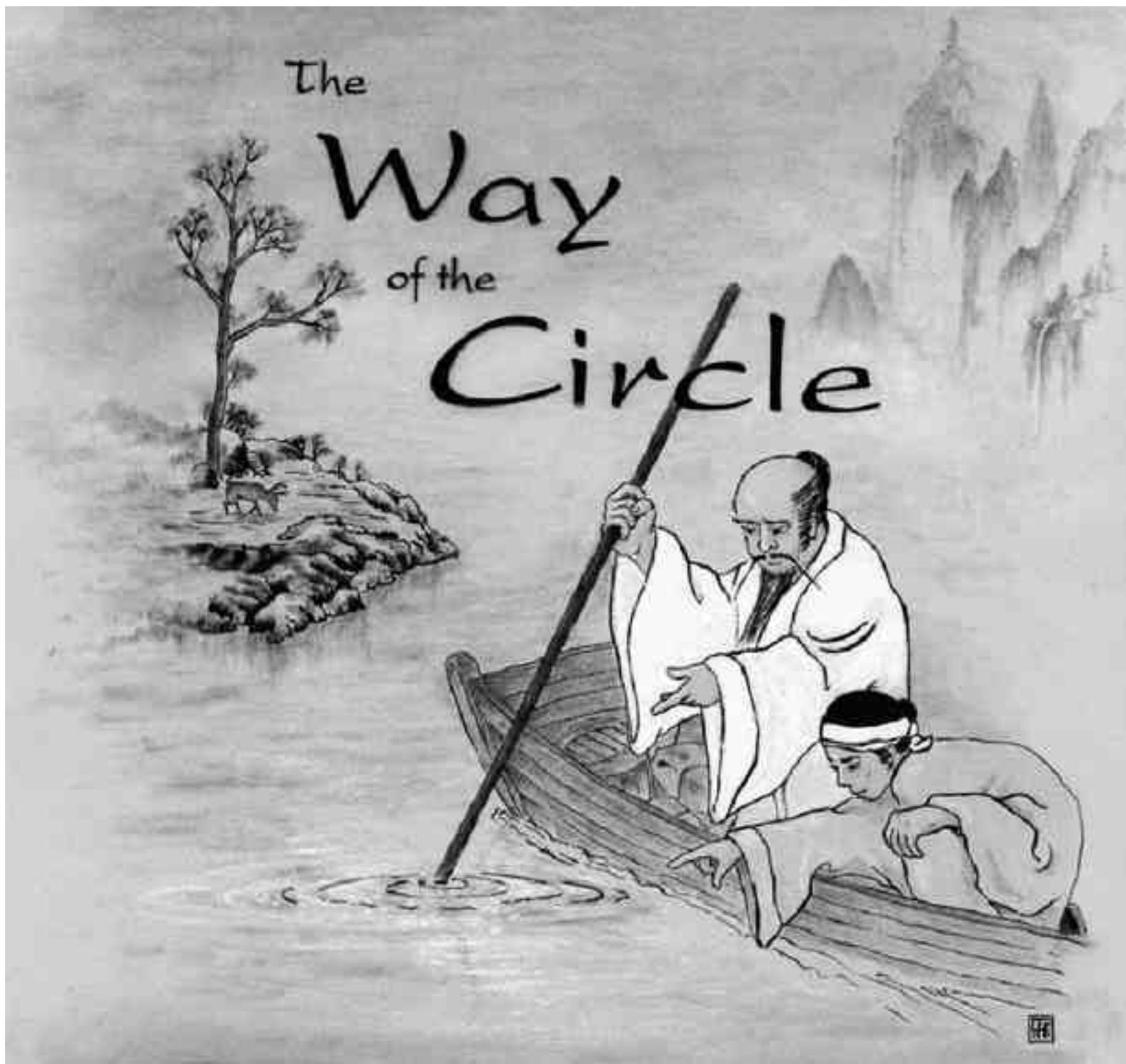


The

Way

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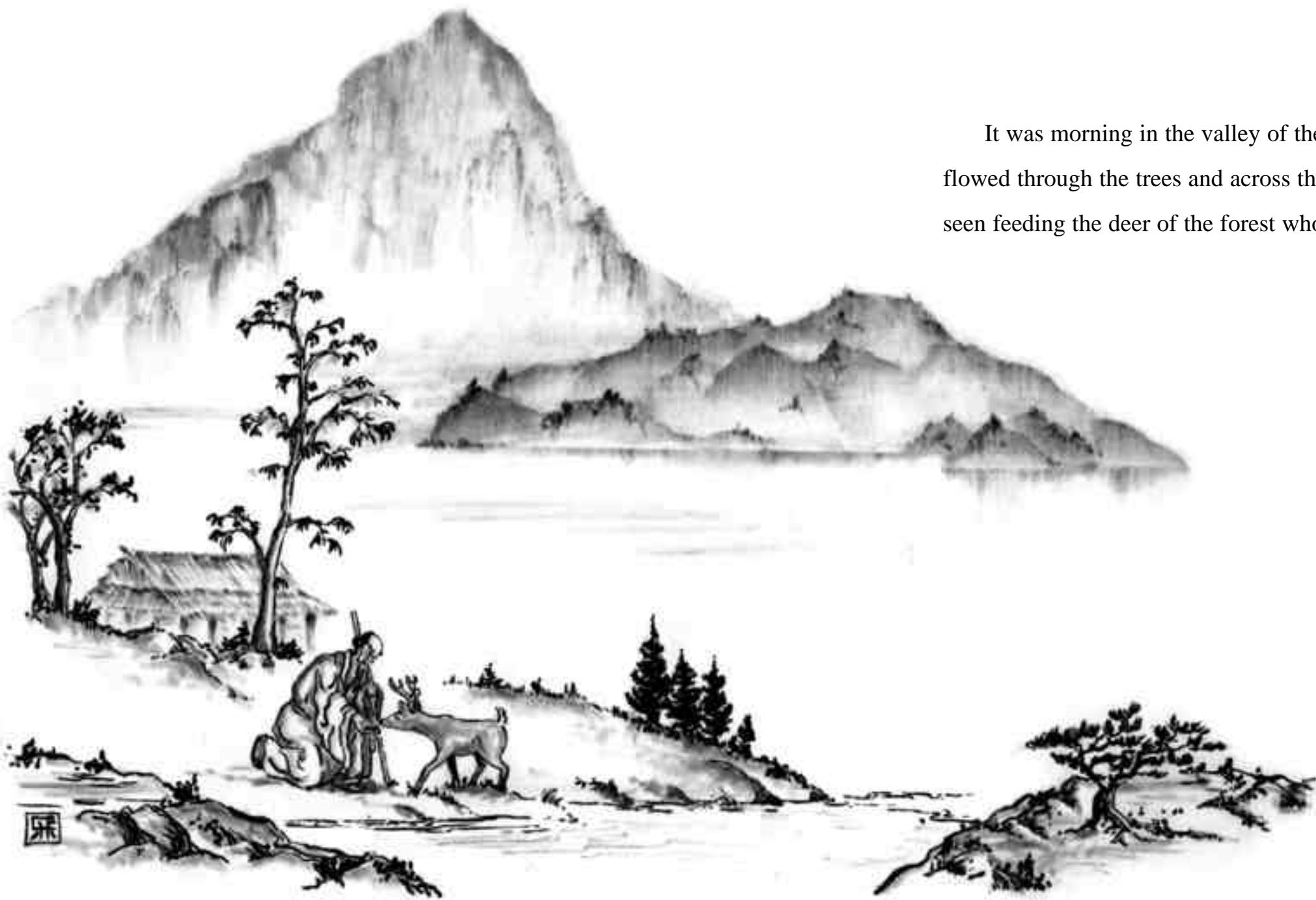
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Illustrated by Chris H. Foleen

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It was morning in the valley of the Great River. As the sun flowed through the trees and across the land, an old man could be seen feeding the deer of the forest who had come to the river's edge.



宋



It was said the source, the very beginning of the Great River, was in Heaven itself. The River then tumbled down the Great Mountains, through the foothills, and into the valley, flowing like a heavenly messenger toward the Great Sea.

The old man lived in a wooden hut next to the Great River. For a single coin he would carry travelers on his raft, across the river to the other side. Some said the old man was always humming, while others said it was the Great River that seemed to sing a continual song. Some said the old man had a special gift he gave to all who crossed the Great River, while others said he was just a simple old man living out his years.



One morning, as the sun flowed through the willow trees that comforted the Great River, the deer of the forest began moving slowly into the protection of the long arms of the trees. Suddenly, a young voice called out from the road, “Hello, old man, hello! My name is Sun Li, and I am on my way to the city. There I will become wealthy and have many servants. But first I must cross the river. Old man, will you take me?”

The old man smiled as the boy approached. The deer watched quietly from the trees. “Cross with me three times,” the old man replied, “and your passage will be free.”

As the old man spoke, Sun Li thought he could hear a hum — or was it the river?



Before Sun Li had time to ask any questions, another voice called from the road. It was a rich merchant approaching the river with his caravan of servants and horses. “Boatman,” the rich merchant said, “I am bound for the marketplace and will pay five coins for crossing the river. Will you take me, boatman?”

The old man gave a slow nod and motioned to Sun Li to help the caravan board the raft. The merchant rode upon a chocolate brown horse whose mane was braided with strands of gold. As the servants guided the pack horses onto the raft, Sun Li noticed that the men were dressed in beautiful white silk robes and carried long, sharp swords at their sides.

As the rich merchant dismounted from his horse, he looked with pity upon the old man and said, “Old man, I have great wealth and if you do your job well, I shall pay you not five but ten coins for the trip.” The old man replied, “Kind sir, I ask only one coin for crossing the river, and that is all I shall require.”

The rich merchant laughed aloud, and his servants stared in disbelief. Sun Li, who had never seen more than two coins at one time, thought the old man did not understand.



With one swift push by the old man, the raft left the shore and they began their journey across the river. The rich merchant invited Sun Li to sit at his side. “Young boy,” he said, “I have summer homes on the Great Sea and servants who wait on me all day long. I wear rubies from Egypt and diamonds from the caves of Africa. Look at this ring; is it not the most beautiful you have ever seen?”

Sun Li stared at the jewel. He thought it looked like a huge red sun.

As they talked, neither the rich merchant nor Sun Li noticed the old man, who slowly worked his way toward them as the raft slid toward the other side of the Great River.



Soon the old man was standing next to the rich merchant. He dipped his staff into the river and pointed to the water: “See how the circles flow from the center of my staff and out into the river? Each circle grows larger and larger as it moves across the water, touching all that is in its path. If the circle is filled with love and kindness, love and kindness will one day return. If the circle is filled with greed and desire only for money, greed and desire will return. Kind sir, you will find that true wealth is not found in summer homes or in beautiful jewels. True riches are found in gifts you give from the heart. As you treat others with kindness and respect, you will gain riches few have ever known. This, kind sir, is the Way of the Circle, the way of life.”

The rich merchant and Sun Li stared at the old man as he continued moving to the front of the raft. A cloud covered the sun, and Sun Li noticed that the ring no longer glowed as brightly as it had.



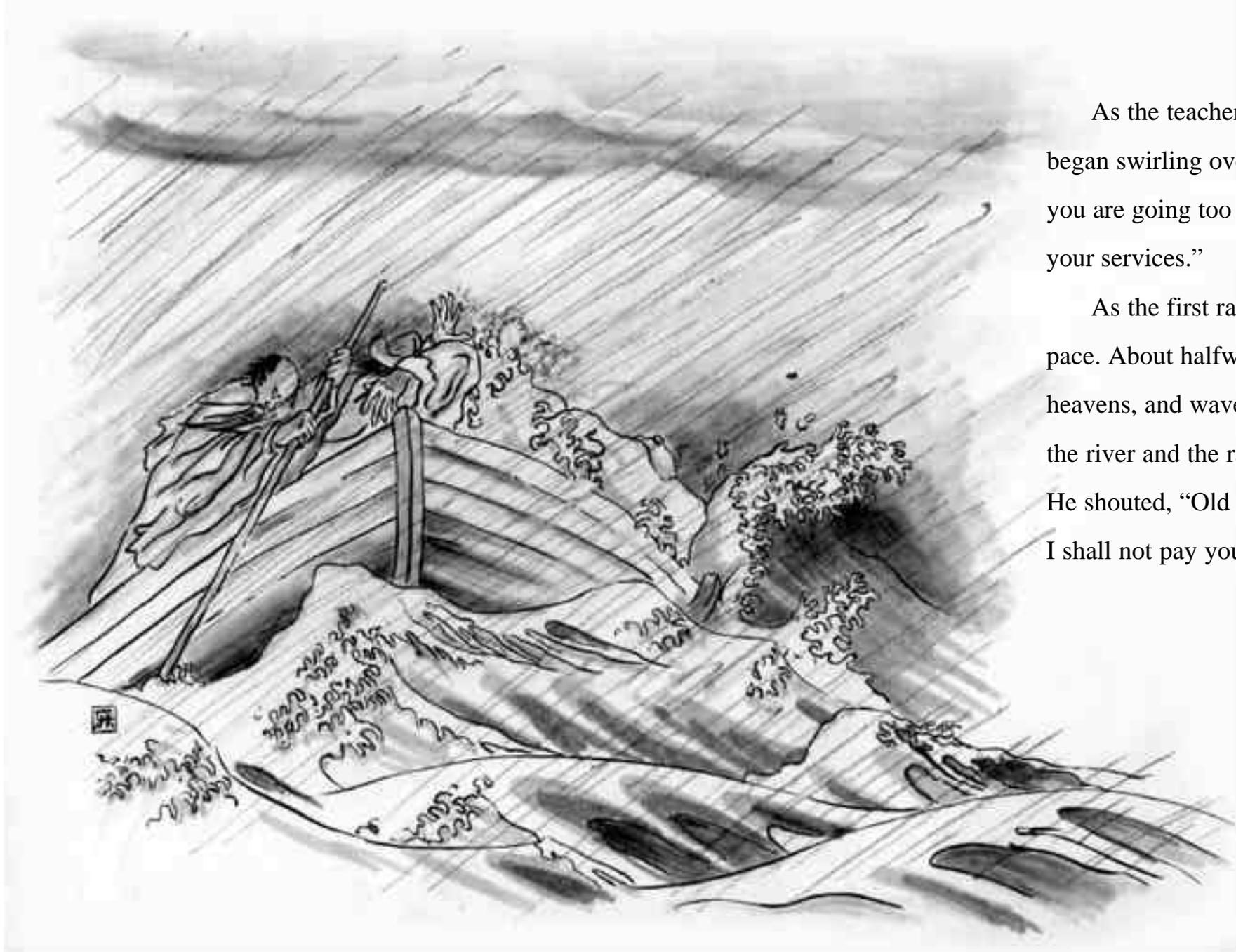
The raft came to rest at the other shore, and the old man and Sun Li helped unload the merchant's caravan. When his horses were ready to depart, the rich merchant turned to the old man and said, "Old man, what you teach is interesting, but it is not practical in this world. You are offered ten coins but want only one. You speak in riddles, and you live with nothing. I say it is you, old man, who lives in a circle of dreams." And with that, the rich merchant tossed a single coin in the air. Before it fell at the feet of the old man, the merchant had turned and gone.



As the caravan rode away, Sun Li glanced back at the river. He could still see the circles from the old man's staff grow wider and wider as they moved across the water and back toward the other shore. Sun Li thought he could hear a gentle humming, and he wondered, was it coming from the old man or was it the river?

This was a busy day at the river, and Sun Li's thoughts were soon interrupted by new voices from the road.

Another group of people was approaching very quickly. It was a teacher from the Great School, traveling with his students. As they grew closer to the raft, the teacher shouted, "Old man, we must hurry, for rainclouds are gathering above the river. I do not want to get wet and ruin my robe, for I am giving a very important speech tonight in the next town."



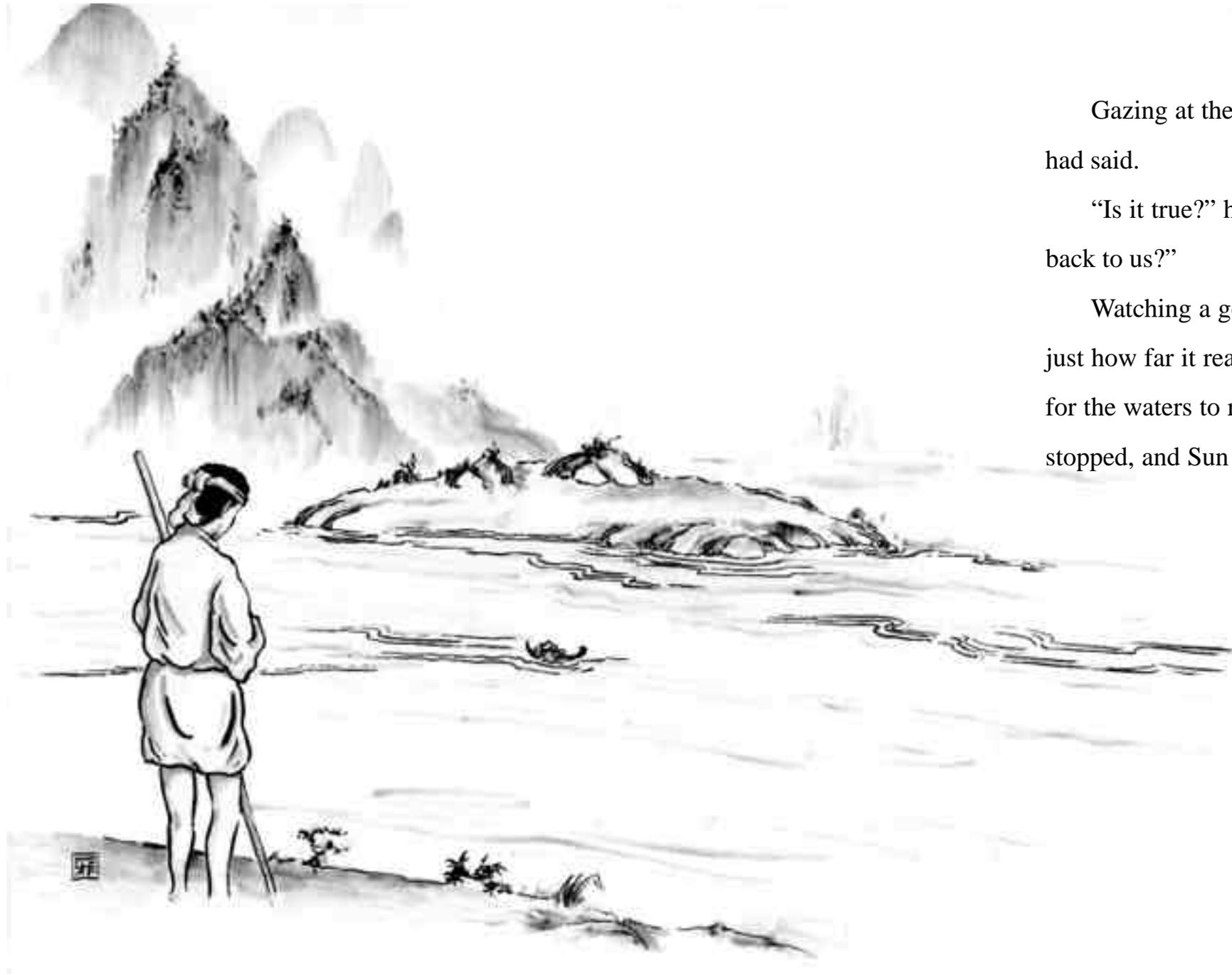
As the teacher and students hurried onto the raft, the dark clouds began swirling overhead. The teacher said again, “Old man, hurry, you are going too slowly. Move quickly, or I shall not pay you for your services.”

As the first raindrops began to fall, the old man kept his gentle pace. About halfway across the river, the rain began pouring from the heavens, and waves began dashing over the side of the raft, making the river and the rains seem as one. The teacher was now very angry. He shouted, “Old man, this is all your fault! You are going too slowly! I shall not pay you for this trip!”



Keeping his steady pace, the old man said, “Kind teacher, if I hurry with the winds and the rain like this, the raft may capsize, and you and your company may drown. If I had hurried when we first started, I would not have caught the current of the Great River that will carry us through this storm. The rain and the current, kind sir, move in harmony with the Great Heaven. If you work with the rain and the current, they are your friends and you will always be safe. The rain and the current are neither impatient nor unkind. Just as the rain becomes the river, the river flows to the Great Sea, and then returns to the clouds to become the rains once again. If you, kind sir, send impatience and anger out upon the river, that is what will return. For this is the Way of the Circle, the way of life.”

Reaching the other side, the teacher and his students left the raft quickly. The teacher looked at the old man and said, “You have made me late, and because of you my robe is ruined. The only circles I can see are the ones you spin in your mind. I will not pay you for your work!” And with that, the teacher and his students hurried off down the road.



Gazing at the river, Sun Li thought about what the old man had said.

“Is it true?” he asked himself. “Do the things we do really come back to us?”

Watching a golden leaf spinning down the river, he wondered just how far it really was to the Great Sea, and how long it would take for the waters to return. As the clouds turned to a silky haze, the rains stopped, and Sun Li once again thought he could hear a gentle hum.



As night began to enfold the trees at the river's edge, no more travelers came to the river. The old man built a fire and offered Sun Li a bowl of rice. After eating in silence for some time, the old man took a stick from the fire and drew a circle in the sand. He said, "This is not just a circle, it is the way of life. Every kind act you do will return to you like the circle. Everything you do with love will someday return. By living your life according to the circle, you will live life to the fullest, for nothing brings more joy than learning to give and to receive with love."

The old man handed the boy a quilt and motioned for him to sleep. As Sun Li closed his eyes he could hear the old man humming — or was it the river?



Here are the words Sun Li heard that night:

“For the way of life
Is the Way of the Circle,
All kind acts
Flow to the sea,
Only to return
In some tomorrow,
Like the gentle sun
Upon the willow tree.”

With the rush of the river surrounding him, and with the embers from the stick still glowing in the circle in the sand, the young boy slept deeply through the night.



Early next morning Sun Li awoke with a start! The old man was already greeting a company that had arrived at the river's edge. Sun Li could see that it was the prince of the Great City!

The prince, who was journeying home, was said to have an illness that could not be cured. He was carried onto the raft with great care. The old man nodded to the prince, smiled, and gracefully began to direct the raft to the other shore of the Great River.



During the voyage, as always, the old man moved about the raft, to guide its course. Each time he passed the prince, the old man would gaze at him for some time. Half-way across the river, he stopped by the prince and inquired, “My prince, what is it that causes you to suffer?” The prince replied, “Life has no meaning, no purpose, and I have no joy or happiness. I have done everything there is to do. I have no reason to live.”

The old man nodded, and then pointed to the fields at the river’s edge: “See how the seeds of the simple dandelion take flight upon the wind and take root in yet another field, multiplying themselves again and again? By giving of itself, the dandelion creates a hundred new flowers — new worlds of its own. For this is the Way of the Circle. By giving to life, you receive life in return. My prince, you have been given everything. By giving nothing back, you are suffering from a sickness of the heart. You are not following the circle of life, which is also the circle of love. It takes courage to give of yourself, my prince, but when you do, you will find reason for living, and life will return to your veins.”

As the old man moved toward the front of the raft, the prince called his servant to his side. Sun Li thought the prince would have the old man slain for speaking in such a way, but to his surprise, the prince held onto the arm of his servant and stood for the first time in months!



As they reached the shore, the prince smiled, placed a single coin in the old man's hand, and said, "Yes, you are right, for it takes courage to give of yourself. It is the Way of the Circle, the way of life. Old man, you are very wise. I would offer you a position in my Court, but I know you would not accept. So I would like to offer a position to your helper. Perhaps by doing so, I can repay you in some way."

The old man looked at Sun Li, who immediately replied, "Yes, yes, my prince, for it has always been my dream to wear fine clothes and to be in the company of royalty. Yes, thank you, I shall come."

As the Prince's company prepared to depart, Sun Li turned to the old man and said, "Thank you old man, you have been very kind." The old man drew a half-circle in the sand with his staff, placed two coins in the boy's hand, and said, "Always remember the lesson you learned on the Great River: the Way of the Circle is to give and receive with love."

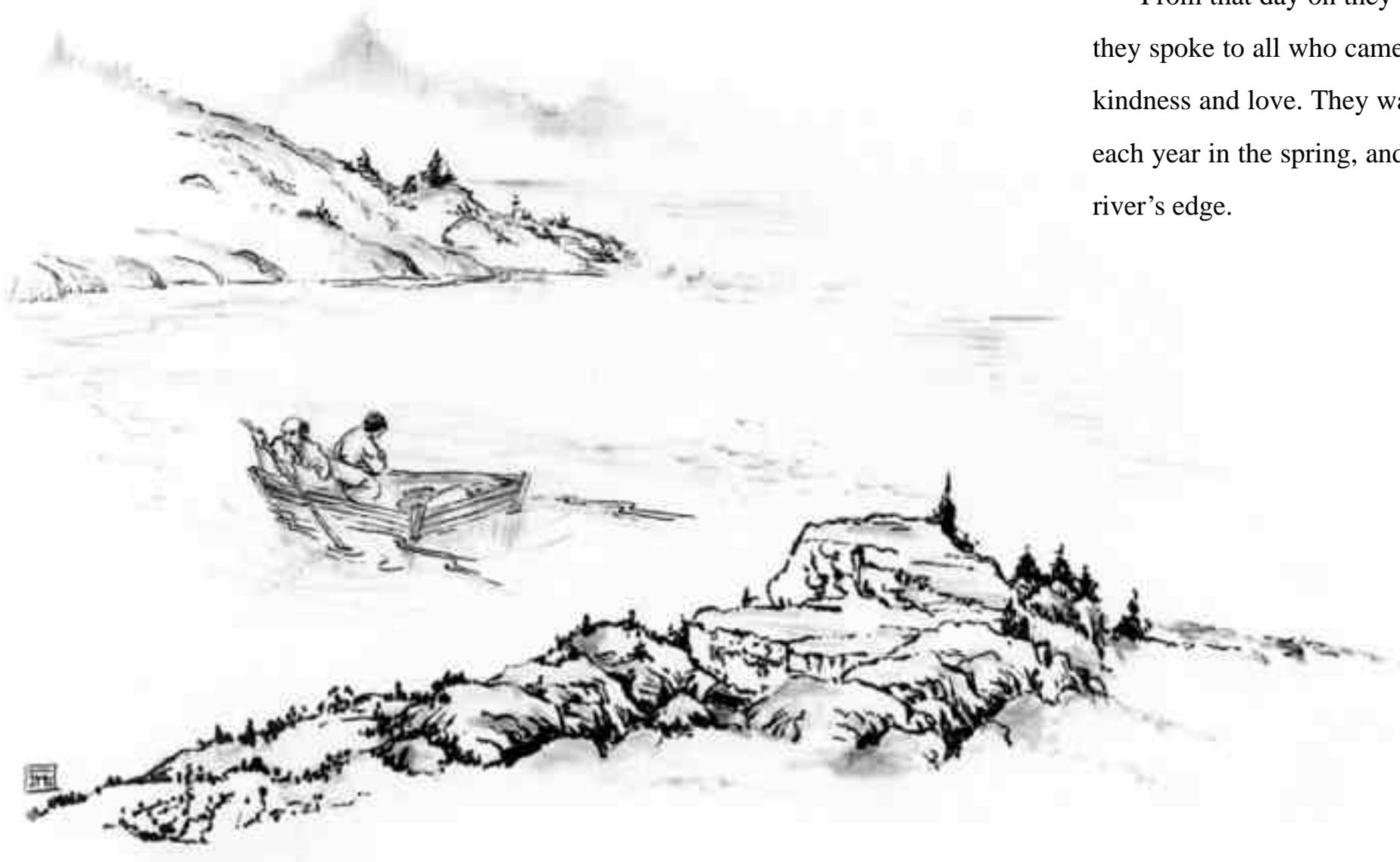


Years went by, and the old man carried rich and poor, old and young, healthy and lame across the river for but a single coin. Some said the old man was very wise, while others said he was just a simple old man living out his years. But to everyone who crossed the river, the old man spoke of the Way of the Circle and how life's true answers could be found through kindness and love.

One evening, as the old man sat warming himself before the fire, a younger man appeared, dressed in beautiful silk and gold. Slowly taking a stick from the fire, the young man drew a half-circle in the sand. As the old man rose to greet him, the visitor placed two coins in the old man's hand. The old man smiled. Looking deep into the younger man's eyes, he said, "I knew that one day, the boy who crossed the river with me three times would return as a man." With his river staff, the old man completed the circle which Sun Li had drawn in the sand.



From that day on they were always together. Crossing the river, they spoke to all who came to them of the Way of the Circle, and of kindness and love. They watched as the wild geese came to the river each year in the spring, and each morning they fed the deer at the river's edge.





One day, the old man handed his river staff to his friend. As they each held the staff in their hands, the old man said, “It is now time for me to complete the Way of the Circle, and it is time for you to carry travelers across the river on your own. Always listen to those who are burdened with life, and like the river that gently moves over the stones, always respond with love.”

As Sun Li took the staff, he nodded, for the Way of the Circle was written in his heart.



Many seasons have passed since the old man gave his staff to his young friend. Those who cross the river now speak of another old man who feeds the deer at the river's edge. Some say they hear a humming coming from the river. Others say it's the old man singing.

A few say they've heard this song:

“For the way of life
Is the Way of the Circle,
All kind acts
Flow to the sea,
Only to return
In some tomorrow,
Like the gentle sun
Upon the willow tree.”