

## In the marsh

After a delicious dinner of ravioli in a mushroom sauce with lard, followed by a liver pie with currant, potatoes and chard in a red wine sauce, all accompanied by two bottles of Chianti, Marcus began to feel confident enough to try a couple of travel stories. He had joined my team only recently and struggled to hatch out of his shell, especially when I invited him for a drink after work. Considering, moreover, that he was one remarkable specimen of those well-mannered Brits, reserved and always ready to apologise for anything, his gentle shyness tended dangerously to border on mutism. The two tales he was about to tell were supposed to make the best of his repertoire. Indeed, his wife Julia tenderly smiled at him like someone ready to listen to a most-loved song. Julia was a brilliant woman, too, who looked at the world through the veil of irony just like Greta, who kept exchanging with the young girl from London the most charming, meaningful glances. I listened to Marcus's first tale with the utmost attention, as though he was lecturing on the mystery of the great Siberian Hell's Gate. The point is that nothing is irrelevant to me, for I believe that every event, even the smallest, always produces effects of some degree on the whole system. However, the second tale began to dangerously steer towards tediousness, without taking off or offering any promise of an exciting and bumpy landing. The narrator caught my impatience in some slight change in my expression, of which I might not have been fully aware. He began to stutter – maybe the wine had some part in that, too – as if his tongue had suddenly knotted. At his first hesitation, I caught the opportunity and jumped to his rescue. Marcus blushed and fell silent, mortified and re-

lieved at the same time. Julia smiled at him with loving charm. Marcus had nothing to be ashamed of, he was one of the best, and he knew it. I poured him a glass of Arran whisky and rolled up a cigarette, then I said:

«To thank my wife for the exceptional dinner she has delighted us with, I cannot think of anything better than telling you a story, whose main protagonist was Greta.»

She showed that self-confident, enigmatic smile that you can only see on certain ancient statues of Chthonic goddesses and yielded with a vague gesture.

«You know what I am talking about», I told her, and she nodded. «You wish to tell it, perhaps?»

«You know I'm not as good as you at blabbing», she said, winking and puffing at her cigarette. «Moreover, I'm rather a listener.»

Thus, in the quiet of the starry night, I began.

\* \* \*

Travelling is a serious affair. I am not talking about those holidays spent in some resort with forced entertainment, theme parties, Saturday night balls with the conga and happy hour. No, I mean hitting the road by just carrying a backpack, a map, and the palest idea about what lies ahead, hoping to stumble upon some secret place, one of those miraculous revelations that appear of a sudden, indecipherable and threatening. The bewilderment one can feel in those moments is the true spirit of travelling. Initiation, then, is what I am talking about, for every true traveller is an initiate. Greta's inquisitive soul and curiosity have no bounds and urge her to explore places that a mildly prudent person would never enter for any reason. As a young woman, she loved every place that possessed something mysterious in its character, be it a misty

gorge in the mountains, a dark forest, a site of ancient ruins, or a neglected pathway ending nowhere or against the gate of an old cemetery.

One year, we were in the autumn, and Greta invited me to go wandering along the coast of a wild southern country. We were young and inexperienced, but we both heard the irresistible call of the world and were eager to explore it. In a warm and misty afternoon, we found ourselves on a hardly visible path that wound across a landscape of naked rocks and low thorny bushes, and it often led us away from the sea through thickets and withered fields. We climbed a slope and stopped on the top of a thin, flat mound that ran parallel to the shore. The air was stuffy and damp, and we saw below a vast marsh whose motionless surface reflected a nacre-pink sky. Just beyond a thin line of sandy shore, the golden sea glimmered so close and yet far out of reach. As we stood astonished before that extraordinary view, we spotted a few pinnacles emerging from the water, and more detached and blurry in the misty air, the control tower of an airport. An entire city seemed to exist under the murky water! The continuous croaking of the frogs made the heat vibrate. Dense swarms of insects floated so thick that we could see them like wisps of clouds in the windless sky. From the edge of the dune, Greta and I looked down at what seemed the landscape of a primitive planet that once upon a time had been inhabited by creatures like us. A flock of birds took off, and their broad wings, long necks and slender legs made them resemble prehistoric beasts.

Greta awoke soon. Our serendipitous discovery had produced an extraordinary effect on her. She grabbed my hand and dragged me down the slope and through the bushes, repeating that we had to see the marsh closely. At every step, her strange frenzy took hold of me too, and yet I apprehensively glanced at the thick vegetation closing behind us as we

rushed on. Then I noticed some ugly huts a few hundred metres from us on the right, and I thought that their dwellers might be marauders like those of Stoker's *The burial of the rats*, who assaulted and robbed the voyagers who, like us, got lost in that boggy land. What better place than a marsh to get rid of a corpse? The miasmas rising from below made me dizzy and from time to time we ran through those swarms of insects, whose touch on the skin was disgusting. Finally, we reached a high wall of reeds and our feet splashed into the murky water. We were at the bottom. I warned Greta to be very careful now, for we could sink into some pit concealed underwater or, much worse, quicksand. We advanced through the thick vegetation, always followed by the intense croaking. While wandering across that labyrinth of reeds, we could only see the sky above our heads turning red as the afternoon grew old. Finally, we emerged from the vegetation and stood before the solemnly still marsh. Scattered bell towers and lamp posts, from which slimy clumps of rotting plants hung, stood above the motionless water.

Suddenly, as though my mind had left the house of my body, I was cast into an unknown and cold world, where a dim, greenish light feebly shone. Before my eyes, I could guess a muddy road overgrown with slimy vegetation and all around lay rusty wrecks of cars. Some white and stiff mannequins stared at me from a shop window. The vision lasted just a few seconds, and when it faded, I regained consciousness of my body and felt a sickness that seemed to spread from the root of my skull. The hallucination had been so intense and precise that it left me with the most vivid impression of that uncanny world, as if I had seen it with my waking eyes. I had never felt anything the like before, and I started to fear it was the first symptom of a heat stroke or maybe poisoning owed to the miasmas. Greta brought me back to reality, making me

aware of a faint buzz beyond the reeds as if some gigantic insect was flying around. The sound grew, and after a while, a rectangular bathtub-looking boat appeared beyond the reeds. The man piloting it was so big that the boat dangerously sunk astern. He looked surprised to see us as he veered in our direction. In the meantime, the shadows had grown darker, and the twilight was now swallowing the landscape.

«Ahoy, down there!», he called, reaching the shore. «What are you doing?»

He looked about forty and was well-built, and his blue eyes – surrounded by a geography of wrinkles – revealed a patient and steadfast soul. As he said that it was impossible to go back in the dark, we looked around and realised how quickly the hours had gone by. The absolute stillness of the air made me think of the atmosphere of some nightmares.

«You'd better come with me», the man muttered.

«On that thing?», I asked, striving not to sound like a squeaking mouse.

«You don't want to sleep out here», he said with a grin.

Actually, I did not believe he cared much about us. He sometimes cast an attentive glance at the water as if he saw or expected to see something out there. Obviously, we could not stay there. Venturing through the reeds in the dark would mean wandering in a labyrinth full of traps. Greta and I exchanged silent glances while the man steered the boat that hardly floated under our weight. We advanced slowly at ten metres from the shore in the fading light, and like in a dream, we could see the top of the roofs slide a few inches below the keel. I shivered, thinking about the rotting things down there in the mud.

«What happened here?», Greta asked.

«This land was once a marsh, before the reclamation. Then they came and built houses, ploughed the fields, and the town

grew bigger. The ground was drenched, yet. Then you know, the sea is rising, there were storm and floods, long story short the land has returned boggy. Crops turned black and wasted away, and we struggled to keep the water out of our cellars. The roads cracked and big sinkholes opened everywhere, swallowing cars, people and even the buildings. The great flight began at last when the insects came, large and vicious, in swarms. They suck the blood and carry strange diseases, high fevers, one dies suddenly like a chicken.»

The man grew dumb and steered the boat toward the lights on the shore. In the dim light, the huts looked like a Palaeolithic settlement. Along a wooden wharf, some old and worn-out boats were moored, and there we finally got ashore. On a cracked and overgrown asphalt-coated path that once had been a road, the man led us to a hut engulfed by vegetation, with discoloured walls and an uneven roof. Inside, we were overwhelmed by a nauseating stench, as if someone had been boiling rotting fish with cinnamon and alcohol. Greta and I exchanged a quick, apprehensive glance. The man opened a door on a large room feebly lighted by an old petrol lantern. For some mysterious reason, the inhabitants of the house had gathered in the room an amount of useless and incomprehensible objects, among which I could spot a pair of stag horns hanging from the wall, small platters and other pieces of pottery, a tall and mouldy ragdoll, and enigmatic, empty frames from which the images had been taken away.

An incredibly ugly woman sat in an armchair in the darkest corner. At first, she seemed to me a grotesque puppet, but I realised she was alive because she kept drawing at a small black pipe, blowing clouds of pestilential smoke. From the other side of a scratched and greasy table, a man stared at us in silence. He was tall, pale and so lean that he seemed made of sticks tied together with rubber bands. His clothes hung

from his shoulders like rags on a scarecrow. For a moment I thought I was in a dream. When he asked who we were, the boat pilot told him how he rescued us. He never turned away from the window, from which he stared at the marsh.

«At least these ones are real and alive», the lean one said grimly.

«Shut your mouth», the other said without moving away from the window.

«Were you hoping to come across someone else?», the slender man insinuated with a malevolent grin, and this time the pilot looked at him in anger.

«C'm on, he ain't gonna show up. Wha' you waitin' for?»

«That's enough, shithead», answered the strong man with a scoff. «Give our guests something to eat. You can see it for yourself, they're spent.»

For the first time in hours, we realised we had empty bellies and many kilometres in our legs. The lean, snarky guy obeyed and fetched from a cupboard two not-exactly-clean plates, two filthy glasses, and equally dirty cutlery. He tossed the whole onto the table and with a ladle began to serve the soup, which, by the way, was the source of the horrendous stench hovering in the hut. Greta could not eat even one spoon of it and just looked at her plate in horror. As for me, I grew up in a family that taught me how to play the game, thus I braced myself and swallowed a spoonful after another.

The men went out, leaving us alone with the woman, who kept choking us with her horrible smoke. From below her heavy lids, she eyed us with an enigmatic, dull gaze. Once again, I was aware of the same strange feeling I had had in the afternoon, like a tingling at the root of my skull that expanded like electricity. The woman kept puffing out her toxic smoke and from time to time moved her lips, mumbling incomprehensible words. Then a deep gurgle rose from her chest and

her body was shaken by a violent fit of cough. As this ceased, the woman remained for a while with her mouth wide open to breathe, resuming her idiotic expression. Then, unexpectedly, she spoke:

«We're not used to receiving guests. Nobody has come here for a long time. Guillermo and Tomàs have been away for many years, Guillermo in dangerous lands, doing ugly jobs. He won't talk about that, he's tired. Tomàs has travelled too. He's violent and reckless, he hates the whole of us. He thinks we're mad, but he's only afraid of the truth.»

«You're wrong, you old fool!», someone yelled from behind us. We turned around in fright and saw the slender guy on the threshold, his face was twisted by hatred. Then he went on:

«I'm not afraid and you lie. Do you think you can scare us? Are we children, who believe in ghosts?»

«You broke his heart. He has been waiting for you to come back, in the house he built for you. You are a bad son.»

«He's not here!», Tomàs cried, trembling in anger. «The old bastard fled like everybody else! He forced us to grow up in this shithole with his freaky family and that psychopath of my mother, oh yes, she loved this goddam place so much! She thrived in this bloody town, sick as her head. He wished we would make the same sticky end as his crazy wife, drowned in the well, but we left before that could happen. In the end, he was not that stupid and ran away too. Have you noticed? There's no house anymore! Only this hut remains, and you in it, with your shit-stinking dope.»

«He's here», she replied with equanimity.

«You make me feel sick. Why don't you kill yourself too?», Tomàs muttered with a black glance.

I felt sorry for that unhappy man. As for the woman, we still could not figure out who she was, and now that I observed her attentively, I found her incredibly repulsive. I could



not get rid of that unsettling electrical feeling in my head, which seemed to get stronger when she looked at me. I tried to reorder my thoughts that were running wild and studied a way to escape from that place. With anxious eyes, I looked around for any object I could use to defend Greta and myself from those lunatics. In the meantime, Guillermo had come back. For sure he had heard the conversation, and standing before the woman he told her:

«Since you're so sure our father still lives here, tell me: why didn't he leave when everybody else went away?»

«Not again! He's not here! Don't encourage her, she's crazy!», Tomàs cried again.

«Shut up and let her speak», Guillermo replied, remaining calm.

«None of us can leave this place», the woman said, puffing out her poisonous smoke. «You have come back as well, in the end. The water is the symbol of our destiny, we were all born under its sign and it won't spare us.»

Greta looked at me in alarm, and I noticed how tiredness and the nervous strain had impressed themselves on her pale face. The three continued their insane conversation as if we had not been there at all.

«You really are an idiot», Tomàs barked in anger. «I tell you for the last time, he's not here! I have no time to waste with your blabbing. I'm leaving.»

The woman grinned with an evil look, then she got stiff and went into a kind of trance, and she began chanting with a blood-chilling voice:

*In his seaweed bed at the bottom does he lie  
Mute and restless secrets don't die  
Eye of the frog blood of the eel  
The heart keeps falling down in the well*

*Deep and slimy and yet it lives to tell  
Scale of a tench skin of the eel  
Every departure will end where it began  
Life goes around and so does the sun  
Tongue of the toad sperm of the eel...*

«Stop it!», Greta cried. The woman seemed to awake and stared at her with indifference, and only then the two brothers looked at us almost surprised, as if they had just realised we were in the room too.

«All this is ridiculous», I said standing up and trying to look brave. «We should not even be here and for sure have no interest whatsoever in your private affairs. This stupid story begins to get on my nerves.»

I expected to be insulted or even worse, but everyone ignored me. Guillermo turned again to the woman and just repeated his stubborn question:

«Why didn't he go while he could?»

The woman burst into sinister laughter, and her dropping cheeks bounced as if made of rubber.

«All the travelling made you grow stupid», she said in a wicked tone. «He stayed for *you*, to watch over the house, because he knew you'd eventually come back. That's your lot.»

The flame in the lantern grew feeble and the room became silent. From time to time, a reddish glow from the pipe told us the woman was awake. Why, indeed, had the two brothers returned to that horrible place where everything was rotting away? I expected some reply from them, but they just stood there, silent and crestfallen. As for me, I would have much preferred not to spend one more minute in that hut. I would have rather slept outside among the reeds, but Greta looked exhausted. After all, Guillermo had said it was unsafe to stay outdoors at night. From what we knew, the other dwellers of

the neighbouring huts might be as crazy as our hosts or even worse, so I gave up. Before us lay the longest of the sleepless nights. Guillermo showed us to a stinky dump room. The light of the lantern revealed large mouldy stains on the walls. Tiredness acted on me like a stimulating drug, and I felt ready to fight to protect myself and Greta, who fortunately fell asleep almost as soon as she touched the filthy mattress. I grabbed the torch from my backpack, which was long and heavy and, in case of danger, could make a practical club. However, my heroic propositions were made superfluous by the events that followed.

For a long time afterwards, I have tried to convince myself that the origin of what I experienced that night was to be sought in the horrible, rancid fish soup I had swallowed or maybe in the pestilential smoke of the woman's pipe. But I am not Dr Hesselius and suspect, therefore, any attempt to explain the inexplicable through the oversimplifying explanations of positive deduction and scientific demonstration. That night, my overexcited mind entered for the first time a shadow dimension existing right below the surface of visible reality, which, although we can perceive its effects with our senses, remains inaccessible to rational thought. We are always affected by it, no matter how unaware, for it produces those states of mind that we call with unredeemable vagueness of speech sensations, impressions, presentiments and whatnot. Nonetheless, the shadow dimension becomes manifest in its full power in our dreams or when we experience some significant psychological alteration. I had perceived it in my dreams only once a few years before when I worked as a waiter in the mountains of Styria, but I don't think I had trespassed its border then. That night, instead, I dove into its dark waters, which later on, over the years, I have fathomed again and again many more times.

While Greta was deeply asleep, as I said, I was instead suffering from that typical state of overexcitement produced by tiredness, anxiety and prolonged exposure to stress. I was neither awake nor asleep and under the impression that even time had stopped. Then, all of a sudden, all my senses became sharper than ever. I could hear the crickets chirping outside in the grass and the low, prolonged croaking of the frogs. The temperature fell dramatically, and the air saturated with water until breathing became impossible. I began to choke and panicked, thinking I was drowning, when the darkness changed into a faint, greenish light, and I saw all around me leaves of seaweeds gently floating in the stream. Down below, I could guess the slow motion of some creatures grazing at the bottom of that odd world. I could not move but very slowly, as though I was immersed in a murky liquid, and then I realised with the utmost astonishment that *I was in the marsh*. I saw all around the dark geometries of the buildings wrapped in vegetation. A window was wide open, and I could see a room with one bed at its centre. On the mattress lay a human body, which I could not see clearly, for a frantic tangle of eels wriggled around it. I felt horror at that sight, but one moment later, I returned to my reality, feeling agitated but not afraid, for sure disoriented by the vision that somehow completed the one I had had in the afternoon. I could not explain how my mind could produce such a hallucination and insisted on believing I had been poisoned. Since then, I have often reflected on that night, studied, and even let some colleagues of mine analyse me – with poor results, I must admit. And still today, I cannot tell what I saw that night.

When the dawn crept in, grey and damp, through the cracks between the rotting planks blocking the window, I stirred Greta. We decided to leave the hut immediately, without waiting for its inhabitants to remember we were there.

Quiet as two mice, we sneaked through the room where the woman was sleeping in her armchair and got out. Through the still air the first seagulls cruised with their thin white wings broadly spread. Below, the marsh concealed a secret I dared not share with Greta. I looked at the murky water and imagined the horrible corpse rotting in his tomb of seaweeds, watched by the eels like a demigod of a dark world. We walked briskly to gain the top of the mound and did not turn to look back. As the light grew brighter and the last star faded, the vegetation lost its sickly look. Finally on the top, we felt as if we had awakened from a tormented dream, and Greta quickly recovered her wit and adventurous spirit, looking at the events of the day before with the same light-heartedness with which one recalls past misadventures.

At that moment, I looked down at the marsh and saw a man crouching on the muddy shore, looking out at the motionless water. His long, white hair hung loose and wet on his shoulders and his clothes, too, looked drenched. I stared at him with a feeling of anxiety. Who would take a bath in that revolting water? Was he another madman? Greta had noticed him too and looked like one who had seen a ghost. The man stood up, painfully swaying, and began slowly to walk – I noted with a shiver of horror – toward the hut. The croaking sound rose to a deafening roar as if thousands of frogs had suddenly gone frantic, all at once and together.