The Tale: Bearskin

A soldier serves bravely through a war. When peace comes, he is dismissed. His parents are dead, his brothers refuse to take him in, and the only trade he knows is fighting. Alone and without money, he sits beneath a circle of trees and wonders how he will live.

A stranger in a green coat appears. One cloven foot reveals who he is. Before offering a bargain, the Devil tests the soldier's courage by setting a bear upon him. The soldier kills it. The Devil then promises him a coat whose pocket will always contain money. For seven years, however, he must not wash, cut his hair or nails, comb his beard or pray. He must wear the dead bear's skin as his cloak and bed. If he dies before the seven years end, his soul belongs to the Devil. If he survives, he will be free and wealthy.

The soldier agrees. As the years pass, he becomes almost unrecognisable. People recoil from him, though money continues to secure shelter. He gives generously to the poor and asks them to pray that he will live. In the fourth year he meets an old man facing imprisonment for debt. Bearskin pays what is owed and provides money for the man's family.

The grateful father offers one of his three daughters in marriage. The two eldest refuse when they see Bearskin. The youngest says that because her father has promised, and because a man who helped them must have goodness in him, the promise should be kept. Bearskin breaks a ring in two and gives her one half. If he does not return after three years, she will know he is dead and will be free.

At the end of the seventh year, the Devil must wash and groom him. Bearskin returns transformed in appearance, identifies himself through the two halves of the ring and marries the youngest daughter. The old story does not end cleanly. The two elder sisters, enraged by the reversal, take their own lives. That evening the Devil knocks at the door and announces that he has gained two souls in place of the one he lost.

A way into the story

Bearskin begins with redundancy in its oldest sense: a worker trained for one task is abruptly told that the system no longer needs what it formed him to do. His bargain is not made from comfort or equal choice. It is made at a point of narrowed possibility. That matters when we think about professional contracts that appear voluntary but are accepted under debt, precarity, vocation or fear of exclusion.

The bearskin is both protection and degradation. It gives the soldier a way to survive while making him increasingly difficult to recognise. Professional roles can have the same double quality. A title, uniform, theoretical language or composed manner may help us carry responsibility. Worn without relief, it can

become the only surface colleagues respond to and the only self we know how to present.

The ending prevents an easy lesson about endurance being rewarded. Bearskin survives and prospers, yet the Devil still collects. Costs move through a system. The person who completes the training, wins the promotion or sustains the impossible service may not be the person who pays most heavily for the arrangement. Colleagues, partners, children or disowned parts of the self may carry what success excludes from view.

The youngest daughter's position is also ambiguous. She recognises Bearskin's generosity, but she is responding to a promise made by her father. The tale asks not only who can see beneath a difficult exterior, but who is expected to redeem somebody else's bargain.

The professional role can also become an object of transference. A service may be experienced as the authority that finally recognises us, the parent that needs rescuing, or the institution to which a debt must be repaid. None of this makes the actual contract less important. It helps explain why some contracts acquire emotional force beyond salary and hours, and why a request to renegotiate them can feel like disloyalty rather than administration.

Supervisors and colleagues may feel something in response to the skin as well. An apparently tireless practitioner can evoke relief, admiration, envy, irritation or a wish to leave them alone because they seem not to need anything. Those responses can become part of the bargain. Countertransference here is not confined to therapy; it includes what the role makes other people feel and therefore what they begin to ask from the person wearing it.

Reflections

Me in my role: What bargain have you made with your working life, and how freely were its terms chosen?

Between us: What feelings does the role you wear seem to evoke in other people, and how do their responses shape the role further?

In the wider system: Where do the costs of professional success travel when they are not acknowledged by the person or organisation that benefits?

Me in my role: What bargain have you made with your working life, and how freely were its terms chosen?