

Dirt of the youth

“This seems to be where we part, my friend.” I said, shaking his hand. It was the hand of a respectable gentleman who I had the pleasure to meet on this, if I could say, utterly boring train. He made the journey quite entertaining; talking about the places he had travelled to. He was a psychologist, a man who laboured hard in the lands of the conscious and the realms of the unconscious.

But no psychologist could even begin to help me after the adventure I’m about to tell you.

“I still can’t believe you made them stop the train in the middle of nowhere. The whole carriage is protesting that unexpected delay!” he said, still amazed. He had drawn a smile on his face, the kind of smile I could never draw on that face of mine ever again.

“I have my ways. And this isn’t the middle of nowhere. It’s the centre of my research as I have told you.” I responded.

As a reader, you probably don’t know what I do. Well, I research weirdness. Yes, weird. I study the myths that roam in the dark villages at night and the urban legends that sneak in the cities. Throughout my years of research, I’ve collected enough testimonies and accounts of uncanny sightings from old villagers who were thought to be crazy, from kids who don’t find sleep at night or startled nurses who leap when the doorbell rings to narrow my field of research to this particular area where I made the train stop. Sometimes, a few pounds could get you anything, if you knew how to ask.

I bowed; I took off my hat and said my farewells. I jumped from the carriage door onto the wild grass. The train puffed his dark carbon fog and slowly gained speed. After a while, it disappeared in the far distance, leaving a trail of smoke in the air.

I set off, staining my neatly shined shoes as I paced on the dirt path leading to the large forest. After releasing my studies to the public, I’ll never have to worry about cleaning my shoes any longer. I would just buy a new, creaseless pair. And maybe change my colleagues’ minds about my sanity.

The forest’s perimeter was delimited by a high stonewall, circling the forest all the way around.

I once travelled here to study this wall in its entirety. But that will be another story for another day. What I can tell you is that there is only a single opening, located at the west side of this dense flora.

I walked along the mossy wall for what seemed like a never-ending period of time. Sweat began pearling on my forehead, its salty components waking my excited pores.

Finally, I saw the opening. It was a large archway made of the same material as the wall. There, nested rune-like shaped symbols: swirls, arrows, dots and dashes, pickings that you could hardly distinguish with the naked eye.

“May I help you?” said a crackling voice, as if it hadn’t talked for ages. Startled, my legs tried to find balance but in vain. I stumbled back, falling in a mud puddle.

“I see you must like to play with the dirt of the youth,” said an old, queer man. He wore simple clothes, nothing too fancy. He continued: “Or you’re just enjoying the last rays of sun as they retrieve into the darkness.” He didn’t move an inch to help.

“Neither.” I say, keeping my manners suited, despite the situation. I get up and remove what can be removed from my clothing, scratching at my sleeves.

“So you’re that new miner then, coming to check that ore they found down there in the mines.” He said, nodding. “No,” I responded, oblivious to this miner situation. His brows crossed. Apparently, he didn’t like the answer. “I’m just a fellow who wishes to pass by this forest.” I wasn’t going to reveal the real purpose of my presence. He may not like the idea of a scientist interfering in this undoubtedly singular ecosystem.

“Oh, what a silly idea. You wouldn’t want to do that.” He said, looking back at the nearest trees. “Go back from where you came. It’s the best piece of advice I can give you. Now, disappear and never get near this forest ever again. Many have tried to wander in this part of the world and never got out.” His face darkened.

And with what he said, I was more than determined to get inside. He had made the suspicion in me grow to the extent that I was ready to bargain for anything to let me pass.

But I didn’t have anything on me, except for a few pounds, a notebook and a pen. I went to scratch my head and there I found the answer, what I could bargain with, if he were willing to. But I was willing to try.

I approached him, handing him my hat.

“Let me pass and I’ll give you this.” It was still stained with mud and the years have worn out the fabric. But he didn’t seem to mind: his face brightened up as he snatched it right out of my hands.

He started studying it with sparkling eyes. He turned it, over and over, feeling the material. His fingers slid on its rim, flowing in its velvety inside.

“I did warn you, didn’t I?” he said, after finishing his inspection, the hat resting on his head. “I did my job. You didn’t seem to care.” He shuffled through fallen leaves and leaned on a nearby tree. “Go on. So many have died foolishly.”

These, I thought, were only words to stray me off my path, to keep me away from entering. I strode under the darkness into the forest. I looked behind me, finding the man staring as I got between the rustling trees and bushes. The uneasiness in his eyes spoke more than his silence. But, it was too late.

The earth began shaking and the stone opening started shifting. The stones rotated, slid on each other ever so smoothly, slowly closing the archway, barring the only way out. And as the last rock fell into place, fear traveled faster than sound, reaching my core. Then, all went silent.

I was unable to move for a few moments, a million thoughts rushing in my mind trying to find a feasible explanation but I couldn’t grasp any. My mind was racing, not after a particular idea but away from horror. Panic overthrew rationality and ruled my emotions. It kept on drawing up the unimaginable.

But my legs finally moved, only it was fear that was driving them. I found myself going deeper into this mass of trees. The eerie night that hung in the sky brought its dark veil, forgetting its glistening ornaments. In the black night, my eyes could only make out the tree logs, tree trunks and bushes that were several feet in front of me. The darkness also brought her night instruments, along with an empty sheet of music. The only symphony that reached my ears had to be the leaves being crushed under my shaking feet.

And creaking filled the emptiness that was the air.

I sprang behind a tree, my body shivering without control. My chest started rising and falling quickly and the blood pumped hard in my ears. The train of thoughts that passed by in my head came to a sudden stop when I felt the earth under me move.

The roots of the tree I hid behind began uprooting themselves, throwing dirt in all directions. They coiled on each other, forming even thicker roots and the trees began to move to another location, extending their new roots and moving just like an octopus would, coiling and outstretching its multiple limbs in perfect coordination. My eyes couldn't believe what I witnessed. But I was rapidly convinced when the rest of the trees in the forest did the same: all the roots surfaced, curved inwards in a net and they began shifting positions until they formed some sort of path, a road limited by the trees themselves and now lit by the hanging white orb. And then, all went silent again.

Still stupified by the event that I just got the chance to witness, I hastily went on my knees, not to pray, but to examine the roots of these fine trees. This not only meant that my calculations were indeed correct and that they led me to the right place; it also meant that the strange tales and myths did have their share of reality in them after all.

I tore a page out of my notebook and, not being able to draw these rare specimens in the darkness, I instead laid the piece of paper on the wood and printed the pattern of its bark.

I was nearly done when I felt the earth shake again. I took my unfinished imprint and retreated a little bit to experience the event again from a better angle. But the trees didn't move and the sound was getting more tumultuous with each second ticking away.

And the path filled with a rushing stampede of creatures that seemed to bore no eyes, wearing what looked like deep and dark orange fur. They had humongous sharp teeth that could cut a tree log in one swing. They all paced on their four, muscly legs, and some even jumped from tree to tree, clinging on with razor sharp claws.

Shuddering, I took one step backwards and my foot landed on a broken branch.

And the pack of creatures stopped dead in their tracks. They started whistling a trio of high pitched notes as one of them moved through the sea of dusky orange. As it appeared, I could make out a crystal white eye nestled in the middle of its forehead. And with a few rotations of this glassy and empty sphere, it looked straight into my soul, sending a deep chill down my spine, nailing my feet to the ground.

It whistled a resonant and low-pitched note that rang in the forest, bouncing off the trees and within mere seconds, the whole pack was on me, racing to grab me with its fangs.

And as my legs did the same, racing to find shelter I fell, stumbling onto the ground. The creatures were now closing in around me, leaving me no way to escape. Their breaths were shallow and quick after that little chase. Their mouths began to water; they were going to have a feast tonight.

The leader of the pack came towards me with his big, white eye coming so close to me that I thought my head was going to have a meltdown.

With its nose, buried under the fur, it smelled me, taking several sniffs. Then it backed away, produced a sharp, strident sound, similar to the one before, and the whole pack was gone, taking its route back between the trees.

It was the dirt of the youth that saved me. I learned that long after the events that happened that night. But that, as I have said, would be for another time.