

The Man of the Wood

There was once a man who lived in the wood. He dwelt at the very centre of a wild forest and he had no commerce or contact with fellow human beings. He was alone and this was his way of life. As far as his memory could reach back in time, this had always been his life. This man, neither old nor young, had something in his eyes that transcended time. He did not just live in the wood; he felt the wood in his very being. His life was like an old and twisted tree, rooted in memories that he never shared with anybody, old, old and wrinkled, in time immemorial buried. The human consortium was no more than the distant flicker of a light that had lost all meaning for him. He chose the wood as the place where he could find a long-lost peace; he chose it as his home and abode.

One day, the morning light was shining in all its glory and the lonely man was roaming among the trees, looking for berries. The gentle wind sifted through the leaves like a voice lamenting the dying season, as autumn was approaching. The Man was happy that day, for no particular reason other than there was joy in his soul. And so he wandered and wandered and wandered in search of something that was not totally known to him, but semi-submerged, in parts of his consciousness buried deep. The Man had lost all sense of time, drawn as he was by this new sense of happiness and fulfilment that soothed and replenished his soul. But unaware as he was, he finally realised how tired his frail body had become. He was not old, but his body, unused to the strain, gave him a signal that it was time to stop.

The Man had lost his way, for the wood was large and tortuous, a labyrinth of trees of all kinds whose names the Man never knew, albeit he felt them throbbing in him like a living presence. No clue had he of the names of things. All that he knew was the smell of the dew and the distant memories that seemed to surface in his consciousness, unclear and unshaped. The Man had stopped by a sycamore, a great tree whose meaning he did not grasp, and by whose shadow he seemed to have lost what remained of his wits. He paused, panted and drew a deep breath, which resulted in coughing and a sudden jerk to his entire body. The Man sat down gently on the ground and held his gaze on the distant horizon. But he saw nothing, only himself. He paused, put his mind at rest and his breathing returned to normality.

And it was at that precise moment that he noticed a necklace hanging from one of the lower branches of the big tree, so ominous and so beautiful before his tired eyes. The necklace had a black band and a moon made of stone, grey with black dots, of no great value. At first, the Man did not realise what it was but he seemed unable to look away. What was it? What did it signify? A half-moon made of stone attached to the end of a necklace. Why was he so captivated by this image? After a time that seemed to be very, very long, the Man stood up and approached the branch of the tree where the necklace was. He got closer to it, extended his lean arm, but the branch was too high. He tried to climb, but fell to the ground. And then, suddenly, the necklace fell from the tree of

its own accord. He examined it, and wondered what it could mean. Had it been his a very long time ago? Was it a token of a past self that presented to him the possibility of a journey into a past that he had totally forgotten? If that were the case, why could he not remember it? His memory was like the embers of a dying hearth whose pale radiance was destined to certain doom. And yet the moon he held in his hands had a meaning for him; he was certain of it, although he had no idea what that meaning could be. The Man put the necklace in his pocket and tried to find the way back home.

Only after long roaming could he find his house at the centre of the wood, where nobody ever dared disturb his peace. The Man entered his home and placed the necklace on a wooden table by the entrance. Sleep came at once and blessed him with the rejuvenation he needed. The entire house embraced him as if to protect him. Lost as he was in his slumber, he forgot all purpose and all direction, and the flicker of happiness that he had felt in the morning decayed in oblivion and darkness. The only sign of a change in his life was the grey moon necklace he had left on the wooden table. Nothing had changed in his life for countless years and if this was to prove different, what would it mean? The Man would soon discover this, and much more, as life is as sudden as the coming season and its moon shines with the white radiance of the Pale Enchantress in the virgin sky. In the sign of the moon his new life was going to exist, though he had no idea that this could be possible. The necklace itself declared that the goddess had chosen him, a humble man, a man who knew nothing, or pretended not to.

When the Man awoke the next day, he realised that he had no name. How this was possible he did not know, but he had the vague feeling that a name would give him purpose and identity. And the Man knew that the moon necklace was the first clue to discover what his name was, if ever he had possessed one. He stood up and realised why he had experienced joy the day before: it was the work of the magic that preceded change. It was the power of a silent epiphany working its charm on his unnamed soul. The Man examined the moon necklace carefully: there were no marks on it. It was just a stone in the shape of a half-moon, grey and with black dots visible on it, probably made from another stone. But he did not know the names of stones, as he had no clue about the names of trees. How could he discover his name if he did not know the names of things? And yet, the goddess had chosen him, and this he could feel, an awareness that shone in the silence of his soul.

The Man had not spoken to anybody for such a long time: silence was his mode of life, his way of existing. Silence and darkness, and the peace they brought. He had never had a desire of anything else up until this moment. But now he needed a name, for he knew that without a name he could not seal a pact with the goddess and give her his all. The Man rose, and made a resolution to follow all the signs that he had before his eyes, and the signs that he might discover in the future. The signs would come, he was certain of it. Or, perhaps, they were already there, and all he needed was to learn how to decipher them. He had no names and no words to help him, but something he had: the resolve to go there, wherever *there* was. He had made a promise to the goddess; he did

that in his heart and he was going to keep his word. The Man took the moon necklace and hung it around his neck. His quest had begun.

Chapter II

Oh yes, oh yes he did. I know he did. He set out on that vain quest of his. Who does he think he is? It will get him nowhere. I know there is no end to that kind of endeavour and if there were, there will be pain, there will be hardship, and there will be so much to give and so much to take. I keep wondering why he decided to follow a sign after such a long time in the wood. It was not the first time. That I know for sure. There have been other signs, other attempts to lure him out of his solitude and mystery. I know it very well because I am the one who left the signs there for him. Oh no, I am not saying that he was gullible, not at all. But why did he ignore all the other little trinkets I left by the old sycamore and choose to give importance to this one in particular? Why now, this is the question? It has been such a long time that I have been trying to tempt him. How long has it been? I have lost track of time. He has no name but, well, I have no time.

I wish I had an inkling of what time is, but I cannot perceive it. Is it because I am timeless? Hidden as I am in the forest, I have tried to push the nameless one out. Besides, I am part of the forest. If there is something that I feel it is this long and extended wood, its presence, all that is. And yes, do not worry about it, I *do* have a name. I might be timeless but a name I have. No, no, I am not going to say it. My name is my only power, until I get what I want from that man. What? Are you asking me what? All I want is more power and that man is the fastest way to get it. Of course I need his name. How else do you think I can please the goddess? When he knows his name, she will give me what I need and I shall feel time. I shall enter the world of the living! Why? You are asking me a silly question. But I shall tell you. This I can tell you. Because of the balance, of course. All is interwoven, all is one and all is manifold at the same time. Do not ask me why, I do not know these things. But I know the wood, for I am part of it. This is what happens to us spirits. Time will be mine, I shall enter his world, and she will turn me into a living creature, perhaps even a human. What? Of course having a body is powerful, especially because of what I know. Yes, granted, humans are frail in their pathetic bodies, but I am not interested in such matters. It is what I know that matters and what I know will always remain obscure if I keep living in this hole. Oh yes, the sycamore tree is a cosy refuge, but I cannot express myself as long as I live in it. I need a body, and all will be well. Yes, I have so much to give, contribute and create. Oh yes, *that* is power. But if the Man does not grant me the boon of his name, I shall be forever locked in this hole. I love my tree, but I imagine the world with its lights and its darkness, its smells, its wonders. I shall finally be able not just to leave the tree, but even to leave this wood. And that stupid man shuns the company of his fellow humans and does not want to have anything to do with them. If that is not foolishness,

what is? Alas, he despises the gift of liberty that was given him. That is absurd. But I would never disregard such an incredible tool. Oh no, all I need is a human body and a voice and with all that I know, I shall walk far and wide in the world of humans. But this is the agreement that I have with the goddess; this is the absurd law of the balance. He needs a name and I need a body, he needs identity and I need to be at one with time. Yes, for us old spirits of the forest, time does not really flow. And yet, it does not stagnate either. But you would not understand me. All I am asking is that you help that man find his name. He has chosen to follow the sign of the goddess and my toy did the trick, but he needs help, otherwise he will never find his name. What? Are you asking me whether he forgot his name? How am I supposed to know? I do not know human customs that well. All I know is that the goddess gave me her word and when she says a thing, she delivers. There is not much else to say. This is what you must do: find out whether he has forgotten his name or if he ever had one, or take him to someone who can give him a new name. Something tells me that he cannot do this by himself. There must be somebody who can do that. But I am blinded by own ignorance, I know that too. What? No, not the goddess. What jokes you make. She cannot name the Man. She is silent, she only communicates in signs and in riddles. You should know this. I am wondering if you are willing to help or not. Yes, yes, of course, we have not agreed what I shall give you in return. Yes, you should have told me at once and no, I cannot give you *that*. I said it is not possible. Why do you insist, I said it is out of the question. Pardon? No other way? Can you guarantee you will accomplish the mission? Oh yes, that makes sense. Yes, fair enough. But only because I have my mission too. Yes, I suppose it is agreed then. I shall go all the way there to get it for you. No, it is not dangerous for me, it is just a nuisance. I feel so old, and yet I do not know my age. Of course, I need to tell you my name now. Yes, I trust you. Well, you entrusted me with the mission of going *there* and getting it for you. Fair enough, I shall tell you my name. My name is Tolk. Yes, I am as ancient as the wood. And yes, I shall go to the underworld to retrieve one of the jewels of the *other* goddess, if that is what you need. I do not understand you, but you are only a fox. You have your reasons.

Chapter III

The Man was in a state of uncertainty and excitement at the same time. He was wondering what to do, how to do it, and what the next step was. He consulted the gods, and received no response. He tried to speak silent words to the goddess, but the Pale Enchantress did not give him any sign of her presence other than an ivory blessing of light. The Man knew that the solution would come; he just did not know when. The Man was not just accustomed to solitude; he *was* his solitude, and in it he became acute and resourceful. But one thing he could not have predicted, no, he had not seen the solution coming in the shape of a grey fox with radiant, yellow eyes. The fox entered his

house, swift and elegant. The Man was not afraid. He thought it might be a message from the goddess. But the fox did not try to deceive him. An animal endowed with a trickster nature, perhaps, but this fox was different. The Man saw it at once. The animal gave him exactly what he needed: the warmth of friendship. There was no deception in something like that, the Man could see it. The fox approached him and promptly took human form. A tall and beautiful woman stood before the Man. She was clad completely in grey fur. Her eyes a mixture of grey and green, her hair white as snow, and the body shining in the grey nuances of her soft fur. As soon as the Man saw the transformation, he took two steps backwards, and stood numb, as if waiting for a sign. After a little while, the woman who was a fox spoke:

“Hail Man of the Wood, ye who lack a name, consider yourself blessed as the goddess has chosen you. I am here to guide you and together we shall find who you are. This will grant me the friendship of one of the old spirits of the forest, the very same spirit who sent me here to help you. I may be a trickster by nature, but I am here under the sign of truth, for in truth I dwell. This has been my choice since time immemorial and I shun lies and deceit because I know that in the true names of things and beings there is that radiance that saves and sets free. I am not free. I am bound to my fox body and to my woman body: I cannot choose to be either one or the other. I must be both. My soul is parted, my identity hangs in a twilight zone and until I have what I need, I am condemned to walk the Earth in both forms. I want to choose one, and fox have I chosen to be. For I too am a spirit, but I exist here with you in bodily form. This is my blessing as well as my curse. I need to have only one body to be free and one body I shall have when I obtain an object belonging to the Other Realm. I shall defy life and death and I shall choose my own life! That is, if my faithful friend the Old Spirit of the Forest will achieve it for me. But his quest is not my concern. I shall not wait for him to come to me with the boon I so long to have. I am here now, and with a pure heart I am telling you, oh Man without a name, let us go together, you and I, and find what your name is. The goddess will be pleased but one thing I must tell you: it was not she who placed the necklace within your reach, but the Old Spirit. He is our friend and our ally, for we all want the same thing. Do not be afraid, let not your timid nature thwart you, but confide in us, for we are all your friends. The goddess is with us at this very moment, and whether deity, shapeshifter or spirit, we are all with you. Follow me, and we shall surely find what your name is.”

The Man of the Wood was amazed by such a speech, given in the clear and enchanting voice of the beautiful, furry woman who was standing before him, in his house, naked and clad at the same time. The Man felt uncertain. He had not spoken to another creature for a long, long time, buried as he was in his solitude. But he felt that this was his moment, and that finding a name would not just help the Old Spirit for a reason utterly unknown to him, and please the goddess, no, it would

save him, even if the price to pay was to renounce his lonely state. But he knew that there was more to be gained in the process, that the powers of the unknown were there for a reason and in them his reason and purpose he would find. The Man made an effort to speak, but no words came to his mouth. It was oh so hard. What was it? Was he timid? There was no reason to be scared of the fox, or woman, or whatever it was. He had seen much more and much worse in his long life in the wood. Why was he so silent then? He felt that the answer would come, but not at that moment. He simply did not know what to do, so he nodded and smiled at the charming creature that was before his eyes in all her splendour, and made a silent promise with his eyes. Yes, in that moment, he gave his word and told his new companion that he would embark on such a quest. The woman understood at once, for she was quick of wit. She smiled back at him and her charming, deep and clear voice resounded again in the wooden house at the centre of the wood.

“My friend, I thank you for your trust. You will see that it has been well placed. And as for your speech, it will come to you when you least expect it. But now we are here and we must decide the course of our action, when to go and where to look for that long-lost name of yours. Names are magical, and they can be hidden well. Whether it is in your memory or in a physical place, there is no difference. Physical and spiritual are the same to me, given my half-state between one world and the other. One thing I do know: we shall succeed. I know it because I see it in your strong and pure eyes and there I can behold my future, and yours, and even what is going to be of this old, old wood. Your eyes are rooted in time, as is the spirit that inhabits them. You have lived here long enough, and your solitude must come to an end. I see the times are ripe. But before we venture forth, I need to tell you my name. Through it, you will know me, or at least part of me. My name is Opal.”

The Man endeavoured to smile. A shy line crossed his face. Opal was pleased and gazed intensely at him.

Chapter IV

Tolk left his old tree. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly he moved and carried on in his immaterial body. There was no need of words, there was no need of further reflection, all that was needed was the commitment and the will to carry it out. Tolk was old, as old as the forest, but present and alive. Tolk was immaterial, but he felt so real. His body was one and the same with the western wind that carried its prophecies around the old wood, scattering leaves and thoughts and the smell of the moisture in and around the autumn trees. Tolk knew that the entrance to the underworld was everywhere and nowhere, that all he needed was the right word as the word was the door and the

way. Entering that ominous place was not the hardest part, but it cost him great effort. However, he had given Opal his word and he would do it.

Tolk said the word, he whispered it and again and again. The word was like wind, and it became wind, and he became the word: a word firm, a word strong, a word that was identity and power and no return. The word was one and the same with the ancient powers of the Earth, a word hidden, a word that shall not be pronounced here. Tolk spoke, and the door was before his eyes. The immaterial spirit saw a little wooden door on the ground. There was no lock, and the door was ajar. What this entailed, he knew: the door to the unknown is always both open and closed, and those who venture forth do so at their own peril. The travellers who dared pass that door always had to leave something behind, something they would lose forever. But nothing is lost, and all is transmuted because changing dimensions entails acquiring a new sight, thereby seeing the world, all worlds, with new eyes. Tolk was allowed in, but he needed a body and he chose to become Wolf. This was the temporary boon of the other goddess: a semblance of his undying wish. Within the bounds of that dark house of Hades, Wolf he was. He left his aura at the gate; he left his light on the edge of the wooden door.

The old grey wolf entered the magnificent realm of the shadows who never stop wandering, some filled with guilt, and others chasing a dream they never had the courage to pursue in their earthly existence. Tolk, the great wolf, cast no shadow. His body was without spirit; he did leave something in the world above. Shadows huddling around his body cast no shade, and fear for the first time filled his being. Tolk knew there was nothing to fear, and yet his body shivered and cold filled his lungs. The old wolf that was a spirit moved slowly and on. The shadows did not give him rest. They were around him and moved in a neverending circle. Tolk ignored them and moved along. He had to present his plea to the goddess of the underworld. He needed to ask her for something material to take from here to the world above, something that would satisfy the fox. The wolf walked and walked and walked, if the word can be used in that dimension. Did he walk? Did he indeed? He drifted on the ocean of darkness that was underneath him and all around him. The shadows never let him be, and Tolk's frail, new heart returned to its normal pace. The fear had subsided. And so along he went and for days and days and days he carried on his journey towards the other goddess, the goddess of shadow and darkness, that beautiful maiden made Queen of the Dead.

Chapter V

And so it was that the Man without a name and Opal set forth on their new journey together, not knowing what the future held, or if there was even a present for them. Everything seemed dismal in the old forest, all dim, and clad in the colours of uncertainty. But the woman who was a fox knew

the way, and all the Man did was to follow her. She seemed so strong and confident, walking not as a woman does, but in small leaps forward, a creature of the twilight. The Man was not scared. He had such a beautiful guide and looking at her was in itself a pleasure. He plodded along, and let Opal find the path with her swift pace. The Man soon understood that her beauty was not of a natural sort, and he loved losing himself gazing at her silver limbs, shining in the light of the new-born day, half hidden by the thin fog and translucent in the pale glare of her ivory skin. Furry she was, and yet her skin was white, as not all her body was covered by the soft hair that seemed to invite the Man to approach her, and caress her, and be at one with her. He could not even remember the last time he had ever felt lust, and his desire was kept in his bosom. He was afraid of it, although he strangely knew that he could trust Opal with any confession. The Man felt renewed by this strange encounter, he felt that human company, if that was the right word, was indeed something he had missed. He had convinced himself that he did not need to consort with any living soul, and now this trickster creature came with words of truth, promising salvation and change. What this would lead to, he had no clue. What this even entailed, no understanding. The Man wondered for a moment if this was just an elaborate scheme of the Old Spirit that lived in the tree, but he still felt that sense of purity coming from his new friend. His judgement was clouded but he knew deep inside that she was a friend, even though he had no idea why or how he came to that conclusion. He felt it, and that was enough.

Opal stopped suddenly and asked the Man if he was tired and needed to rest. She said that they were on their way to the end of the forest and it would take at least another day to get there. The Man was astonished as he never believed that he could ever leave his wood, but Opal was resolute. If there was a solution to his name, it was to be found outside the forest, where civilisation resided. The Man did not let his trust falter, he never wavered, not even for a moment, but fear, subtle and venomous, gripped his limbs. He could not walk: he stopped. Opal approached him and said: "I understand your fear. I know that you came here a long time ago and you are afraid of your fellow men. I know you are reluctant to leave this place, but this is necessary. Your name is not only the key to the wishes of the Old Spirit of the Tree, or to the joy of the goddess who speaks right now in the pure words of the morning light, but it is the key to everything. It is in your name that the forest will be recast and reborn, as you are part of it and it needs you. Of all the innumerable creatures that live in our immense world, you are the only one who does not bear a name. There must be a solution; an answer is somewhere to be found. And it is not here that we shall find it. No, the answer belongs to another dimension, and there we shall surely find it. I know we shall, because I have been there once. That was the only other time that I took the shape of a woman. Trust me: I had more reason than you to be scared. So, please, rest a little and feed your heart with new hope as no harm will come to you as long as you are under my protection. Can you feel it? Can you feel that you can trust me? If you can, speak the words now."

The Man paused for a moment. He could hardly find the words, but after a little while, he did and spoke thus: "Yes, Opal, and I thank you". The woman who was a fox smiled and her grey eyes shone with multiple hues for a moment. The Man stood up and followed his guide. He knew he was safe, even if his limbs were still weak from the fear that had assaulted him with such subtle and terrible might. Opal resumed her strange jumpy pace, and the Man followed, no longer uncertain. He had found a guide to his identity and to his destiny and he was committed to go wherever this would take him.

Chapter VI

Tolk had no time to rest. He was on target. He knew exactly where he was going. And he felt suddenly stronger. He could not have known that he was meant to enjoy this new body he found himself in. As a wolf, Tolk felt imposing. As a spirit, he felt he was always hiding. He knew that he could feel pain now, enclosed as he was in a vessel of flesh, but he felt bold and invincible. Besides, what could the shadows do to him? *They* were immaterial, not he.

Tolk had little time to ponder such matters. All he knew was the way before him, and he was on track. He ran down the multiple tunnels of the underworld. He had never imagined such a place, and yet, all he knew was his tree, and, maybe, some parts of the old wood. The tunnels were dark, and the smell of burnt ashes filled the air, mingled with another smell that Tolk could not easily identify. Smells were something new to him, but he had the impression that this was indeed something that could not be found in the world up there. The smell of ... tears. But could tears be connected with the sensory perceptions of odour and aroma? It became more and more apparent that the closer he approached his target, the more he could smell that wet and unusual aroma. Tears filling the world, with an aftertaste of burnt ashes... of something over and done with.

Tolk started to familiarise himself with his new body, which meant that he moved faster and faster. Did this entail that he would have avoided the shadows and shunned the feelings he had, now that the tears overcame the entirety of perception? It was then that he realised that the shadows and the aromas were one and the same thing. It was from them that the smell came, and the closer he was to the goddess, the more the shadows huddled together and filled his nostrils with the unusual scent. What was it? Was it that the spiritual and the physical mingled and confused him in unexpected ways? And yet, Tolk had a keen eye for anguish and its correlates. In his long life as a spirit of the forest he had met pain and regret and all the causes of tears and suffering. He had met so many beings and creatures, but never had he seen shadows of the underworld, never had he tasted regret and pain as he had now. He wanted to understand what all this meant, as he had an inquiring nature, but his mission came first and soon he was to find the goddess. They say that she can only be found if she wills so. Granted, but the grey wolf who was a spirit knew in his

heart that this was her will, and that she was eager to meet him too. The reason why escaped his reasoning, but of one thing he was certain: the shadows could not stop him. Their mental anguish was not a bulwark that he had to overcome, no, it was just a feeble attempt to warn him of what was to come.

But Tolk was impervious to fear now. He just paused, took a look at his smarting paws, licked them for a moment, took a deep breath, and resumed his journey along the crevices and the tunnels of the underworld. All was dark, but he could see in the dark. All was moist and humid and burnt and sad, but he knew there was more to regret in the human experience. He knew what human was, as he had been close to humanity a long, long time before. Tolk knew that the shadows were not just the spiritual remnants of what were once human beings, in other places and in other times, but the embodiment of their regrets, failed aspirations and forlorn hopes. Those tears smelt of burnt lives, they reeked of lost hope! He knew this now. And the goddess drew nearer and nearer, he knew this too. Tolk proceeded beyond the expected and the unexpected, and in so doing saw a faint light flickering from afar, the only light in that world of utter darkness.

Chapter VII

Opal was furious. She was pacing back and forth and seemed so restless and agitated. The Man looked at her intensely, but spoke no word. They had suddenly stopped. The Man felt numb, utterly unable to understand what was going on. He wanted to ask that beautiful and mysterious grey woman what it was that ailed her, but he could not speak. It was not fear. It was not uncertainty. Rather, it was instinct. It was the same instinct that had led the Man so far away from the inhabited world of civilisation. The instinct of solitude and detachment, the power of being at one with nature, of finding in the silence the only possible comfort. The Man did not choose. He felt all that he came from somewhere else, from an outside force that was far from his control. While the Man was so deeply immersed in these old feelings that held him fixed to the spot, Opal broke the silence:

“My friend, we cannot continue. There is no way out of the forest. The way is blocked. We cannot ever leave this place. Yes, I know what you are thinking: the pathway is before our eyes. And yet, we cannot leave. There are more things here that you can see with your eyes, worlds intersecting, visions of bliss or woe that are hidden to men like yourself but that I can see clearly. I am a hybrid, I live between dimensions, neither entirely a fox nor the woman you see standing before you. But this grants me the power to gaze upon the unseen. And there is no way out. This path is blocked. Even if I continued to drag my human body along, I would never get anywhere. Not in this shape. I see wonder and discomfort in your eyes, but I assure you all this is real. There is no way out, not for me. I cannot exit this dimension. Yes,

I see the question on your face and I shall tell you right now: no, it was no lie, I did leave this place once but I cannot do this now. Our journey has come to an end before it has even begun. You will perhaps find your name, but not with my help, not outside of our wood. It is beyond my comprehension but the harder I try to breach this unseen wall that blocks the way, the more I lose myself. I cannot face this, and I do not understand it. I ask your forgiveness, gracious Man. But I have no solution to offer, not now, not like this. I am starting to feel numb, and I need to leave this place. The terrible guardian of the threshold will never allow me to leave. It is pointless to try.”

The Man looked upon the woman and spoke no word. Again, he retreated in his silence. In any case, there was nothing to say. He believed the woman, he trusted the fox, but he felt no more fear. As if he could have the key to the conundrum, as if he was endowed with the ability to solve a mystery made of thin air, and silence, and the dismantling of all energies. But energies can be gathered, they can be redirected. If there was one thing that he knew, that was it. He had done it for so many years in his life in the wood. One can pause and breathe, and let it all go. The solution will come, if it will, at a later stage. When the odds seem unsurmountable, there can still be peace. This was about letting go, and accepting a situation that could or would not be changed. Such acceptance was in itself an engine towards change, a novel insight into the unpredictable and the illogical. Everything can take on a new logic, if the old logic fails to give one the means to understand the issue at hand. A new way to think and plan was available, and it was composed of silence, and of the sweet hope that arises in the soul when it is not afflicted. The Man knew it. He did not pretend to understand. He did not need to. All he needed was to be at one with the silence, to become silence once again, and thus connect with the unfathomable. He did not belong to the world of the spirits, like Opal, but he had in him a sight that truly comprehended both worlds, and went beyond them. Not knowing why, not knowing how, and yet feeling the peace, was that not the key to all predicaments? The wind blew gently on their faces. The Man closed his eyes, and entered a deep state of tranquillity and reflection. Was this the boon of the goddess? Was he already a disciple of the Pale Enchantress blessing the world with the radiant silver reflection of the ever-changing, the opaque glare of that wavering celestial sphere, the Moon? It took shape slowly and ever so slowly, but it finally did happen. It was a memory. The Man saw it, and now he knew why Opal could not cross the threshold. He now knew that *he* was the barrier that she could not surmount.

Chapter VIII

And there she was, as if she was the light. The goddess of the dark clad in the supernal light of divinity, majestic and real before the eyes of the grey wolf. She did not want to be found, she wanted

to find *him*, and see what was inside of him, what expectation or hope led this strange figure all the way to the underworld. Who or what was this grey creature that had to delve into the darkness to ask for an audience with her? It was not easy to surprise her, and amazed she was when she saw the Old Spirit who became a wolf crossing the boundary between one realm and the other. Tolk was not afraid. He knew the role that he had to play. As soon as he saw her, he bowed and laid at her feet the offering he had brought from the world above. "My Queen whose realm I have crossed in haste and wonder, accept this gift from your humble servant." At this, she frowned and beckoned to him that he could stand up in her presence and speak his mind.

Tolk replied: "I am coming from the world of the servants of the sun. I am here to ask you a boon and a token of your friendship. My friend Opal, a trickster of the forest, has embarked on a journey with the Man who has no name. Their quest is to find who he is and thus please your sister, and save the forest. The unnamed Man poses a threat to all the living things above, but I yet have to understand why. All I know is that I too need his name, for the death of the wood and of its trees entails my own destruction. I come here with humility, please give me a token of your good will, and a gift that I can bear as your emblem to Opal. She has craved it for a long time, and now that I am in your presence I understand why. She needs it to choose a fixed form and stop being a hybrid. She wants a sign of death, to live one and only one life. But I am certain you know all this already, my Queen."

"Yes, Tolk, I know your mission, and yet you amaze me. I know it is not easy to cross boundaries, to leave one's aura in the worlds above and to face the shadows of my dismal kingdom. But I also know who Opal is and what she desires. I am willing to help. The Man without a name is a threat to me too. His solitude is dangerous for all of us. His name is the only salvation that will grant you life. He has no idea who he is, but when he discovers it, all will be well. A name he needs, and a story, as we all do. But now, dear Tolk, stay with me and rest. I will give you what you want, but first I shall ask you something"

"What is it, my Queen?"

"I desire that you wait for me and give me time to go on my own quest. I need to talk to my sister up above, as she is my opposite in every way, and she has the answer that I need."

Tolk did not dare ask the dark goddess what on earth, or under the earth, it was that she did not know. Besides, he was so tired, and he felt that a deep slumber was about to possess his entire enormous grey body. He wanted to talk to the goddess once again, but his eyelids started to shut and he could not resist the sudden onslaught of sleep that took hold of him. He soon sank into a deep darkness, a darkness within the darkness, a sleep without dreams. The goddess smiled at the grey wolf that lay motionless under her thin and beautiful figure. She hummed a slow and beautiful lullaby, and started climbing up the immense opening of a great cave. The world below was connected with the world above by great doors, which appeared out of nowhere, through the immense volition of the dark queen clad in light, slowly ascending to the higher levels of her realm.

The shadows retreated when they saw her, and the fires of the underworld lit up: The queen was leaving for another dimension.

Chapter IX

The Man felt all energies converge upon one small spot between his eyes. It felt as if the past had condensed and transformed, and that a novel life, a novel future, a novel existence was about to be torn out of it. Life born, life transformed, life redefined. He realised that such immense power could not be sustained, but all he could do was gaze beyond himself, and wonder, and find, perhaps, answers in the silence. Meanwhile, Opal was looking at him and all she saw was the Man staring into the void and biting his lips. Opal knew something was happening, but she had no way of breaking the thin barrier that separated her from the immense mystery that dwelt in the heart of the Man. He might have been just a human, and she a hybrid, fox and woman, traveller between worlds and identities, but there was nothing to say, nothing that might have breached the heavy silence. The Man knew this, and he became suddenly aware of the distance between himself and the grey woman. He knew they differed in kind. He understood that he had created the distance by becoming the very threshold that they wanted to enter. But that could not be, as it would have entailed casting off his very self, not losing the self altogether, but dispossessing it. Not losing it, rather ceasing to *be* it, ceasing to be who he was and who he might be. Opal could feel this, despite her lack of comprehension, despite her inability to do anything about it. She was no guide! All was in the hands of the Man, and all she could do was to wait. But the Man gave no sign that he was ready to do anything. He gazed into the void, sullen, moving his hands in sudden jerks. Were inside and outside in dialogue? What was there to be seen? The past and the present converging upon a single point? Or was it mere illusion and all that was happening was a strange pantomime of human life and fake mysticism, for the Man had really nothing to add? Was Opal a fake too? Perhaps she was never a fox, and the transformation of things and beings does not exist, all a lie and an illusion, false fire, a deceit destined to be discovered by a more attentive eye? Was this only a vision? Who were these people? Was there really a threshold, a gap, a point of convergence? The question is all, the question hones the identity and fashions a new reality. The question is there, throbbing in the mind. The question becomes a reality, the doubt a new certainty.

But the question hides another question, the mirror reflected the image of itself in an endless array of mirrors, each contained within the next. And the question travels, it brings forth awareness and epiphany, the very ability for change and upheaval. But the question is: who has the questions? Who is the possessor of the question, who is the owner, and who is the seer? The Man was eager to dispossess himself of the only gift he had: that of overturning the outer reality in order to project it into an inner world that others could share too. The Man knew that all that was outside of him was

mere illusion, and that the interpretation of it, springing from the depths of the inner world, was all that mattered. And it was for that reason that he was ready to lay down all that remained to him: himself, the deep nameless self that he had not forsaken. And it was through such dispossession that the Man could bring to the fore of the current narrative the question and its correlates, the wonder and its magic.

As the question chased the question, as the owner of the question is here, right now, with us. The words on the page hide and veil, and the questions peep out of the narrative to become yet one more reality. What did the Man do? Who was the Man? A fool gazing into the void accompanied by a madwoman whom he believed to be a fox? Was that what they were? If that is the case, mindless chatter is better than the present words. A deceit it was, and no more. But the owner of the question is right here, with us, with the words that are formed on the page, with the page that is yet another mirror, with the self that in turn shrinks into one and only one point in space. Is the past mingled with the future, is all life immersed in one immense silence? The silence reveals more than many words, the question unravels unforeseen realities, and the threshold is breached. Who had the question, oh Reader? Was it you? Did you ponder what the Man did or did not, did you doubt or did you believe? And if the latter, where did your belief lead you? To more questions or to the continuation of this story?

But the Man and Opal have not remained idle and something has changed. Was it a feeling? Can that be measured? If so, what are the logical consequences and is there an outcome to it? All we know is that the Man has discovered who he is, and Opal has followed him up to the very boundaries of the self. The Man knows his name now, and Opal has found her true and lasting form. They ventured forth and crossed the border of the forest while we were distracted by so many questions, by the question behind the question, by the question that engenders all the questions. His name is appropriate for a new life, as life and the name belong to the same dimension. Can this be a blessing? Is the search over? Has it ended where it began? Was there an ending, a beginning, a journey? Or, perhaps, there was no mission, no quest, only the question and its power to upheave and transform.

Chapter X

The queen was eager, the queen was willing, the queen knew who she was. The queen who knows herself, knows us too. She knows our ailments, she knows that we need her, and she has given us her word: one day, we shall fully remember who we were. Oblivion is our companion, for our memories are half-hidden, and they come in sudden epiphanies. The tears we have are not our solitude, and not our pain, but a tribute that we pay the great goddess of the reign below. She needs our tears, the salty deposit that keeps her world, solidifying its underlying structure. No, this is not

pain. No, the queen has her reasons but she guarantees that our work to sustain her world is valuable. We might not understand the meaning of our existence, but we know that we can create beautiful things. We do not fully grasp who we are and where we come from, but we trust the lady who knows herself. She is the lady of memory, of memory lost and memory regained, alive within her grasp. All we can do is to shed tears and tears and tears, but truth dwells in our hearts. Even if we cannot fully grasp it, truth is our guide. And she bestows on her subjects the grace of a word: the promise of future freedom, the liberation from oblivion. So, we comply, and we cry, if cry we do, as we have no eyes. The darkness protects us and we likewise protect it. Without us, there would be no dark, and thus no balance. This much we know, and this is what we do. The queen is generous, and the queen is eager and willing: She is ascending the higher spheres to meet with her sister. What they will discuss, we cannot know. But we retreat and give way, our queen is good, our queen will give us an answer, our queen will restore the collective memory of countless lost souls. And all our lives, and all our stories, will be poured onto the world, and all will be one. We are grateful for we know this was meant to be. We do not know the past, as it has been taken away from us a long or a short time ago, that we do not know. But we know the future. And the prophecy will be fulfilled and yet, as it goes, the truth has strange ways to come to the fore. What will be, will be. We shall not forget the future. And in it we shall merge, and we shall each become one individual person again, not dormant, not lost, not deprived of precious memory. The tears will dry for a new world will come into being! Let us all rejoice, let us all trust in the queen of our splendid dark abode, in her grace, in her dark power and in her shining figure. All will be well, crying shadows, all will be as it is, as it always has been. For life is a circle, and a spiral, and time can cease to be, and then be born again. Immense darkness, in you we reunite, in the mystery we are bound. Immense life, so far from our oblivious souls, open to the coming of the queen: for she is coming.

Chapter XI

The world beyond the forest was made of warm homes, safe shelters, and a feeling of fraternity. This is the way they portrayed it. This was how they contrasted it with the ominous forest and its mysteries, its silences, its strange occurrences. What was there was not here; what was possible here, could never have happened there. The forest could not be safe; the wood was a place of uncertainty, shadowy, ghostlike. Men never crossed the border from the civilised dimension on this side of the spectrum. They knew that small creatures, hidden in the holes of the ground, in the crevices between the shadow and the light overheard passing travellers. Men did not trust the forest and what it brought. Nothing coming from it was ever welcome. If they could have had it so, they would have destroyed it. But a sense of awe and fear always dissuaded them from doing so. Men

were weary of the strange rumours about the world beyond, and they heard story after story about the shadows that lurked underground, in another world, shadows who used to be men.

The Man who had found his name in the threshold between the forest and the other world wanted to tell men of what he had seen. He wanted to share his own completeness with them. He knew now. He understood what his mission was. Discovering his name was not sufficient to bring peace and harmony to the wood. No, that was only the beginning. He needed unity. He needed the peace and harmony that ensues when fear and prejudice dwindle and give way to fascination and understanding. The Man spoke and addressed Opal looking into her beautiful, shining eyes: "As you see, something has changed. I have found my name now. There was no need to enter their world to do that. My name has always been in me, but I had refused to know myself. Lack of self-knowledge leads to misery. I had believed that I could be at one with the soil, and the trees, and the leaves, and the morning dew. I wanted to absorb the wood deep, deep within me, and I wanted it to welcome me. It did. But I should not have left myself behind. All I needed to do was to go back there, to that place that I have carried with me the whole time. But I needed you, Opal. I needed your plight, your fear, and your love. I feel the love you have for me and what I had confused for lust when we met - yesterday but it seems much longer - is now clear: it is the pure love of one lonely soul that has met another. It is through your love that I have finally seen myself. And for this, I thank you. But my name will not help establish the harmony. I am only a man, no matter how much I see into the mystery. A man is not enough. We need to talk to other men, and for this I need your help. We need to reconnect with the world at large; we need to create a synergy between the one dimension and the other. Perhaps they will believe me. We must try."

At this, Opal raised her eyes, looked at the immense sky, and said to the Man: "I understand that something has changed. I also understand that your name was not enough. But what is your name, may I ask? Why are you concealing it from me? Am I not your friend or, even, the only person you love? Why are you so secretive, oh Man of the Wood, my leader, my lord and master?"

The Man spoke: "Opal dear, do not call me that. I am much less than what you make me. I am just a man, I told you. As for my name, you will know it in due time. When the moment comes."

Opal stared at him for a long time and said: "Yes, dear friend. So be it. And now let us go. I shall follow you to the end of the earth if this is necessary"

The Man smiled. The sweetness in his eyes did not meddle with his mystery. They set forth and crossed the first line of houses. A man and a fox, and there was no fear in their hearts. Nobody was around. the Man seemed to know exactly where he was going. Perhaps his new-found name led him like an inner compass in the only possible direction, that of his will, that of his true purpose.

Chapter XII

“Sister, I have come to you. But I fear it is too late. Maybe my visit was not necessary.”

“It was, it cannot but be necessary. What is more necessary?”

“Yes, but the Man has found his name and he is already setting out on a new quest. He wants to discover the mystery of the wood, and maybe our mystery too.”

“Let it be, dear sister, if that is the will of my disciple.”

“But why?”

“Because to the gods, life is one. But that is not so with men. He has many lives to live, for in that spiral that we call time he dwells. He has been my adept for time uncountable. He has lived in silence to the point of forgetting his own name. I could never have been more praised than that. But now, let us leave the Man to his new quests and to all his lives.”

“But what if he discovers our secret? I cannot let that happen, sister.”

“Could it ever harm you? Could you leave the shadows behind? Can he take away your power?”

“Of course not, but I am not comfortable that a mortal should know who we are.”

“For men, all gods are one, you should know this. And for us, that Man is all men. But there are differences, my dark and dear sister. Do you now see that the pale radiance of the moon is my boon to life, my pledge to the life of all the shadowy creatures, to the poets that sing my name since time immemorial? And your shadows and their half-forgotten lives have perhaps had a just retribution, but you do not see men as I do. Your world is too far from their world. Come here to the celestial sphere more often, and you will see the truth of human life with different eyes.”

“I see men. And I see their mischief too. I have no esteem for them, just the mercy of the half-forgotten lives that I grant them. And this should be enough.”

“Hence the balance, dear sister. But tell me about one more thing, if you please.”

“What is it?”

“What will happen to Tolk? I have led him to believe that the moon necklace was just one of his trinkets. I have deceived him into believing that he could trick the Man and me, and that he could do something for the fox. But I chose to do so because I know the Old Spirit, and he lived in the forest for such a long, long time. My true gift was the journey he set out on, and the ultimate price will be self-knowledge. He wanted to discover the name of the Man, but all that he needed was to know himself.”

“I do not know what will happen to him. I told him to wait for me there, in the kingdom of my dear shadows. His destiny is yours to choose, sister.”

“Indeed. My choice is to let him live as a wolf for a little while longer and then give him the chance to be a man, as he has always wanted.”

“So be it, then. And what will happen now?”

“What has always happened. The Man will share the secret with his fellow men, who will not believe him, and they will try to kill him. It is an old story. No need to hide in a cave full of shadows to learn about it, dear sister.”

“Were those shadows like mine, dear sister?”

“No, they were simulacra, lies, artefacts made of men to deceive men. There was no truth in them. They were set to cover the world in petty and disgusting lies. Your shadows were once men. They are alive. It is quite a different story.”

“I had missed your wisdom, dear sister. I shall go back to my darkness and let Tolk go. He will wander in the forest, and become a man. But his name I want as a token for such transformation. The same spirit he left at the entrance of my world is nothing but his name in a different form. He will give it to me, and he will become the new Man of the Wood.”

“And a new life will begin. Cycles, cycles and more cycles. The moon will witness all change, as the sovereign of change I am.”

“And will this new Man look for his name one day? Will he leave the abode of his solitude, roaming in the forest only to find another spirit living in a tree, deceived into leaving trinkets of the moon and its wonders?”

“I believe this will come to pass too. For men will kill the Man who has found his name, and he will become a spirit too, and in the tree I shall place him. In the same old sycamore of my beloved, prosperous wood.”

“But why the lie, dear sister? Why did you let them believe that finding his name would change the life of the entire forest?”

“Oh, that is not a lie. For the name is a life giver.”

“And yet, I do not know his name yet. Will you give me the last tile of this mosaic before a new cycle begins?”

“His name is on the cover of the book that contains us, but I shall not pronounce it here. The question is whether he is the author of this story or if the story has fashioned him in its semblance. The story that will take him – and us – to other worlds. And his name will be one and undivided, and all the Men of the Wood will have this name.”

“In forever repeated cycles, sister?”

“No, in the spiral of life that eternally grows and is neither born nor destroyed.”

Saul Andreetti