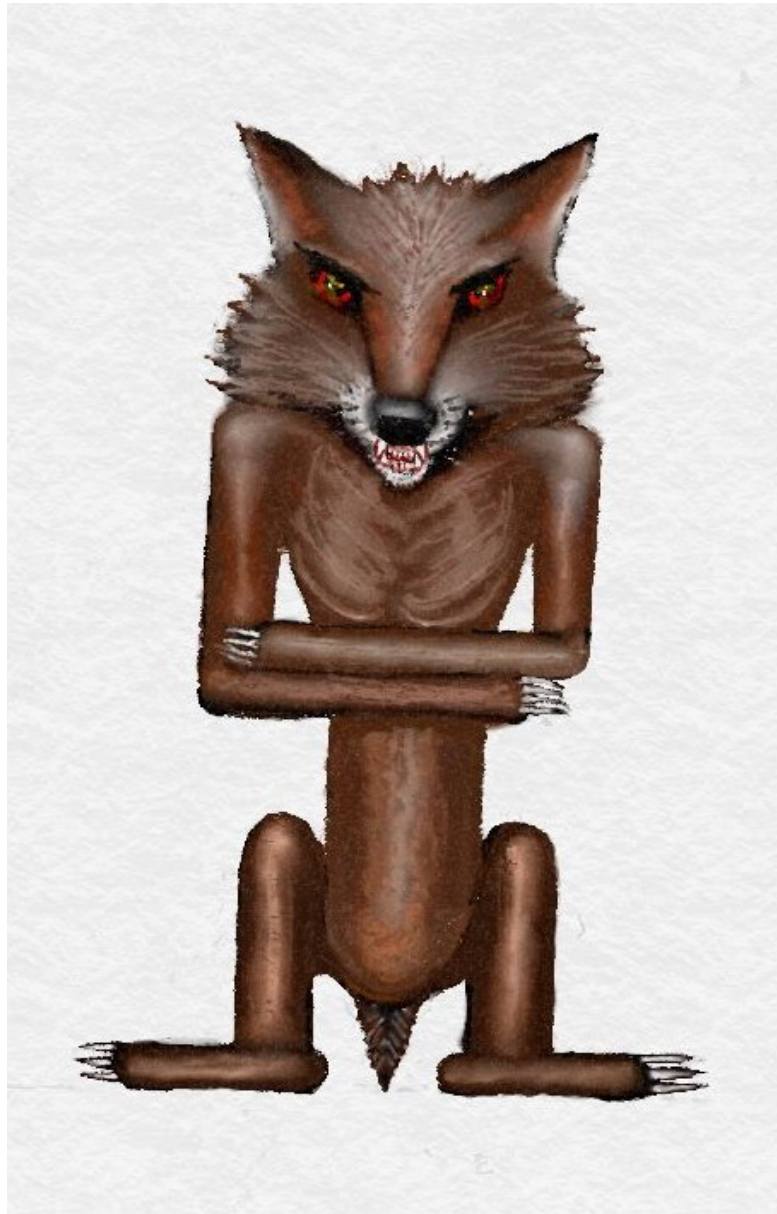


All my Instincts

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Silence. That was what struck me most about this mountain range, in the dead of winter. There didn't seem to be any noise at all. Had my sense of hearing become deficient because of the urban hustle and bustle my ears were used to? Couldn't I hear anything? On second thought, I did hear a sound. A tenuous sound. The whistling of the wind along the icy corridors. Was it real or was it just a figment of my imagination? My senses were confused. Maybe because I was so focused on experiencing something. All I could discern was my heartbeat, which was as uneventful as the landscape. Everything was so calm. Nothing seemed to happen.

Far away, on the horizon, the sky was indented by rocks like raw lace. I proceeded to the tracking of the needlework of Nature. My eyes plunged into this icy ocean, following the snow swirls sweeping the rocks and swaying up to the summit. I could almost sense them freezing my eyeballs. I blinked and looked down the steep forest-green slopes. Fir trees exuded a fragrance which filled my nose and spread out in my lungs. I exhaled this pure air in evanescent cold vapor. My sense of smell was stimulated. A snowflake nestled on the side of my nostril. It was both soft and cold. I peered at the sky, and held out my hand to catch flakes in my palm. It had stopped snowing. Nature was swooning before my eyes. These mountains wanted to remind me of my puniness. I screamed "I feel alive!" and the mountains echoed back in a hollow sound. Nature was sending me back to my loneliness and my meaninglessness.

I had come here first because I wanted to connect to earth. I wanted to feel forces bigger than me. But right now, I was not sure what I was supposed to do. Here, my story didn't matter. I was surrounded by emptiness, set on a white scene. I was standing out, all alone, high up above the valley, but I was powerless. Was I supposed to act? I felt daunted in front of Nature acting as the stage director. I was submerged by this sensory experience. I stripped naked to expose myself to Nature and let it decide how to dress me up for the performance. A long fog scarf wrapped me up. I let myself be carried away by the gusts and sucked into this quilted soil. My pale skin was slightly enhanced by the pristine background. With cold, my blood progressively stopped pulsating. It got pallid. I was becoming the canvas on which Nature could paint. I turned blue-lipped and purple-handed. Chilblains on my feet looked like violets. Impressionistic brushstrokes turned my body into a living piece of art. But the more colorful my body was, the more self-oblivious I became. I was no one anymore. I felt the ground vanish from under my feet.

Warmth. Glow. Crackling embers. I blinked a couple of times and opened my eyes. I was lying on a couch in a place which looked like a timber cottage. The place was dark. In this gloom, I could barely see the wall behind the wood-burning stove. Supporting myself with my hands, I tried to sit. But I couldn't manage to move, my body didn't respond. My head had never been so heavy. I couldn't figure out how I had got there. Abruptly, an unfamiliar deep male voice made me jump : "At long last! It is about time! I've never seen someone sleeping for so long," he grumbled. I squinted to see better. There was a man standing in front of me, next to the fire. The stranger was rather tall and stocky, and stared wide-eyed. He seemed to be waiting for me to talk. Who was he? How had I ended in this place? I tried to say something but no sound came out. I passed out.

When I woke up, the fever was gone. The fire was extinguished but the room looked brighter. The man had vanished. I turned my head to the left. A white light filtered through the lace curtains. I bounced back and sat. I pushed aside the coarse blanket spread over me. I was wearing clothes which didn't belong to me—a large red-check shirt made of thick fabric, canvas pants and long wool socks of a beige color. Is this a logger's home? I wondered. I glanced around. There were two doors, both closed. One probably opened on to the outside, the other to another part of the cottage. There wasn't any sound but a whistling kettle. I was alert. Is there anyone here? Is this a trap? I worried. I could see myself in a Hansel and Gretel creepy tale. I couldn't perceive any move and the kettle was screeching. I got up, went to the kitchenette, and carefully removed the kettle from the heat. I strained my ears—nothing. I was tempted to explore the cottage but I was held back by my overflowing imagination. I chose to open the front door instead. My blood turned cold. A few meters ahead, the ground was swallowed by the sky. The cottage stood on a narrow stretch of land, and it was so high up that it was only surrounded by clouds. It seemed like I would never leave this place.

I heard steps from behind. I turned and backed off. I was very close to the edge. Should I slip, I would fall into this white abyss. The stranger stood there, holding a giant axe. He was now running towards me. "Stop it!" he shouted. I stepped back and lost my balance. I was falling down. A split second later, I was catapulted back to the summit. I landed face down on my knees. The man was now still next to me. Suddenly, he had a severe coughing fit. The handkerchief he had brought to his mouth was covered with blood. He peered into my eyes.

I came back to my senses, surprisingly calm, a sensation of warmth in my abdomen. I lay quiet a few minutes, my hands on my stomach, looking at the ceiling in the morning half-light. Why was I always making the same dream? It had surged back since everyone had left the city. It wasn't a dream like any other. Usually, when you dream and your heart starts throbbing, it's just a matter of time until you are fully awake, right? In my dream, I was close to dying, but I went on sleeping. What woke me up was the sight of sickness. I couldn't figure out the meaning my unconscious tried to convey. Everything felt so real in my dream. I could smell the conifer resin irrigating from their roots to their needles. I could see the wind sweeping across the valley. I could hear the snow cleansing the Earth and wiping out human plagues. I could suffer the hardness of the couch against my back in the cottage. And—what struck me most—I could feel the taste of a blood which wasn't even mine. It touched me at the very core of my being.

I got up and took a few steps to contemplate the remnants of the city through a hole in the main wall of my room. It was my morning ritual—gazing at the cement rubble rooted in the dusty red soil. This city had turned into an urban cemetery. A pungent odor filled the air. The sky had taken on a lasting blood orange color. It was as if time had stopped. Each day seemed more and more like the day before. But the decrepit-looking buildings were like a remembrance of things past. I was dwelling in a building which had been abandoned when everyone had left the city, and which was now falling into disrepair. There was no electricity—the outage that had occurred about a couple of months before was now permanent. I had set up a rainwater collection system. But it required great care and organization, because sometimes rain was radioactive. The city was sinking deeper and deeper into decay.

I took a deep breath to lift my spirits. Was something eventually going to happen today? I was so lonely that I started to hear the dilapidated homes whispering. Was I becoming crazy? The stranger in my dream was the only human I had been in contact with for weeks. I couldn't figure out if I had made him up, or if he was actually trying to reach me. I wanted to believe he was real, and appeared in my dreams to tell me he needed to be rescued. I clung to this thought because I was hopeful. I did not mean to escape at all costs from what had become my reality. I had kind of got used to this doomsday landscape—in a way, I even found it hopelessly beautiful. I was just so puzzled that I was eager to understand, recollect or at least meet someone who would know what had happened. I could remember things as they used to be, but at some point my mind had gone a complete blank. Had I suffered a head injury? The uncertainty gnawed at me.

I put on my tattered raw cotton dress, braided my hair and grabbed my fabric bag to go out and explore the city. Every morning, I would wander in this world of crumbled homes, pacing up and down the streets. While I was roaming this ghost world, recollections blended with new experiences. By the ice-cream shop, I always pictured my sister and I as kids, quarreling to check who had gotten more toppings. Now the place was totally empty, with only a few overturned tables and chairs, as if the clients had left the place in a hurry. The old storefront was still easily recognizable, even though its colors had faded and there was only one scoop left in the ice cream cone decorating the façade. I had entered the shop a couple of days before, and I had found a diary on the floor, opened on the last handwritten page. But the paper had been so brittle and wrinkled that it was impossible to decipher what had been confided to this paper mate. I had made it mine with the will to liven it up with new secrets, but I had become so obsessed with solving my mystery that I had neglected my new travel companion.

The last frayed threads of life seemed to be disappearing over time. My universe was fading away. Everything would take on the same aspect, the same scent. It was as if somebody had designed a riddle and had made it unsolvable by erasing all traces. I was persuaded that I had to uncover the solution and then everything would be back to normal. I would return home and find my mother reading in the rocking chair, smell the spicy fragrance of my dad's dishes, hear my sister laughing. But months had passed now, and I had still no hints at all. I carried on my relentless search, scouring every building, snooping around the former shops. The buildings looked like wreckage of a bygone era and all I could find in the shops was waste material. The city looked like a never-ending scrapyard.

Sometimes I found myself suffocating. I would run all along the main thoroughfare to reach the borders of the city. I would get past the open air dumping girdling downtown like a hilly belt. I would cross the desolate landscape of desert dried lands. And then I would enter the forest and I slow down with rest my hands on my thighs. Then I started breathing again. The forest nurtured me with its energy. I embraced the trees, pressing my body tightly against their trunks. They soothed me. I could spend hours like that. In these moments, I would let myself cradled by those woody-armed giants. The breeze would caress the back of my neck and I chilled out. After a while, I huddled among the tree roots, and eventually fell asleep, a sensation of warmth in my abdomen. Waking up, I could leave the forest light-hearted.

One day, on my way back to the city, I heard noises amongst the waste. It was unusual. It wasn't due to the wind—basically the only breathing sound in this empty city. It was a series of clangs and clatters. I looked for the origin of that noise, but I didn't see anyone. I ventured into the maze of scraps and then I came across him. He remained still for a while. He was probably as lonely as I was because he looked just as miserable and lost. He wasn't that young considering the aspect of his hair. I immediately felt empathy for the sad looking fellow. He seemed to be harmless and undemanding. He was straying amongst these disposable things. How had he come here ? Had he witnessed the past events ? How could I know ?

The haggard wolf stood out clearly against the background of rubbish. The effect was so striking, the picture looked strangely aesthetic. The whole meaninglessness of the scrapyards seized me. There were the testimonies of past lives devoted to ownership. All these collected objects without anyone to make sense out of them! Their former possessors had considered themselves as creators when they had been nothing but borrowers. They had now disappeared, leaving their so-called belongings as landscape components. The objects had fooled me. I had seen them as gentle hills whereas they were disposable human productions spoiling the earth : an offensive display of leftovers, last reminders of a consumer society. All I could now see was ruins. And all I could feel was loss. How had humanity come to that point ? It seemed that men had brought on their own destruction.

I had been abandoned to this sad reality. I was left with a wolf as sole companion. What should I do now that I was no longer alone ? Not knowing how to behave, I sat next to him on a microwave which had been somewhat fashionable a few months before. What an environmental mess! I contemplated this authentic picture of human's hubris. Humans were unsatisfied creatures. I scanned the pieces of furniture, electrical goods and other revolutionary objects. I gazed at the horizon, where the sun was trapped in the belly of a ripped-open fridge. I had lost control, relegated to an outdated world. I was a castaway, the only remnant of former times. Was I still a part of it ? I wanted to share my story in order to stick to my humanity, to keep my identity. It was a familiar world which seemed to be nowhere at the same time. I experienced an existential disorientation.

I noticed my new fellow wasn't by my side anymore. He stood a few meters away and was looking up at me, expectantly. I watched him with an inquiring look and waved at him. He didn't move. I stepped towards him while he moved further away. I stopped. He stopped as well. The scenario was repeating twice. Was it a game ? This situation was totally absurd. I was hoping he would lead me to someone who would help me fill my loopholes. But what was the point ? I realized how nonsensical it was to be in control of my fate whereas everything around suggested chaos. I put my

heart and soul out into a quest I didn't even know the name of! I gave in to my fellow's will and let myself be guided through this cemetery of goods. At least I wasn't no longer to my own devices. The presence of the wolf saved me from despair.

Together, we walked for hours. At the beginning, I believed we were aimlessly stumbling along the city, all the more so as the wolf was moving at a slow pace. But progressively, I started to see things from an entirely new perspective. We were drawing circles around my former prison. I understood I would reach inner peace at the end of this journey. I got calm, and focused on breathing. I knew every nook and cranny of the houses and buildings we passed by. Something had changed in the atmosphere. The dreariness which used to prevail during my forays had faded away. My loneliness was eventually palatable. I felt neither desire, nor fear, nor anxiety.

We arrived at the bottom of stairs. I knew that place. The stairs led to a small apartment. What was the hitch with it? The wolf was looking towards the door. I started to climb. For once, I wasn't expecting anything to happen. The ascension seemed eternal and was totally effortless at the same time. Everything was so calm. I stopped a few meters before the landing door. I noticed the shed skin of a snake along the wall. How was it possible ? I had never seen a snake in this city in my whole life. I got closer. Indeed, it was the skin of a snake. As a child, when I was in Africa, I had seen many snakes molting. I remembered snakes slithering against the rocks. They rubbed their heads cautiously until their skin split. The head peeled back on itself, and then the snake could sneak out of its skin. I was told that molting was vital for the animal to maintain its quality of vision. Yet, I had always thought that snakes relied on their sense of hearing.

I came across a lot of reptiles in my childhood, especially when I had the sand rustle beneath my feet. I would spend my entire spare time in the vast undulating golden lands of the desert. I would lie on the never-ending hot bed until I forgot about everything. I would sink my feet in the sand and appreciate the heat coming from the lower part of my body. But sometimes some little creatures underground let me know that I was invading their environment. One day, I got bitten by a snake, and my ankle swelled so much that I couldn't walk for days. I went to see the community healer. She had always fascinated me. She had a collection of glass jars with different medicinal plants. The body was no longer a mystery for her. She knew a lot about poisons and remedies. I had heard that she managed to cure diseases traditional medicine couldn't. She was a woman of few words and kept her practices secret, probably because she was scared people would think she was a witch. For sure, she was a wise woman. She had urged me to live a balanced humane life in keeping with

nature. I will always remember her wary look contrasting with her compassionate gestures. Thinking about her made me shudder like every time she placed her hands on my body.

I pulled the door and entered the apartment. It was dusty, but rather bright and almost empty. The blood-orange light filtered through ripped curtains and illuminated a child. A little blond girl was crouching in the middle of the room. She was quietly sobbing with her hands on her stomach. I moved towards her. She raised her blue eyes up to me. I saw suffering in her gaze. She moved her hands away from her belly. They were covered with blood. Her white dress was stained with carmine red. The metallic smell of blood filled the air. I heard no sound but her panting. She seemed to be struggling for survival. What should I do ? She had a serious injury. There were no operational health facilities. I was no doctor.

I felt my pulse beating fast in my ears. I must do something, anything. A sensation of warmth spread in my abdomen. There was no air in the room. I must do something. Instinctively, I laid her on the floor. I couldn't explain how or why, but I knew what to do. I placed my hands on her abdomen and focused on her wound. A lot of energy flowed from the depth of my being to my hands. The child felt it and arched. Her face lit up. Sunlight seemed brighter and filled the room. We stood body to body, eye to eye. She allowed me to share the warmth of that healing.

I felt empty. But I was alive. I went out. The wolf was gone. I turned my head to the sun. It had started to snow.