coarse needle through the wad of thick rough hessian. He tore a strip of fabric from the bottom of his shirt and bound a copper coin to the ball of his thumb in the manner of an improvised thimble. He was proud of this little piece of ingenuity, but that was all he could take pleasure in over the weeks he worked in the factory, since the pittance he earned barely paid for his food and the rent on a tiny attic room, and even this meagre source of funds would dry up soon when the

order at the factory was filled.

Winter was coming, and he noticed how, outside each house he passed, piles of wood had been delivered. He asked his landlord who chopped this wood for those who could afford it. Peasants do it, replied the landlord. They will arrive in the town at the end of the month and over the space of a few weeks, they will chop everyone's wood for an agreed price, and this income will help to support them over the winter.

The man lay awake scheming. He counted how much money he had left, and estimated that he had enough to buy an axe head and handle. The next morning he visited three young refugees who had arrived at the same time as he had. He told them about the wood, and suggested they pool their resources and offer to do it themselves for a price that would undercut the peasants. He was offering them the opportunity because they, like him, were strong and not afraid of hard work. Moreover, they were brothers in their troubles, and brothers should stick together.

In the end, no one cared who chopped the wood, as long as it was done, and if it could be done at a cheaper price, then so much the better. The man and his friends worked hard and steadily, and at the end of the fortnight, they had chopped and stacked all the wood in the town. The man's hands were hard and calloused, and in his pockets he had enough money to pay rent on his room for a month and to pay for the stout boots and warmer coat he would need to walk back to the border to make enquiries about his wife and children.

He has been gone a couple of days when the streets start to fill with disconsolate peasants, trailing from house to house, looking for the work they had counted upon to tide them over the winter. He is still away when a woman enters the refugee committee headquarters with two little children. She is small and clearly ill. She tells them she had walked the last fifty miles to the border with the children, paying an agent to ferry her across the freezing water in the dark. She had been terrified the children would cry and betray them. She had kept her hand over the mouth of the youngest child as they rowed across the river, she says. She is looking for her husband, she says. She names him and describes him: tall, dark, burly and clean-shaven. He is a teacher, she says, of Russian literature and mathematics. They shake their heads slowly. There is no teacher of that name or who matches that description in this town, they say. There is a man with a name like that, but he is heavily bearded, and he is a woodchopper, they say.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.