

## Fear

Konrad was an intelligent and kind young man with a poetic and receptive soul. I knew him quite well because we used to meet every morning in the same cafeteria, where we liked commenting on the few events that enlivened the otherwise dull life of our small town. Then, we talked about art, nature, and the many facets of human beings. It is such a rare joy to find someone with whom you can share profound thoughts, all the more so in a small town like that where we used to live then. This was no more than a medieval village that had remained faithful to its picturesque image over the centuries, with its dark stone buildings, towers, mullioned windows, wooden doors seasoned by centuries, and massive walls perfectly maintained, with intact battlements and walkways. Such a town encourages daydreaming in those who are prone to fancies, especially in the gloomy days of autumn, when rain and damp make the masonry look even darker than usual and the labyrinthine alleys of the medieval centre, whose uneven floor resounds with the steps of rare passers-by, assumes a bleak look. If one adds that the town is perched on the slope of a densely wooded mountain, which millions of years ago was a huge volcano, one will guess why Konrad decided to dwell there. He was not born there. His Italian parents moved to Germany in the 1960s, but they soon after split up. His father married another woman, from whom he had Konrad. Once he grew into adulthood, the young man left his family and returned to his ancestral homeland, looking for his roots

or inspiration for his artistic vocation, and decided to begin with visiting his father's hometown. After a few years, what was supposed to be a starting point became a landing spot. Konrad established his home there, and his small atelier became one of the few places in town where I popped by with pleasure. His cosy studio was always full of ideas flickering from a black-and-white photograph or an unfinished painting. Konrad specialised in landscapes, for which he drew inspiration from the town and its marvellous surroundings rich in forests, lakes, plantations, and small hamlets perched on rocky cliffs perpendicular to deep gorges. Konrad's imagination was powerful, and he could catch the spirit of the land, or *genius loci*, that made every corner come alive in his eyes. His works had something metaphysical: shades of colour and volumes, combined with the contrast of shadows and elements, revealed the secret power of life in the sudden violence of a storm or in the slow erosion of a rock, which the trees clung to with their bared roots. Konrad could see beyond appearances, and his art showed things in their essentiality, upon which his genius impressed the revelation of the beyond. In his good-natured shyness, free from that histrionic attitude that too often artists display as a surrogate for their lack of talent, Konrad was, like his art, free of vanity. I believe that during his inner voyages he visited mysterious places and enjoyed the profoundest conversations with the deities that dwell in all things, dialogues that he should not and could not repeat on this side of the border, among us.

One day, at the end of the summer, he stopped visiting the cafeteria and his atelier remained shut. Because no one had a

clue about his sudden disappearance, after a few weeks I inferred he had left and felt sorry and somewhat offended by his departure without a word to say goodbye. And then, unexpectedly, I came across him down the street three months later! It was a blow, for I scarcely recognized him. The healthy young man I used to know had turned into a wild-eyed, shrivelled old guy. In a very odd excitement, he began to tell me a ruffled story I didn't understand, and as he went on, I convinced myself that something was wrong with his head. The thought of our unsettling encounter kept bothering me for days, so I asked a couple of colleagues of mine for counsel, a neurologist and a psychiatrist who worked in a big hospital in the capital. The former suspected a rare case of early dementia, perhaps due to trauma, and the other mentioned a schizoid neurosis, possibly hereditary. I decided to visit Konrad at his place, and it was painful to see his apartment untidy and dirty as a caveman's hut. The poor chap lived alone and seemed incapable of caring for himself anymore. I returned to see him again in the following days, and he always kept telling me the same incomprehensible story. It was like listening to someone's dream, while the dreamer seemed not to have woken up yet.

I ordered a blood test, which ruled out infection, and an MRI that revealed a concussion dating back a few months. The psychiatric hypothesis remaining the most plausible, my instinct suggested that I should use hypnotism to reach Konrad where he really was. Our first session took place in my study on a Saturday afternoon. Konrad was incredibly responsive to the treatment, and after a few seconds he was al-

ready in a trance. I had guessed well, suspecting that my patient was trapped in an ambiguous, dreamlike condition, something which I was to observe again many years later in another subject, a poet excessively prone to fancies, who believed he had been imprisoned and tortured in a hidden place he called “the cave”. But that’s another story, I’m rambling, sorry.

While hypnotised, Konrad answered my preliminary questions, and when I commanded him to tell his story, the change in him was extraordinary. For the first time, his story unfolded plainly in short sentences that Konrad uttered in a flat, slow, and chanting voice, which I recorded and am now copying from my handwritten transcription.

«There’s a dirt road by the old cemetery, heading north through the fields. Wonderful landscape, green hills to the east, open fields to the west ’til the eye can reach. Summer morning, on a Sunday. Never walked that road before. Clear sky, white clouds, happy feelings. The city behind gets smaller and smaller. Then, a fork’s before me. On the left, the path climbs the Hermit’s Hill. The other track vanishes between two walls of ripe corn, ten feet high. The sun burns, the shadowy path seems inviting. Above me the sky’s white with heat. I see the tops of some cypresses a few hundred yards away. As the plantation ends, I stand in the sun. There’s a path on my left with cypresses on both sides – they impress me, they are dark. It must be some private property. A carved wooden object hangs from the raised bar. It looks like a large animal, like a boar but longer. It has thin legs like those of horses but

strange. They seem man's legs. I don't like it, some madman must have carved such a thing. Deep silence. There are buildings at the end of the track, I want to watch them closely. There's something odd in this place, I could paint it. Too bad I don't have my Canon with me. There's a clearing, weeds everywhere, oppressive air, crumbled buildings. A roof's wide open, a beam stands vertical against the sky. An elder tree grows out of the barn. The pump has no blades, just a rusty skeleton. Collapsed walls, smashed windows, a shutter hangs on its hinges. I will return to take some pictures and make a few drawings. Now, I make it back for the dirt road and resume my walk. Intense heat, the air is still. Lizards hide as I pass by. No sound can be heard but my footsteps. I walk on. The town on the mountainside appears so far, far away. I stop and turn back. Three hours to return, I reckon, at least. Thirst. Something doesn't feel right, I don't know why. Heavy air. I walk on, my town's far away. A gust of wind hits the back of my head, cold and strong. I turn around and stand as stone. The horizon's dark. The storm fills the sky, is coming up fast. The light grows dim. I pace up. I think of lightning, there's no shelter out there. The sunshine is gone, the mountain ahead turns dark. Dust whirls on the path. Thunders rumble. Tic-tic-tic, all around, tic-tic-tic. A large drop hits my face. Lightning flashes on the right, purple is the sky! Large drops falling! Run! Lightning flashes all around. Explosions. I can see the cypresses and run hard in a terror! I see a black cloud whirling down into a cone, down, down to the ground. Oh God, the horror! Can't see a thing, I just run for the house. Water pours down with the sound of thunder, so thick I can't see a things.

Then I have a glimpse of the wide-open doorway, I jump in. A stream of mud follows me, swallows my feet. All dark, but I find the stairs and climb up to the first floor. Damp and mould. Scattered furniture, all wrecked. Rain through the shattered windows. I find a small dry room with a window. The tornado approaches, it's horrible to look at. I crouch in a corner. Cold and fear. Roaring air, shaking walls. I'm waiting for the roof to fly into the sky, I can't move. No thoughts in my head, only noise. The house shakes, things bang against the walls. And suddenly it's quiet again. I open my eyes. All quiet. The tornado has passed by, the rumble fades away. I can breathe...»

Konrad broke off, suddenly looking exhausted. I waited a few minutes to allow him to rest and then invited him to continue.

«Rain taps. Thinking of home. I see my room, my bed. I think of my oils, must paint the storm. The thunder rumbles far away. Impatient, I want to leave. I get up and reach for the door. A purple light blinds me! The pump out of the window explodes like a bomb. "Lightning!", I think, as a roaring gust pushes me hard. I fall, feel a pain in my head, I'm goin' to die. There something in the corridor. All black and out...»

Konrad stopped talking and responding to my stimuli as if he had been shut down. I waited a minute before I woke him up, and for a moment, he seemed lucid. One second later, however, he was drifting away in a stupor. I took him home, where he looked happy to be among his things. Back in my

study, I transcribed the recording and pondered over the things I had learned. I had seemingly found the cause of his concussion, owing to which he fainted, which in turn explained the sudden catatonic silence that had interrupted Konrad's tale. Thus, when I repeated the hypnosis one week later, I waited for Konrad to slip into the trance and as soon as his regular and slow breathing signalled me that he was deeply asleep, I asked him to resume his story from the moment he came back to his senses.

«Absolute dark. I'm lying on the floor. Feels like floating. My head hurts, my ears ring. Don't know where I am, dazed and cold. Slowly things come back to me, a road, the heat, cypresses, the storm... the horror! I realise I'm still in the house. My body is stiff, like the boards of the floor. My back hurts. I push on my elbows, turn over and crawl, stretching my hand. Only void on the tips of my fingers. Then I remember, something was there. Withdrawing my hand, I stay still, listening. As I move, my shoe scrapes against the floor. What a horrible noise! I see flickering lights, what are those? *Igni fatui*? Glittering eyes? Shivers down my spine, my hair stands on end. My heart's pounding, my head feels like about to burst. I stick my nails into the cracks of the boards. My arms are stiff, is the house swallowing me? Someone will come up here, one day, and find the heap of mouldy clothes wrapped around a rotting log looking like me. Hang on. A noise makes me come back to my senses. Shoes? A tool? Something taps on the wall, don't know where. A horrible vision creeps into my brain, of mouldy rags wrapping a stump. Can't be, there's no one with

me. Some beast downstairs is moving around. Yes, it must be so. I don't move a finger. Oh, the terror! I can see it in my mind now, a beast like the sculpture on the path. Squat body on thin legs, drooling muzzle, sturdy head. The thing is pale and stands like a human, much more than a beast. I see it in my mind. I feel the heat in my veins, my muscles ready to fight. Am a wild beast ready to kill. Stomp my fists and feet, growl and scream as loud as I can. I can feel its warm brain throbbing in my fingers, it's in my power. My own yelling terrifies me. How long did I scream? Cold and tired, my head is about to burst. I crouch in a corner, exhausted. I scream and haul from time to time, I'm the monster. Is that thing afraid of me? Oh, my head, it hurts so much! A crashing sound comes from below, a thudding on the stairs, oh my God, it's coming up for me! What are those sounds, words? What's coming up the stairs? What's this sound now, bare feet? I hear it breathing behind the wall. Right here, crouching in the dark. It breathes and makes no move. If I attacked first... Any second now... now, attack!... just a moment... oh my God, here it comes...»

The crisis was terrifying. Poor Konrad began to tremble and shake on his chair, and I had to wake him up before something terrible could happen. My unfortunate patient emerged from the trance in the same state of terror he must have felt that night inside the house. He smashed half of my study in an attempt to hide, emitting inhuman screams of horror, and I saw him fight with an invisible foe with the violence of a desperate beast. I somehow managed to tackle and sedate him.

As soon as he lay numb on the floor, drooling and staring at me with a blank yet frantic gaze, I realised that the little consciousness or rationality he still retained had melted away. I felt sorry for him and responsible for his misery. I dared not repeat the hypnosis, also because it was now pointless. He would never come back from the place he had gone to. Although I ignore the rest of his story, I think I can claim with almost absolute certainty that that night in the house Konrad was alone.

I believe Konrad remained senseless in the house for about six or seven hours, which would explain why he woke up in the middle of the night. In many cases of post-traumatic unconsciousness, the subjects take up to several minutes, sometimes hours, before regaining full awareness of their body, time and space. During the waking hours, the poor man grew sure that something was inside the house with him. However, the mysterious creature lurking in the dark was nothing but his fear. It is extraordinary – I happened to reflect later – how fear can sometimes be our best defence from dangers we are unaware of. If Konrad had panicked and tried to escape, he should have moved around in that unfamiliar house in the dark and could have fallen down the stairs, breaking his neck. Fear, instead, pinned him to the ground, saving him from bodily injury but dooming him, alas, to fall into an even worse pit. If and to what extent did his concussion contribute to his delirium, this is not in my means to say. I cannot rule that out, either.

A couple of weeks later, I decided to go and look for that house. I admit it is a bleak place, not unlike other abandoned

ruins. At twilight, I thought, those cypresses must stand out against the sky as a procession of mourners. And yet, nothing made me believe that anything supernatural had occurred there. I questioned a couple of elderly peasants who lived about a quarter of a mile from the ruins in a house Konrad did not see because the ripe corn concealed it. They agreed to talk to me because they still remembered that night. They told me they were scared, and their dogs were unusually snarky. The storm had left something strange in the air – so they said – like some electric buzzing and clicking that could be heard all night long. They claimed they saw Saint Elmo’s fires on the tips of poles and over the cypresses. They thought lightning had overloaded the line, and the wires made that eerie sound. Then, just before dawn, a terrifying wail woke them up. The man described it as the cry of a wounded horse, although no horses were in the area. When I asked who used to live on the farm, they told me that someone sheltered there at night, sometimes, maybe a tramp. Be it as it may, they never ventured beyond the bar. They only hoped that one day somebody would tear down those ruins. We said goodbye then, and I took my leave. The autumn was gorgeous; the fields had been ploughed, and I could admire the peaceful countryside as far as my eye could reach.

I have often happened to think about Konrad and his unsettling story. Today the sinister farmhouse has perhaps crumbled to the ground, so many years have passed. However, it might still be there with its black cypresses, the rusty pump, the collapsed roofs and those unsettling, dark, empty windows. And in the solitary evenings, as the shadows grow

thick, the late wanderer passes by the ruins and shivers, unaware that his mind is where the most terrifying horrors dwell. Are they real?