

## The dark beyond the earth

My name is Uwe Reinhardt. I've been a psychiatrist for over forty years and yet my reputation is debated, in fact, many colleagues of mine have often raised an eyebrow about me. I don't feel like putting judgment on them, however, for they did that only for the sake of our profession and not without honesty. Nonetheless, a fool too can be honest. The object of their critique is my interest in certain psychological phenomena that science considers unworthy, may Jung be at peace with that. The real reason why this interest of mine has drawn to itself so much blame must be looked for even deeper, in my general attitude towards the world that is not harmonised with the orthodox points of view of the many. As a doctor and man of science, I should pursue the most adamant faith in pure reason and logic. However, the true courage of a scientist resides precisely in admitting that reality is an unfathomable mystery. Beyond the horizon that reason and other instruments make relatively and apparently comprehensible lies an uncharted territory, which I happened to glimpse several times over my career, although I failed too many times to understand it. Someone made me note, not without sarcasm, that this is a philosopher's talk at best, or a charlatan's in the common idiom, anyhow it's beneath a doctor's reputation. Oh, how I crave for the old times when Paracelsus and Ficino, Bruno and Campanella engaged the mysteries of the world by relying on their senses as well as their minds, or better, allow me to say, by using their minds as a sensorial organ.

Today, as I ponder over so many a case I have observed in life, I feel that I must agree with the philosopher, and my conscience does not suffer from that. For this reason, I've decided to disclose for the first time ever the stories of some of those cases that took me to those unknown territories, away from the footholds of the scientific method. Sometimes I had some part in those events and other times I was just an observer, but I can say beyond any doubt that the stuff they're made of is true facts, the evidence of which can be easily found in books and other sources. As to their meaning or interpretation, I can only wonder once more: if something happens only in the mind, is it less real?

## Clelia and the Ghost of the Mountain

Still a man hears what he wants to hear  
And disregards the rest

*The Boxer*, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel

The simple life of a village at the bottom of an Alpine valley offers a boy many opportunities to indulge in daydreaming. The vicinity of the woods and the animals dwelling in them, together with the majestic mysteriousness of the mountain landscape, shape both the personality and imagination. And then, there are the stories told by the elderly, some of which were handed down through the centuries and are covered in a thin layer of dust and friendliness, while other one are more recent and still wrapped in a halo of dangerousness as though the reality out of which they emerged like butterflies from a cocoon had left in their folds and wrinkles a venomous scent.

The legend of the Ghost of the Mountain was one of these tales. The first time I heard my grandfather telling it, it was in the early 1950s and I was perhaps four or five-year-old. Grandpa was not a man of words but he loved telling the stories from his war, that of 1914, which he fought on the Galician front for two years before he left a hand there, as well as the old ghost stories that his grandparents used to tell one century ago in the candle-lit evenings of stables and inns. According to that legend, the Ghost haunted the *Pechwald*, a thick forest with an ominous name that stretches over the moun-

tains of southern Styria. He was the lost soul of an assassin or maybe, according to one different version of the tale, of an unfortunate man who had been murdered by marauders. At any rate, the restless Ghost wandered in the forest assaulting the lone travellers and feeding off the blood of grazing heifers. His looks were terrifying because the horror of death had remained on his monstrous face, brown as the earth and green as moss, half boar and half bear. My grandpa's tales impressed me so much that I could see that mask in my mind as though I had met him face-to-face. Legend had it that anyone who met the Ghost was maddened with terror and that even the beasts grew afraid when he came near.

Every legend contains a grain of historical truth that in time grows thinner and thinner until only a faint and fantastic echo of it remains. However, when a legend is in its prime one can, with some patience and stubbornness, dig down where it possibly roots in reality, although it remains hard to tell how much truth may rest down there. Between 1922 and 1927, the papers published some articles about the disappearance of four people who had entered the *Pechwald* never to come out again, while a fifth, a deranged woman, had been found by a hunter to whom she had said that the wood had become alive and had taken her baby away from her. Those were not times when such news could be discussed under the light of science, at least not in the villages at the bottom of those valleys. Folks believed in witches, spirits and what not. As for the rest, rumours had it that the woman had gone into the forest to give birth to her illegitimate son. In 1928 a roundup was called to chase the Ghost out of the forest. My grandfather remem-

bered that over a hundred men led by the dogs stormed the woods, armed with torches and rifles, and that three priests followed them with great wooden crosses, with which they expected to repel the evil spirit. Of course, the expedition remained unfruitful. Afterwards, even darker times came, but that is history, not legend. The notoriousness of the *Pechwald* was such, however, that not even the most desperate refugees dared trespass its borders. In fact, it is an incredibly ruffled and thick wood that covers a jagged side of the mountain, whose many dangerous cliffs are battered by the icy eastern winds. After the war, the rumours about the Ghost and his misdeeds grew pale in the face of the too many crimes perpetrated by humans, and the legend began to assume that dusty outlook of the old-maid tales. My grandfather died in 1955 and in my family no one spoke of the Ghost anymore. Eleven years later, though, his shadow rose on the horizon once again, unexpected as can be.

At that time, I was working at the Hunter's Inn, an old, Tyrol-style, dark-green, wooden-built house that looked as sombre as the barracks of the *Grenzpolizei*. From its windows one could see to the west the wide shape of the Speikkogel, the dark forests on the sides of the mountains, and the pastures scattered with large, grey boulders. The summer was declining and Mr Hempel went to greet our last guests of the season, a French family that had just arrived. A tall, pale man and a withered-looking woman alighted from the car, they wore city clothes and seemed tired as if they had been journeying for many days. Behind them Clelia appeared, slender

and tall, with faded brown hair and skin as white as milk. She wore large, dark glasses that made her look like a weird, albino insect. Our welcome was rustic and not at all ceremonious. I brought the baggage inside while Mr Hempel offered his blackberry Schnapps as a welcome gift, which Clelia's father gently declined with a kind smile. I was nineteen and had just finished school, and I used my basic French to translate between the hosts and Mr Hempel. Then I took them to their rooms upstairs, where Clelia stopped and stood on the threshold of her chamber:

«It seems a dwarf's lair», she said sulkily grinning. It was a bizarre room indeed, a slant wall met the tilted ceiling creating an odd geometry. The warm light of the early afternoon came in through the window making the fir planks of the floor and the floating particles of dust glimmer. I noticed a tiny speck outside, far away right on the border of the woods at circa five hundred metres, and I thought it should be some large animal, perhaps a boar if not even a bear. I don't know if Clelia saw it too, she just shut the window and drew the curtains.

At dinner, I discretely observed our only guests from the kitchen door. Clelia and her father ordered wild boar stew with potatoes, while her mother asked for a plate of boiled vegetables.

«Why don't you try something else?», her husband asked. «You didn't eat anything the whole day.»

«Are you kidding me? Do you want me stay up all night with my stomach in flames?»

The man looked at her with a dull gaze but said nothing, and I caught that the unpleasant bit of conversation had to be, very likely, the repetition of some habit, the mirror of a very unhappy life. They ate their dinner in silence like a bereaved family. The man was stiff and pale, he looked like a devitalised tooth. The woman constantly twitched and grinned, as if some mysterious torment moved her face and limbs from the inside. Clelia, instead, remained inscrutable behind her dark lenses, which she never took off. Staring at her plate, she slowly ate a mouthful after another like someone who is carrying out a boring and inescapable duty. Those were the years of wealth, happy holidays and brand new household appliances, of TV sets and bikinis portrayed on the colourful covers of fashion magazines, and yet that family seemed as if they had just materialised out of a Brel's song or some existentialist novel. After dinner, they stood up and Clelia said she would stay a little longer out on the porch.

It didn't take much of my time to clean the table. As for the other chores, I left those for the next day. When I got out, Clelia was still sitting outside on the bench, just out of the light-cone of the lamp, and my sudden arrival gave her a start. The air of the night was still and chilly and the black mountains stood out against the starry sky. As she turned to watch me I saw two big, ice-grey beautiful eyes, shining like jewels on a crown. I had never seen anything like that, nor did I meet again anyone with similar eyes. They looked like the cold and cruel eyes of some polar praying nocturnal beast, but they were also kind and compassionate, as if some sort of

desperate loneliness was calling for help through their piercing gaze.

«I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you», I muttered in my broken French.

«Never mind», she just replied turning away.

«Do you like it here?»

«I do. In the place where I live, you can't see the stars. Do you live here?»

«No, I only work at the inn. My name is Uwe, by the way.»

Clelia shook my hand kindly.

«It sounds fun, like that of cat», she said. «I'm Clelia.»

«It's a beautiful name», I mumbled. Suddenly, I craved to know everything about this girl, so nice and graceless, who looked quite younger than her age.

«Where do you live in France?»

«Paris.»

«What year are you at school?»

«I'm through. I just wish I was twenty already, like those girls who go to the university and drive a car, work, go out and share a flat with other girls. My cousin let me listen to her records of the Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel, The Birds, but my parents don't want, they say they're perverts.»

In that instant, Clelia seemed to me like a creature from an unknown world where millions of people live together without knowing each other, a world where the noise never stops and no one can notice the changing seasons. Her language too and her ideas seemed almost inconceivable and made me feel ashamed of my backwardness.



«What about you? What do you do except working?», she asked after a while.

«Not much, really. This is my first summer without school and I still don't know what to do. I would like to go away to study, perhaps in Vienna.»

«What do you want to study?»

«I don't know yet. Maybe history, or philosophy.»

«Will you become a professor?»

«Who me? I don't know...», I blushed. Me a professor! I just nurtured some foggy desires of travelling and seeing other places, maybe writing someday, but the only sure thing was that I didn't mean to spend the rest of my life in that valley.

«You speak good French, you may come to Paris.»

«Who knows... and you? What are you going to do?»

«I will study and become a doctor to find the cure for my eyes», she said with confidence.

«What's wrong with them?»

«It's the light, I can't stand it. I was born with this thing, they call it photophobia, it means fear of the light.»

«Is that why you always wear those glasses?»

«Yes. The light hurts me like a fire, I see coloured flashes and the images become blurred like in a blinding fog.»

«Oh my God...»

«It's not that grim. I just have to turn off the lights. I keep the shutters closed and go out after sunset.»

«You're the first person I meet, how feels better in the dark than in the light.»

«The dark is wonderful, you know. People don't realise that, especially in the city, for the lights are always on even at

night. When you observe things in the shadow you must concentrate and look closely. Only then you can see things for what they are. My cousin told me that some people do drugs to see the world differently, in London it's raging, and they call it psychedelia.»

Once again, Clelia was talking about things that seemed to come from another world. I tried to make an effort to imagine those guys in their big cities, coming together to listen to music and explore mysterious experiences like the cultists of some ancient religion. Then I thought about home, the old furniture inherited from the grand-grandparents, the All Saints procession with the bonfires and the dances. Would I ever be able to see things differently like Clelia did through her extraordinary eyes, or like those guys did with their drugs? I put all my strength into focusing on the blurry forms that barely appeared in the dark, but maybe because I was standing within the cone of light or because my mind was simply unfit, I couldn't see anything but the black speck of the woods before me. And then a shapeless fear expanded through my mind, like a blank, boundless threat.

«You shouldn't stay out here all alone», I just said. Then I wished her goodnight and descended the steps down the porch almost running. Only when I was sitting in my car, with the engine running and the stream of the lights tearing the night apart, I felt better.

That night the Ghost of the Mountain crept back into my head after a long time, and for the first time I asked myself if I really believed in his existence. The inn stood on the road to

the *Pechwald*, but nobody paid attention to those tales anymore. Every summer many tourists flocked to visit our mountains and no accident whatsoever had happened in years. I could not explain how my sudden childish and unreasonable fear could be so intense and pervasive, as though my whole being had been put into alarm. I found it absurd that I could still believe the Ghost was out there, and yet his vivid memory had reawakened in my mind and I could see with my inner eyes his horrible face, on which the human features blended madly with the vegetal and beastly soul of the forest. I brooded all night long and the story of the Ghost kept intertwining with Clelia's words about her strange, attracting world. I wondered for the first time if reality ends there where we can perceive it or if something incorporeal and invisible exists, like the angels and demons of which the priest used to speak, something that apparently dwells nowhere and yet is everywhere and makes itself manifest to the mind alone, with the same intensity as material things make themselves manifest to our senses. I was surprised, for I – an irreligious but wildly imaginative spirit – did not hold myself capable of such reasoning, but that night I felt for the first time my soul expanding and it seemed to me that I could fly over the mountains as though my body had evaporated and turned into an incorporeal mist. I flew over the peaks and clearly saw the rocks and the firs' pinnacles, and I could fly faster or slower, and climb or dive as an owl, and as my mind's eyes spotted the tiniest blade of grass and drop of dew I could hear each leaf trembling in the breeze. It felt as though everything was alive and real inside me, for I was one with the whole. And

then I saw him and shivered. I saw his terrifying face of stone and bone, moss and bark, with dry leaves for a beard and a wolf's fangs in his drooling mouth. He was so real that I thought I could touch him, but I also knew he could not reach or see me because all that was happening only in my mind. And then everything went black, blacker than the darkest night.

The next morning, I arrived at the inn at about half past seven and found a note from Mr Hempel with a list of the things to do for the day, for he was going to stay out until the afternoon for some urgent business. Sure as I was that Clelia and her parents were still in bed, I began cleaning the kitchen and dining room, then the hall and the porch. It was almost nine o'clock when I heard the stairs creaking and I saw Clelia's parents ready for breakfast.

«Is there anything that your daughter particularly likes for breakfast?», I asked while serving their coffee.

«Just tea, with a little honey», replied her father.

«And some fresh fruit», the woman added.

However, the hours went by and Clelia would not leave her room, which her mother said to be quite unusual.

«She is an early bird», she explained with perplexity, and her father decided to knock on her door, but no answer came from inside. After a first moment of bewilderment, he knocked again and called, but only silence did he have again for reply. The door was not locked, so when they turned the handle it yielded gently.

«It's empty!», the man cried.

«What?»

«She's not here.»

«And where on earth should she have gone?», her mother asked outraged.

We searched everywhere, but Clelia was nowhere to be found. She had left no note and their parents had no clue about when she had left the inn. I knew that she had gone into the woods and felt angry about her bold recklessness. The *Pechwald* was infamous for its treacherous jagged floor, crisscrossed by crevices and cliffs that the thick undergrowth concealed like deadly traps.

«I'll go looking for her», I said without hesitation.

«Shouldn't we call for the police?»

«It might be too early, she could just be wandering. Anyway, it would take hours», I objected. «We don't know how early she went, and even if she's walking slowly she might already be some kilometres away.»

«How do you know where to go?», her father asked.

«I know the woods.»

«I'm coming with you.»

«I'll travel faster alone. Please, you stay here and wait for Mr Hempel. He will know what to do, if we do not return before he does.»

Having left them with no other options but staying at the inn, I headed for the forest and started my chase. I assumed Clelia had not left the path. The wood was thick and the air stuffy, and I felt uneasy. Now and then I called for Clelia's name, but my voice faded in the forest. As the afternoon grew old and the sun sank westward behind the mountain, the light

grew dimmer and a chilly breeze started to blow from the east, bringing dark clouds over the *Pechwald*. I started to feel really worried, for I knew I had walked for over five kilometres and if I had not gone back immediately, I would not have had light enough to come out of the forest. However, I had not yet found Clelia and I could not leave her out there overnight. Something bad had happened, I could feel it in my bones, and I started searching the undergrowth frantically, thorns and spikes scratched my hands and I stumbled more than once on the rocks concealed under the vegetation. The low clouds were now engulfing the woods, creeping in white, ghastly banks among the trees. Suddenly, I felt that the Ghost was near. His presence filled the air of the *Pechwald* and weighed on me, spreading a terror that I had never felt before. A bleak desperation descended on my heart, as I cried out Clelia's name until my throat went sore. I don't know what mysterious instinct or animal inner sense of danger held me back with my foot raised and ready to take the fatal step that would make me fall down the cliff that the ferns concealed. In the fading light, I watched down and saw the darkness gathering at the bottom. But I also noticed some traces revealing that something or someone had fallen down the steep slope. I began to descend with caution on all four, using the stones as footholds, and finally reached the floor a few metres below. There, the darkness was so thick that I could barely see, but I could hear the feeble sound of something creeping in the undergrowth.

«Clelia, are you there?», I asked and there she was, lying among the ferns, dirty and scratched but miraculously unhurt.

«Thanks God I found you! What are you doing here? What happened?», I asked vehemently, so relieved to see her.

«I was following that thing, but I didn't see the edge of the cliff. I don't remember exactly what happened, I just fell over», she explained as she tried and sat up.

«What were you following? Why on earth were you wandering alone in this woods? They're dangerous, very dangerous!»

«This morning, very early, I was looking out of my window, when I saw something like a big animal crawling very slowly up the road, heading for the woods.»

«And you followed it, didn't you?», I said scornfully.

«I did. I couldn't help, I felt as if a mysterious voice was telling me to follow that thing. It was exciting and frightful, I can't explain.»

If only I had told her about the Ghost, she wouldn't have been so bold. I lowered my eyes, feeling guilty and ashamed.

«We must go now», I said then. «It's getting dark.»

In the dim light we climbed the cliff and found the path, but before we could get out of the forest the night had fallen and we had to proceed slowly with our hands stretched out to avoid the trees and boughs. As we approached the inn, I noticed a fourth car in the parking lot and guessed that Mr Hempel had called the police. Clelia was now extremely tired and pale, and only now I realised that she was not wearing her dark glasses. Nonetheless, as soon as we got inside her parents scolded her roughly, not to mention that they thought it unnecessary to thank me for rescuing her. Mr Hempel looked unusually excited and glanced at me twice with a curi-

ous and respectful gaze, but the police officer asked a lot of questions about the incident, maybe suspecting that something odd might be going on. It should have been a heroic moment for me, and yet it made me only uncomfortable and impatient. Clelia explained that she had gone into the woods to follow an animal and got lost, and I only explained how I found her, which was the truth they needed to hear. The other truth, which I alone knew as the only capable explanation of why Clelia had been attracted into the forest, remained deeply buried in my soul. I never told her about the Ghost, for her parents got so upset that they decided to leave the very next day. I cannot tell if the incident had spoiled their vacation or if they just caught the opportunity to put an anticipated end to their unhappy holidays. I met Clelia just before they left the inn, the following morning. She looked miserable.

«How are you? Could you sleep?», I asked her.

«My eyes hurt. I wish I had my glasses.»

«What happened to them?»

«I don't know, I must have lost them when I fell. By the way, I didn't thank you yesterday. If you had not found me, I cannot imagine what would have happened.»

«You were lucky, that forest is... dangerous», I said with some hesitation, for I did mean to say evil.

«It was very foolish of me, to go there like that.»

«It's ok, you have learned a lesson.»

«You sound like my father.»

I scoffed, and then I added:

«He wanted to come with me yesterday, by the way.»



«You know, I thought again about that thing I was following. I am not sure it was an animal, after all. It looked like an old, crooked man, and perhaps he was wearing some furry kind of coat. I don't know why I wanted to see it so badly, it was an odd feeling, real uncanny.»

I wanted to say so many things and share my secret with her, but I remained silent, sucking my teeth. She had seen him and had fallen under his wicked spell, like all the other victims. And yet, her imperfect, beautiful eyes had protected her from seeing too much of the truth. She only sensed the power of the Ghost's mystery and ventured into the *Pechwald* out of sheer desire to see that thing for what it was, maybe a beast or maybe a man, more likely neither of them. It was just a spirit, conjured by the forces of nature in the dim light of the dawn, a spirit that her extraordinary eyes had glimpsed in its earthly form. She had the guts to go there where no one else would and for that I admired her profoundly. Although she didn't come face to face with him, she saw what dwelled in those woods and survived. Now I knew it was my turn.

We separated for good, and on that very same day I returned into the *Pechwald*, looking for the Ghost. In the cloudy morning the forest looked even more ruffled than usual, and despite my fear I was also determined to find him, even though I had no idea of where to start looking for him. I searched everywhere in vain, and I suppose that the reason why I could not find the Ghost is that he did not mean to be found. When I gave up my exploration and made my way back to the inn, that afternoon, I felt downcast and unworthy. There are people, who claim they can summon the spirits at

their will, but I've never seen any of them at work and have, instead, read so much about the fraudulent ways of many of them. Ghosts, after all, were once living people, temperamental, full of contradictions, and driven by desires and emotions. If we do not allow others to make us do what we don't want to, why should a phantom abide?

However, the Ghost of the Mountain never left me alone, even after I moved to Vienna to study medicine. Yes, what had happened had convinced me that the mind should be the object of my future explorations, for it was there that I had seen for the first time vast and uncharted territories of which I wanted to know every aspect, geography and laws, inhabitants and history. That's why I embarked on the voyage that would make a psychiatrist out of me. In those years, I imagined the Ghost wandering alone in the woods, unseen and forgotten by all except me, and I felt sorry for that unhappy soul destined to remain trapped there in utter, endless solitude. The thought of the Ghost became an obsession and began to take its toll, for I could not share that secret with anyone without risking being mocked as a loony or an idiot.

I don't know how many times I went back into those woods looking for the Ghost. I went up alone and almost secretly without telling anyone and risking to remain stranded in the forest if anything happened to me. It was dangerous but I was no longer afraid, and over the years spent in the *Pechwald* roaming and chasing I grew aware that the Ghost was much more than the lost soul of a man. It was the spirit of the *Pechwald* itself, the forest of bad luck, where people saw in every log and stone a horrible face not so different from the face I

had imagined in my mind for so many years. After all, we only see what we want to see and always disregard the rest.

Legends speak the truth, however, in their own special way. The Ghost had some physical, human form and some people had really seen him. Clelia was the last one, at least to my knowledge. She was right when she claimed that the thing she had seen crawling at dawn along the road was a human being, crooked and cloaked. I found him at the bottom of a steep gorge, sitting on the forest floor, wrapped in an old brown cloak, with his back against a young chestnut. He looked asleep and his head, inclined to the right, was concealed beneath a wide hood. His white and skeletal hands lay on the ground, and his stretched-out legs clothed in old, worn-out trousers ended into a pair of broken boots covered in mud. I got near very slowly, expecting to see him rise at any second, I was scared and felt my legs like jelly, and yet kept on walking toward him. I grabbed the edge of his hood and uncovered a wax-yellowish, bald skull. It was a terrifying view and I almost screamed in terror, for I was face to face with the Ghost himself, bony and wrinkled, yellowish and grey like a piece of mouldy canvas. The eyes were hollow cavities, and there was no nose amid that face, and the ivory-tainted teeth stood out against the blackness of the open mouth. I noticed then that half of his jaw was missing, but I could not see the fragments anywhere. I looked closely, for the inquisitive spirit of the young, eager medical student had now taken the upper hand over fear, and I reckoned that the fracture in the bone was ancient. That defaced skeleton told me a ghastly story of violence, of a very severe wounding that reminded me of those appalling pictures taken after the Great War, pictured of men whose faces had been de-

stroyed through splinters, bullets and shrapnel, men who had been forced to spend the rest of the unfortunate existences secluded in hospitals and asylums, away from the eyes of their kin and friends. I knew that during the Great War many young men from were enlisted in those valleys and my grandfather was one of them. Many fell in battle, and many went missing. Perhaps, I thought, the corpse I was looking at was once one of those young men that the war had cruelly transformed into shadows and ghosts.

I felt pity and profound quiet. I looked around and became aware of the beauty of the forest, in which I sensed the sacred spirit of the mountain and the unending continuity of life. All around me, I could now sense all the dying and rotting from which new life was constantly reborn. I had found the Ghost and I now saw him for what he really was, whatever he was. I put my hands into his pockets, hoping to find something that could reveal his human identity, but the only thing I found was the most unexpected object. A pair of dark sunglasses, the very ones that once protected Clelia's eyes from the scorching burn of light.