

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

THEATRE FACULTY

Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy

MASTER'S THESIS

An Actor's Tale:

My Journey of Finding a Way to Share a Story on Stage

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Date of thesis defense: 21.9.2020

Academic title granted: MA

Prague, 2020

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE

DIVADELNÍ FAKULTA

Katedra autorské tvorby a pedagogiky

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Hercův příběh:

Moje cesta k nalezení způsobu jak sdílet příběh na scéně

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Datum obhajoby: 21.9.2020

Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA

Praha, 2020

D e c l a r a t i o n

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Keywords:

Authorial Acting, Storytelling, Writing process, Adapting text for the stage, Film, Reflections, Creative Process, Authorial Presentation, Actor Training, Play

Resumé:

In my thesis, I examine a story that I wrote, *A Mountain Tale*, and reflect on what inspired it, what I was hoping to share through it, and offer a critical account of the process of adapting this *Tale* to the stage as my final authorial presentation.¹ In my earlier studies I graduated from filmmaking and originally this story would have been better suited as a film or animation. Thus, my process of adapting this work into the language of theatre gave me many valuable insights into the work of an authorial actor and also helped define what theatre, acting, and being in a relationship with the audience means to me.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the summary of my *Tale*, examines my inspirations and addresses what I wished to share to the public through my story. In the second part I offer a thorough chronological account on the different theatrical tools and approaches I used to adapt the story, and discuss what sort of obstacles and discoveries appeared while I was rehearsing. Throughout my process I'm also inspired by texts of renowned theatre practitioners and by bringing this awareness into my practical work I come to understand better what acting means to me.

In the final part I form a conclusion and examine the form of my authorial presentation just before the final performance. I also reflect what being on stage means to me now, and look back on the long and diverse journey and consider what were the most essential lessons I learned, and what to consider further.

¹ Authorial Presentations (APs), are theatre performances at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (DACaP) which are performed by one actor, devised from personal topics and themes, and most often without any props or scenography.

Klíčová slova:

Autorské herectví, Vyprávění/Storytelling, Adaptace příběhu pro jeviště, Film, Tvůrčí proces, Autorské Presentace, Herecký trénink, Představení.

Abstrakt:

Ve své diplomové práci zkoumám příběh, který jsem napsal, *Příběh hory*, a přemýšlím o tom, čím byl inspirován, co jsem doufal, že skrz tento příběh sdělím a nabízím kritický popis procesu přizpůsobení *Příběhu* pro jeviště jako mojí závěrečnou autorskou prezentaci. V mých dřívějších studiích jsem absolvoval obor filmové tvorby a původně by se tento příběh lépe hodil jako film nebo animace. Tím pádem, můj proces přizpůsobení této práce do jazyku divadla mi dal mnoho cenných poznatků pro práci autorského herce a také pomohl definovat co divadlo, herectví a vztah s publikem pro mě znamená.

První část práce se zaměřuje na shrnutí mého *Příběhu*, zkoumá mé inspirace, a řeší to, co jsem chtěl prostřednictvím svého příběhu sdělit obecenstvu. Ve druhé části nabízím důkladnou chronologickou úvahu o různých divadelních nástrojích a přístupech, které jsem používal k přizpůsobení *Příběhu*, a popíši, jaké překážky a objevy vyšly najevo během mých zkoušek. Během celého procesu mě inspirovaly také texty proslulých divadelníků a autorů a přenesením tohoto povědomí do své praktické práce jsem lépe pochopil, co pro mě herectví znamená.

V poslední části následuje závěr, ve kterém zkoumám tvar mé autorské prezentace těsně před závěrečným představením. Také přemýšlím, co pro mě teď znamená být na pódiu, dívám se zpět na dlouhou a různorodou cestu a zvažuji, jaké byly nejdůležitější lekce, co jsem se naučil a o čem uvažovat do budoucna.

Thank you

to my pedagogues, mentors, role-models, colleagues, friends, family, the Teahouse, Emily who proofread this thesis and sat with me throughout the long evenings of outlining this journey, and Frida, our cat, who kept on reminding me what play was while I was writing this serious paper.

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Introduction:

An Actor's Tale is a thesis of a reflective nature in which I offer my accounts as a writer, filmmaker, and especially as an authorial actor, on the process of adapting *A Mountain Tale* – a story that was originally suited for cinema, but ended up becoming my graduation authorial presentation² for stage. When I started writing my story, I was aiming to write material for my final AP, in other words for theatre. However, I was heavily influenced by my earlier film-making studies, and while writing I became aware of my tendencies to tell stories visually. I studied Film & Creative Writing from 2011-2012 at the University of Essex, in the UK, and later continued studying film-making at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts & Communication School of Tallinn University, in Estonia from 2014 to 2017. I've written, produced, directed, edited, and sound-designed several short films, and my aim in the future is to continue working in film. But in addition I want to develop as a stage-dramaturg, theatre-director, and authorial actor. I was pleased to have written a story for a possible film, but what felt more important was for me to attempt to make a stage adaptation of the same story. I felt that this way I would learn through practical experience how to produce something for theatre, an area in which I felt I had less experience in.

In this thesis my background in script writing and film-making occasionally adds some complementing color when elaborating my creative process, but above all these reflections are meant as honest accounts of an authorial actor, essentially searching for the *right form* to share a visual and myth-like story on stage. I believe that being open about my process and proceeding in a chronological manner can shed light on the various considerations a dramaturg, director, and actor, in essence an *authorial* actor, has to make when adapting written material for the stage, and hopefully serve as inspiring and encouraging examples for anyone's own creative journey.

Throughout my practical work I found I needed to consider the nature of theatre and my place in it from a more philosophical perspective. I created a story and now had the responsibility to share it, but what did it actually mean for me to be an author, and moreover, an actor? These contemplations go hand-in-hand with my proceeding accounts of practical work and serve as an outline of the journey I went through. Perhaps my attempt can also inspire others

2 In more depth: Authorial Presentations (APs) is a discipline that students study individually at DACaP, in which each student devises a short "one-man" show, usually lasting 10min, in which the student presents some topic or theme from their authorial point of view and presents it to an audience. The APs can range from personal memories to adapting classical literature, basically anything that is relevant for the student, and that they feel is worthwhile sharing in a theatrical form to the audience. Students receive mentoring but the main responsibility is on themselves to structure the piece and find the right means to share it with the public. One of the underlying principles of authorial presentations is to maintain *awareness* and establish a *relationship* between the author, their topic, and the audience. For graduation the students are asked to make an authorial presentation of bigger proportion. The length of this final piece can be anything from 20-45 min.

to contemplate their own place in the creative arts, and the pedagogues of acting to consider how is acting taught and defined to the students.

This thesis is divided into three main parts: *The Story*, *The Actor* and *The “Holy Trinity”*. The first part focuses mainly on a summary of my *Tale*, what storytelling means for me, and the inspirations behind the fable. Generally in my art, and also in my everyday life, I am intrigued and strongly influenced by some of the universal themes and applications that Jungian psychology, mythology, and spiritual traditions examine worldwide. These areas underlie my reflections on the creation of *A Mountain Tale* and also give a framework for understanding the plot of the story and what the dramatic characters are going through. I also address my personal motivations of what I wish to share with my work.

The second part focuses on the process of adapting the *Tale* through theatre language, in other words *how* to use my body, voice, and personality on stage to express my story. I proceed to examine my ways of working in the space with this story material. This includes the initial attempts to the finishing touches, my ideas and approaches to devising a solo piece, ways in which I rehearsed and explored the material, failures and discoveries, and acting methods and techniques that were developed. I also consider what questions arose during the process. Throughout my practical work I was inspired by many “masters of theatre“, whose thoughts inspired me in my work. I also examine how I was provoked by these role models to consider anew my own definitions of theatre and its many aspects.

In the third part, I share and explore in more depth three three crucial aspects of theatre that I came to understand more deeply through my journey. I aim to embody these aspects when I finally enter the stage with my *Tale*. Some of the questions I address are: what does it mean for me to be on stage in front of an audience? What does sharing mean? What is it that I want to share? What are the *means* with which I can share something with others? The answers I offer are like snapshots taken in the moment of writing. Will they change? Very possibly. Can they inspire and evoke further exploration? Certainly. Can they inspire in any other way just as they are in the moment? I truly hope so, especially because the essential conclusion is one that touches not only theatre or film people, but all of us – it is something we have known since we were born.

After this I come to the conclusion of my thesis. I make a summary of the overall journey and reveal my take on whether I managed to accomplish what I set out to do: to provide honest accounts of an authorial actor in search for means to share a story that is precious to him. Was my endeavour fruitful and did I manage to document the essentials? Do I believe these reflections hold something valuable for others? Lastly, do they provide a basis for some further consideration and exploration in the future?

For anyone interested, the original text of *A Mountain Tale* is added as an appendix following the Bibliography. Although written in free-form, it largely resembles a film script, and was envisioned cinematically.

The Story

“Stories are medicine. I have been taken with stories since I heard my first. They have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything – we need only listen. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories.”³

What is storytelling for me?

Since I was a child stories stirred my imagination, evoked a sense of awe, and made me excited and curious about the world and the possibilities that it held. But even more important was something else, something mysterious and rare that always filled me with deep emotion and left me with something longer lasting than feelings of entertainment. It was a vital spark that was clumsy to explain but that I felt most viscerally.

The closest definition I found for this is *catharsis*, defined by Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary as: “1a : purification or purgation of the emotions (such as pity and fear) primarily through art, b : a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension, 2: elimination of a complex by bringing it to consciousness and affording it expression.”⁴ Perhaps more famously, in the ancient times, Aristotle gave a short account of this in his *Poetics*: “...through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions.”⁵

I found myself undergoing a kind of transformative journey too while reading books, watching films or plays, listening to someone tell an account from their personal lives, or witnessing narratives of all kinds unfolding, empathizing with the heroes and their undertakings. Something special and precious happened whenever I became actively involved in a story. As Joseph Campbell, a renowned American mythologist, suggests: “It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. [...] Apparently, there is something in these initiatory images so necessary to the psyche that if they are not supplied from without, through myth and ritual, they will have to be announced again, through dream, from within— lest our energies should remain locked in a long-outmoded toy-room, at the bottom of the sea.”⁶

3 Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, (New York: Ballantine, 1992) 15.

4 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Purgation”, 12 Apr, 2020
<<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/purgation>>

5 Aristotle, “Poetics“, trans. S. H. Butcher, *Project Gutenberg*, Nov. 3, 2008, 12 Apr, 2020,
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm>>

6 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Novato, CA: New World Library 2015) 10-11.

To put it bluntly, Campbell is stating that myths offer a kind of a therapy; a deeper spiritual understanding that was essential not only for individuals themselves but also to communities and civilizations as a whole. Through his vast studies of world religions, folklore, and mythology he formed a theoretical template called the *Monomyth*, or *Hero's Journey*,⁷ known more popularly as a structure for stories, that has become widely used in the film industry for example. Campbell argued in his most influential book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, from which the theory arose, that globally, and throughout time, myths present an ever-recurring motif of a *Hero*, who undergoes a perilous journey that transforms him or her. The *Journey* and the *Hero* differ in form and context, but this archetype remains. The result of the protagonist's journey is that after a decisive victory he or she returns "home" with a boon that can be bestowed upon the world.

There are many who follow Campbell's footsteps in understanding story with a similar touch of spirituality and psychology, and others who view stories through a more practical and everyday lens. Jonathan Gottschall, a literary scholar and author of *The Storytelling Animal* puts it this way:

"People may invent high-minded aesthetic (or evolutionary) justifications for their fiction habits, but story is just a drug we use to escape from the boredom and brutality of real life. Why do we go to see a Shakespeare play, or watch a film, or read a novel? Ultimately, from Kessel's point of view, it is not to expand our minds, explore the human condition, or do anything else so noble. We do it for kicks."⁸

Becoming invested in stories for kicks seems as valid and true as any other "nobler" purpose. David Mamet, a renowned American play- and screenwriter affirms this notion when teaching people to write. According to Mamet, people consume fiction for two reasons. Firstly, they want to be entertained. The second reason is political reaffirmation of ideas. In his own work he maintains his position in the first camp.⁹

What about myself as an author then? Am I in the camp of Campbell or Mamet? What do I want to share through my *Tale*? I could reaffirm the notion that stories are important for the renewal of our spiritual energies. I could say I want to offer *catharsis*. But who am I to do that? How can I say I know better than others, and hence, offer morals, guidelines, or answers through my stories? I don't know, and that is the most honest answer.

What I do know is that I *enjoy* the process of creating a story and sharing it, through text, theatre, cinema, music, dance, be it whatever medium. I also know that when I share with

7 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1.

8 Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal, How Stories Make Us Human*, (US: Mariner Books 2013), 61.

9 Fede Mayora, "Save Your Screenwriting Career with David Mamet", *Medium*, Nov 27, 2018, 20 Apr, 2020, <<https://medium.com/filmmarket-hub-academy/save-your-screenwriting-career-with-david-mamet-3be6078f76db>>

integrity, it is something that excites and makes sense in my soul, with the hope that perhaps through a creative act I can evoke something that might feel beautiful or precious for another person. Not all stories engage us though. Earlier I spoke of the unique feeling of becoming actively involved, but this was not always the case. Indeed, my fear as an author is that I will not have anything worthwhile to share. As an authorial actor my fear is that my performative means for sharing are inadequate. These are points that I will return to throughout my journey in this thesis.

“So, what is it about?”

The story in *A Mountain Tale* starts with an old, mysterious-looking man, dressed in ceremonial and ancient clothing, sitting by a fire and waiting for a large group of tribespeople of all ages to gather and seat themselves around him. He is an Elder, a shaman type of figure in this fantasy world, and he is about to tell a story about a young woman from their tribe, who set out on a journey to recover something precious far, far away...

Vena, the female protagonist, in her mid-twenties stands atop a mountain. The time and era is unclear but the setting and clothing gives a hint of something timelessly ancient. She stands by the edge and holds something precious against her heart while admiring the view. There is a specific place on the horizon she has fixed her eyes upon. The precious thing is revealed: a simple acorn, with a curious carving of a wolf. Vena pockets her acorn and sits against a ragged old tree growing alone at the top. She closes her eyes as if in meditation. As the wind begins to blow harder we see her getting ready to leave but as she does so she notices a small hollow in the gnarled tree's trunk. She reaches into the shadows of the hollow and picks out a beautiful and mysterious-looking flower. As she smells the flower something unexpected happens that will propel her forward into her adventure. Her acorn falls from her pocket and slips through a crack by the roots into the depths of the mountain. She is left without her cherished possession and instead with the mysterious flower, which she decides to keep...

The story follows her quest to retrieve the acorn from within the mountain, but what the quest signifies for her is precisely what is important. Through this task we learn about her character and what is at stake in her world if she doesn't recover her acorn. As the story progresses, we learn that Vena ran away from her tribe the night before she was supposed to marry Mayam, her childhood friend and the person who gave her the acorn

when they were still children. After running away, she came to this mountain and met an old ranger named Grigor, who took her as an apprentice.

At the time of the story, Grigor is out, and Vena is waiting for his return. Even though he isn't physically present, he will help Vena in a particular way. However, the main help she receives will be from Danim, another fellow traveler of same age, and from a similar tribe. At first Vena will refuse to offer him a place to stay, but as things unfold, she will find out that the only person who can truly help her is this stranger. She gradually finds out why Danim is up here, and this strongly resonates with Vena's own purpose. From Danim she will also discover that the flower she found might not be an ordinary flower. There is an old folk legend that claims it can grant wishes...

As they venture within the mountain they will have to find their way through obstacles, and face growing challenges with echoes from both of their pasts. Ultimately, each of them will face a sacrifice and a temptation, and will come to full awareness of what their true wishes are.

In certain key moments, the story of Vena is interrupted by the story of the Elder and the rest of the tribe. He asks his people questions about the story they are hearing and they offer their considerations about Vena. This interweaving repeats a few times during the story, specifically when there is an action happening that demands perspectives from various sides. At the end of the overall story it becomes clear that the Elder is in fact Mayam. As he finishes narrating the story of Vena, and the tribe is leaving, a mysterious figure stays behind to meet him...

Inspirations for the *Tale*

I recognize that particular themes rise in significance and prevalence at different times in my life. There is a feeling, some kind of an intuitive sense of a topic I am drawn to delve deeper into. I know that through a particular topic I can explore something in my own personal nature, and hopefully through this exploration find something evocative and worth sharing with others.

The realm that surrounded *A Mountain Tale* was intertwined with contemplations around traumas, family dynamics, relationships, love, fear, sexuality, desire, freedom, forgiveness, transformations, and fears that might be passed on through generations. Essentially connected to all these keywords is the concept and motif of the *shadow*, as coined C.G. Jung, one of the key fore-fathers of psychology in the West:

“The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook on life. That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ -- all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least among them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself -- that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness -- that I myself am the enemy who must be loved -- what then?”¹⁰

The analytical psychology, founded by Jung, aims at healthy integration of the Shadow, which to my understanding represents an aspect of our personality that we may not be fully aware of. The Shadow often initially provokes a response of condemnation. Integration, on the other hand, would mean coming to terms with something that we find difficult to face within ourselves. In other words: to accept ourselves as we are, even the darkest parts.

In my *Tale* we follow the journey of Vena, who is essentially undergoing this type of process. The inspiration for Vena’s journey came from my own sense of integration, acceptance, and journey through my own inner landscapes.

After a necessary period of introspection, I was ready to shift focus. I began listening to how the story wanted itself to be written. This meant that intuitively I felt the story wanted to flow towards a certain direction. Sometimes this was difficult to accept because my ego desired certain things to be in the story, like a personal watermark. People would recognize this as Alex’s work. But I had a sense in the back of my mind that I might be going against the stream. I had to ask myself: what was more important, satisfying my ego or doing what would be more natural for others to access the story? Why was I writing this story in the first place?

I decided to trust this flow of the story and see where it would take me. This meant I had to discard some of my initial ideas and allow the *plot-progression that felt most natural* to take me to places I hadn’t thought of before. This meant I had to stay present and tune into the story, listen for the rise of associations, and choose to follow the ones that *felt* viscerally most natural.

The tricky part, however, was that something might have felt right in the moment, but then I might feel very differently looking back at it a day or week later. What to do then? Again, I tuned in and made the adjustments that felt most natural *in the moment*.

10 C.G. Jung, Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, *Collected Work of C.G. Jung, Volume 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, (New Jersey, US: Princeton University Press 1975) 339.

Because of the shifting nature of my method of writing, sometimes it felt as if there was no solid ground below the story. This was frightening and caused me to doubt whether I would finish the story at all. Yet, there was something beautiful: a constant flux of little deaths and births happening all the time.

After a great deal of time spent shaping the material, the story finally started to occupy more solid ground. Many things had to be transformed, and I am sure that if I were to continue working on this story, the process of transformation would be prevalent even now. But because of deadlines, I had to make a step forward with the material I had.

However later in the rehearsal process, I realized that there were still many changes to be made. But the changes I would make then would not come from the standpoint of a writer, but an actor. Being in the space and aiming to establish a better relationship with the audience provoked a different shaping of the story. I will examine this in the chapter on the final form of my performance.

Usually there are some images in the back of my mind that set a tone and an atmosphere for any new work. In the case of my *Tale* I was strongly drawn to traditional myths, folk fables, landscapes of nature, and the archaic times of mankind. In particular I was also drawn towards Zen and its folk tales. These tales are widely known to be simple and humoristic anecdotes about universal human principles that don't necessitate the reader to be part of religion in any way. To illustrate their simple examples that nevertheless have wide implications, I will provide two well-known stories here. The first one is called *Two Monks and a Woman*.

“A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side. The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman. Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and carried on his journey. The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them. Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out: ‘As monks, we are not permitted a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?’ The older monk looked at him and replied: ‘Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river, why are you still carrying her?’¹¹

11 Farmer Seam, “Two Monks and a Woman – Zen Story”, *Medium*, 1 Jul. 2018, 21 Apr. 2020, <<https://medium.com/@soninilucas/two-monks-and-a-woman-zen-story-c15294c394c1>>

Here is a second one called *A Cup of Tea*: “A learned man once went to visit a Zen teacher to inquire about Zen. As the Zen teacher talked, the learned man frequently interrupted to express his own opinion about this or that. Finally, the Zen teacher stopped talking and began to serve tea to the learned man. He poured the cup full, then kept pouring until the cup overflowed. ‘Stop,’ said the learned man. ‘The cup is full, no more can be poured in.’ ‘Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions,’ replied the Zen teacher. ‘If you do not first empty your cup, how can you taste my cup of tea?’¹²

There is a saying that simple things are the hardest, and when I read these stories I am immediately struck with admiration of the clarity and simplicity. As a writer and filmmaker, I have a tendency to be complex, ambiguous, and sometimes allegorical in ways that others can’t follow. Often there are so many things I want to say but I am lacking the ability to put it together concisely and understandably.

In these anecdotes I see examples which, despite their simplicity, provoke me to consider the nature of existence in many ways. These two humble situations, with their minimal actions and direct resolutions, offer strong implications on the way we behave and view the world. They provoke to question our awareness. Such simplicity inspired me to ponder what kind of basic situational examples between people I could think of that could communicate a vast sense of understanding.

I had a deep fascination with the spiritual traditions and philosophies of Zen Buddhism and Taoism, and I wanted my fable to have a similar spiritual power – something that could inspire, but not necessarily in a religious context. What was important rather was to have a sense of something universal and accessible to everyone, something human that a reader or viewer could empathize with.

There is also a mythical atmosphere present in *A Mountain Tale*. This comes through the use of some recurring ancient motifs seen in virtually any culture’s mythology. Some of these elements, found also in my *Tale*, are for example: the journey inside a cave, a mountain that is considered holy or special, the old wise man, animals and their distinctive symbolic meanings, the cleansing river, etc. These recurring patterns could be considered *archetypes*, which nowadays is a term with differing emphasis according to tradition. Here, I believe its useful to consider the Jungian sense: “... forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin. The archetypal motifs presumably derive from patterns of the human mind that are transmitted not only by

12 Niklas Göke, “Zen Stories for a Calm, Clear & Open Mind”, *Medium*, 11 Jan. 2019, 21 Apr. 2020, <<https://medium.com/personal-growth/zen-stories-for-a-calm-clear-open-mind-28e84c523022>>

tradition and migration but also by heredity. The latter hypothesis is indispensable, since even complicated archetypal images can be reproduced spontaneously without there being any possibility of direct tradition.¹³

In other words, these universally recurring motifs represent universal aspects of being human, despite where and in what times we live in. Naturally, the form and way an archetype reoccurs can vary, but there is an essence that remains the same. Jung argues that there is a *collective* subconscious, and this is why even modern people might feel strong and unexpected feelings and associations arise from seeing mythical imagery.

As an example, the archetype of a beastly animal, in the case of the wolf in my *Tale*, holds a special place in the story. One of the most significant sources that inspired me was Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, a controversial and widely acclaimed novel from the late 1920s. The story revolves around the protagonist, Harry Haller, and his attempt to come to terms with his low, animalistic side, like the "wolf of the steppes."¹⁴ This part is in direct opposition to the other side of his personality which he considers to be "higher" and more spiritual. The wolf represents everything that he finds difficult to accept in himself, such as petty "bourgeois" delights, sex, drugs, dance, and all aspects of life that Harry didn't know how to access before.

The wolf as an animal holds a diverse range of native beliefs across traditions, and has inspired thousands of tales filled with magic and wonder. In my tale, the wolf is an embodiment of similar nature as in *Steppenwolf*, representing a free-roaming, aggressive, animalistic, and instinctive nature in Vena – something that can't be caged, and something that doesn't want to conform.

This beastly aspect in our psyche has intrigued us since the dawn of time. Consider the folk tales about werewolves, the story of *Jekyll and Hyde*,¹⁵ or Anakin's gradual transformation into Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.¹⁶ All of these examples share something essentially similar: a kind of force that is beyond our control. Even the archaic example of

13 C.G. Jung, Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, *Collected Work of C.G. Jung, Volume 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 50.

14 Hermann Hesse, trans. B. Creighton, *Steppenwolf*, (New York: Bantam, 1963), 19.

15 *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a gothic novella written originally by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850 - 1894), and first published in 1886 in UK, revolves around Dr. Jekyll's attempt to cure himself from his evil and malicious alter ego: Mr. Hyde.

16 The original film-franchise *Star Wars*, which George Lucas (1944) began writing in the 1970s, has an underlying motif called the *Force*, a kind of a universal energy that creates life and that can be utilized for special superhuman powers. Great warriors called the *Jedi* train to use the *Force* in order to protect the galaxy and its Republic, whereas *Siths*, the enemies of the *Jedi*, use the *Force* for their own passions. The essential storyline of *Star Wars* follows Anakin, the strongest Jedi, prophesized to be a "Chosen One", and his gradual fall to the *dark side of the Force*. Eventually he will become a *Sith* called Darth Vader, who will tyrannize the galaxy.

the Fall of Lucifer¹⁷ from Heaven into the abyss of Hell, as represented in John Milton's work *Paradise Lost*, provides an insight into collective examinations of the same archetype. The struggle or polarity between opposites, "good" and "evil", *Ying* and *Yang*¹⁸, the search for harmony and wholeness – this pattern can be found in religions, metaphysics, literature, philosophy, and art. Campbell provides a simple tale representing the problem and the dynamic it produces:

"The difficult point is made vivid in an anecdote from Yorubaland (West Africa), which is told of the trickster-divinity Edshu. One day, this odd god came walking along a path between two fields. "He beheld in either field a farmer at work and proposed to play the two a turn. He donned a hat that was on the one side red but on the other white [...] so that when the two friendly farmers had gone home to their village and the one had said to the other, 'Did you see that old fellow go by today in the white hat?' the other replied, 'Why, the hat was red.' To which the first retorted, 'It was not; it was white.' 'But it was red,' insisted the friend, 'I saw it with my own two eyes.' 'Well, you must be blind,' declared the first. 'You must be drunk,' rejoined the other. And so the argument developed and the two came to blows. When they began to knife each other, they were brought by neighbors before the headman for judgment. Edshu was among the crowd at the trial, and when the headman sat at a loss to know where justice lay, the old trickster revealed himself, made known his prank, and showed the hat. 'The two could not help but quarrel,' he said. 'I wanted it that way. Spreading strife is my greatest joy.'¹⁹

Even though the conclusion of this tale may seem rather harsh, or even fatalistic, Campbell argues that the nature of myth, and mainly why it is so important, is that it can reveal a perspective of the *whole*. This whole is something beyond our egocentric lens, the lens

17 John Milton (1608 - 1674), an English poet of 17th century, wrote his nominal work *Paradise Lost*, inspired by the biblical myths of the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Lucifer being banished from Heaven and falling into Hell, thus becoming Satan. I prefer to keep this as my main point of reference on Lucifer rather than the Bible itself, because my knowledge and understanding of Christianity, and the whole spectrum of revisions and interpretations that exist on Bible and its myths throughout time, is not sufficient to provide valid and accurate citations. See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005)

18 According to Taoism, the ancient Chinese religion and way of life, *Ying* and *Yang*, are two completely inter-related forces of nature, each having its own distinctive qualities and attributes, such as *feminine* and *masculine*. Essentially they are not at war with each other because there would be neither one without the other. Alan Watts (1915 – 1973), the 21st century British philosopher, known for bridging the gap in understanding between Western and Eastern religions, makes the same point more elaborately: "At the very roots of Chinese thinking and feeling there lies the principle of polarity, which is not to be confused with the ideas of opposition or conflict. In the metaphors of other cultures, light is at war with darkness, life with death, good with evil, and the positive with the negative, and thus an idealism to cultivate the former and be rid of the latter flourishes throughout much of the world. To the traditional way of Chinese thinking, this is as incomprehensible as an electric current without both positive and negative poles, for polarity is the principle that + and -, north and south, are different aspects of one and the same system, and that the disappearance of either one of them would be the disappearance of the system." Alan Watts and Al-Chung-Liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, (New York: Random House, 1975), 19.

19 J. Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 42.

which gives rise to all kinds of judgments we make, both beneficial and detrimental. In this example, it does not really matter whether you say that the hat is red, or white, even though both statements are true in a certain sense. But both of these contrasting perspectives are narrow, and do not encompass the *totality* of things. That's what I believe is meant by the function of myths: to help us see beyond ourselves.

Similarly, there is another animal in my tale which holds a special but different place, a contrasting nature to the wolf. Without telling how one should interpret my tale, I would like propose a question: could any of these animals or "sides" exist without the other? Now is the time for me to keep revealing too much. From here any potential reader, or viewer of my piece can witness for themselves how this myth unfolds.

What is a myth?

How does a myth differ from a simple story? Michael Wood, an English historian and broadcaster, gives a helpful clue about them:

"Myths are stories that are based on tradition. Some may have factual origins, while others are completely fictional. But myths are more than mere stories and they serve a more profound purpose in ancient and modern cultures. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience [...] The subjects of myths reflect the universal concerns of mankind throughout history: birth, death, the afterlife, the origin of man and the world, good and evil and the nature of man himself. A myth taps into a universal cultural narrative, the collective wisdom of man. An excellent illustration of the universality of these themes is that so many peoples who have had no contact with each other create myths that are remarkably similar. So, for example, cultures worldwide, from the Middle East to the distant mountains of South America have myths about great floods, virgin births, and the afterlife."²⁰

But if myths are meant to give answers to universal questions then why aren't the answers concrete and understandable? How does the imagery of a flood or paradise provide a sufficient answer in our everyday life? How are we meant to understand such imagery? "Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words."²¹, said Ananda Coomaraswamy, a Indian scholar widely noted for bringing Indian art to the West,

20 Public Broadcasting Station, "What is a myth?", *Myths & Heroes*, Nov. 2005, 29 Jun. 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/myths_what.html>

21 Ananda Coomaraswamy and Rama Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004) 273.

and who also influenced Joseph Campbell. As for Campbell himself, he puts it this way, “Mythology is the penultimate truth – penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words.”²²

If truth cannot be put into words, then perhaps the truth can be expressed *indirectly*, through the use of metaphor or allegory. It seems to me that this is the reason myths are shrouded. If I state something directly, it is up to the observer to affirm or reject the selected notion, observing whether it makes sense to oneself logically. It also seems to me that sometimes if something is not properly understood, a person might choose to accept the notion because they have *faith* in it, which stems from trust, perhaps trust in the person who stated it, or to some other context.

An indirect form of communication on the other hand, such as a metaphor or allegory, has a literal meaning outside serving only as a disguise, and the essential and different meaning is hidden underneath it, or *between the lines*. Sometimes it can indeed be very well disguised, which is usually the case in myths. It provokes the listener to observe the associations, feelings, emotions and thoughts that stir and become alive in oneself.

It seems to me that in myth the observer has a more active role digesting the information because of the wider scope of possible associations and meanings. Instead of one value that can be accepted or rejected, the choices of “rights” and “wrongs” become many. Viewing things from this type of a macro lens can evoke understanding that is beyond polarized narrow views. By this I mean that myth can provoke awareness of interconnectedness, interdependence, relativity, and understanding beyond one’s ego.

Sharing this type of awareness is important in my work and so naturally I had a strong pull towards the “genre” of myth. I felt that through mythical imagery I could most organically express what I wanted to share. It was essential to me that each observer makes the journey of understanding in the way that is natural to them, provoked by the imagery, with freedom of interpretation, and safe distance from taboos that can be difficult to digest directly. As I would eventually come to discover, my *Tale* would change into even more mythical shape in the final form of my authorial presentation.

22 Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Anchor, 1991) 194.

The Actor

“...positively to embrace the possibility of error is to allow for movement, for *play*, for a departure from the norm, so as to be open to the new and the different.”²³

Narration

After I had finished the writing process, I decided to try sharing the story with Emily, my partner, in spoken word. I was interested in oral storytelling as an important community event. Sharing hearing a story was essential for handing down historical information, but what really intrigued me above all was the aim of handing down something unifying and renewing for people’s daily life.

I was inspired by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a Jungian analyst and storyteller, who wrote a book called *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, in which old folk tales are examined as guidelines to heal psychological wounds, especially in the lives of women. The book contained empowering examples of stories that provided wisdom and healing. The author had even excavated and collected lost pieces of original stories that were often passed down only by oral tradition.

“Viscerally, however, I come to stories as a *cantadora* storyteller, keeper of the old stories. I come from a long line of tellers: *mesemondók*, old Hungarian women who tell while sitting on wooden chairs with their plastic pocketbooks on their laps, their knees apart, their skirts touching the ground [...] and *cuentistas*, old Latina women who stand, robust of breast, hips wide, and cry out the story *ranchera* style. Both clans storytell in the plain voice of women who have lived blood and babies, bread and bones. For them, story is a medicine which strengthens and arights the individual and the community. [...] The nurture for telling stories comes from those who have gone before. Telling or hearing stories draws its power from a towering column of humanity joined one to the other across time and space, elaborately dressed in the rags and robes or nakedness of their time, and filled to the bursting with life still being lived. If there is a single source of story and the numen of story, this long chain of humans is it.”²⁴

Inspired that I could take the role of someone important who could hand down

23 A central principle of teaching acting and performing by Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999). He was a French mime, clown, physical theatre actor, and teacher well known for influential teaching methods that remain in the present day. One of his principles was encouraging individual authorship, and helping each student to find their “right” way of acting. He had a background in sports which inspired him later in his acting and movement teaching. He is also well known for his work with masks. See Simon Murray, *Jacques Lecoq*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 53

24 C. P Estes. *Women Who Run With Wolves, Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, 19.

important cathartic information I narrated a part of my story to Emily in our room with an atmosphere of candlelight I had set up specifically. I had expected that the story would take life as I spoke and it would feel profound and mystical. There would be silence and attention as she listened to my words. The effect however was completely the opposite.

My narration was lifeless and stale, without energy, and there was no profound silence coming from total attention, and no exchange of something important and life-affirming. It was merely an awkward, choppy attempt to tell a story, hard to follow with a contrived sense of mystery that was meant to justify my rigid and serious narration.

I realized I didn't actually have much information nor any experience in witnessing how oral storytelling worked in ethnic communities such as Australian Aboriginals, Native Americans, or the various tribes living in the Amazonian jungle. Even the more recent rural communities, as Estes mentioned in Hungary or in Latin America, were completely alien to me. I had grown up in Finland, devouring films and books, but I had never attended oral storytelling. This was not prevalent in the culture where I grew up. I had a doubt that what I imagined about oral storytelling was based on fantasy and wishful thinking. Even if it wasn't completely fictitious, I had no proof nor direct experience.

Moreover my story wasn't based on tradition and heritage of a culture. The tale had not been shaped by generations and generations before me, and thus proved true by experience. I didn't have a historical myth. Instead I had a personal story wrapped in robes that I had designed to look "old".

Another thing I realized was conditioned in me through my exposure and enjoyment of films, novels, and later through studies and experiences of writing for film, was the common pyramidal plot structure. I had taken for granted that a plot should linearly lead up to a climax and fall afterwards to a resolution. This was the template for most films, TV shows, and Western/European novels. However this was not necessarily the structure of narration in oral cultures.

Instead of gradually building up to a peak, bringing all the initially loose plot lines together at a climax when the stakes were highest, it was actually episodic patterns chosen randomly from here and there that seemed more natural when narrating a story by speech. Previously I had not been aware of the way that writing *shaped thought*. Only through the means of writing, selection, creating an imprint on paper, did it become more natural to intricately devise thrilling methods to keep the reader engaged. As Walter J. Ong, an American Jesuit priest, scholar, and teacher, puts it more elaborately in his comprehensive study of orality and literacy: "We must not forget that episodic structure was the natural way to talk out a lengthy story line if only because the experience of real life is more like a

string of episodes than it is like a Freytag pyramid.²⁵ Careful selectivity produces the tight pyramidal plot, and this selectivity is implemented as never before by the distance that writing establishes between expression and real life.”²⁶

This was a new consideration for me and I began to ponder anew: what was the best structure to share my story in through my voice? But I wasn’t solely voice, so what else could I do than *speak* to make my story *come alive* on stage? Surely, I had other means at my disposal?

Heightened text

One of the things I analyzed to be a hindrance for me was the rigid searching for words when narrating my story out loud. I attempted to fix the lines to maintain a solid repeatable structure that I could follow. While doing so I started considering ways to *heighten* my text as a way to make it more expressive. For me defining *heightened* was purely intuitive. It was a way of forming a text so that it had not only a logical sense but also an emotional expression which could lend itself to various interpretations.

In Wrocław, Poland, Emily and I had been working together with a international theatre company called Jubilo²⁷, whose director, Diego²⁸, had introduced the concept of *active texts*. He made us search for texts that would have an “engine” as he called it, a kind of a pulse or rhythm, an internal sense of movement.

On the other hand, Cicely Berry²⁹, the former Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, defines heightened text as such: “I am taking heightened text to mean writing which is built on a rhythmic structure, where there is compression of

25 Gustav Freytag (1816 – 1895) was a German novelist and playwright who derived his ‘pyramid’ with a five-part dramatic structure by analysing ancient Greek and Shakespearan drama. These parts are: ‘exposition’, ‘rising action’, ‘climax (this part being the peak of the pyramid)’, ‘falling action’, and ‘catastrophe’. See chapter II in Gustav Freytag, *Freytag’s Technique of Drama, An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEvan, (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1900),

<<https://archive.org/details/freytagstechniqu00freyuoft/page/n9/mode/2up>>

26 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2015) 137.

27 Jubilo is a Polish-based international theatre group, doing research and performance work with an emphasis on using theatre as a tool for giving voice and bridging the gap between marginalized social groups and the audience. They have worked in the past with mentally handicapped people, Roma youth, and currently with a group of inmates at the penitentiary system in Wrocław. Their work features often the use of traditional songs and physical theatre. <<http://jubiloproject.com/about-us/>>

28 Diego Pileggi is an Italian theatre director and actor, also the leader and co-founder of Jubilo. <<http://jubiloproject.com/about-us/>>

29 Cicely Berry (1926 – 2018) was a British theatre director and vocal coach. She was the voice director for the Royal Shakespeare Company from 1969 to 2014, and various renowned actors and directors give her great credit for her work. She also worked as a voice and text coach at London’s Central School of Speech and Drama, gave numerous workshops around the world, and wrote several books for actors and directors on the various ways to use voice on stage and access a stage text.

imagery, and where we understand as much through the logic of the imagery as through the factual reasoning. And I am taking naturalistic writing to be prose, where the structure of the story is built on a logical progression of ideas, where the dialogue is rooted in everyday speech patterns, and where imagery is more incidental than essential.”³⁰ Cicely Berry states openly that this interpretation is immediately open to contradiction but I was not overly concerned about definitions. What mattered to me was my organic understanding and utilization of heightened text.

I felt that musicality and rhythm could naturally bring life and playfulness to my narration, and accordingly evoke something in the audience as well. I could imagine the reasons why poets, storytellers, bards, and writers used certain tools such as rhyme and meter to make their texts more accessible to the spectators, who often were illiterate and relied solely on orality. Even though I didn't consider myself to be very familiar with lyrical texts I decided to make an attempt at this. Inspired to some extent by poetry with meter and rhyme I decided to write heightened stanzas based on each situation in the story. I was writing these at the same time as I was in the space speaking the words, sensing how it felt to say them out loud. I began shaping lyrical phrases, such as these ones:

“This is a story of a young soul who sought freedom far from home.

Vena, was her name.

Following a river, across valleys and hills, meadows and forests, up she had come and stood now on a mountain peak.”

I noticed that this way I could encompass not just a literal meaning of the present moment but also something beyond that. In the present she is standing on top of a Mountain, but we also get a sense of something from her past by hearing that she sought ‘freedom far from home.’ These lines follow:

“A golden view, through and through, and yet in her heart there was an ache.

Out from her pocket she drew a precious thing.

A simple acorn with a carving.”

I believed I could shorten the length of the fable by expressing multiple meanings in lyrical stanzas. Rather than explaining for example why she has an ache, there is a more intuitive and organic connection between: home → journey → heartache → acorn → reminder of

30 Cicely Berry. *The Actor & The Text* (London: Virgin, 2000) 34.

someone back home.

But would this be effective in speech? From my experiences in the authorial reading classes³¹ I remembered feeling more capable of appreciating and understanding more lyrical and intellectual meanings while reading in my own time. I could then come back to the passages I had yet to digest fully. Whilst listening I had to concentrate hard, make an effort and be in constant attention, and if something was lost I could not return.

For this reason, I decided to keep the lyricism simple and as short as possible. Accompanying the natural rhythm of the words I composed a physical score of dance-like movements and gestures meant to represent the meaning of the text. I believed this physical score would illustrate the sense of the words and also help maintain a flowing tempo, that could be played with by acceleration or slowing down in special moments. It seemed that rhythm would bring expression not only through speech but also through the rest of my body. In this way I composed the beginning scene of the tale in this manner and showed it again to Emily. The short sequence made a better impact this time, and I felt happy. I had managed to please one audience member

The next day I presented this to my mentor Kateřina Daňková.³² Although our meeting went well and she offered me valuable feedback and seemed to approve of my approach, I noticed a sense of doubt creeping in me. I didn't feel that I had managed to share anything *profound*. Instead I felt I had done something *decent*. Afterwards I felt ashamed to have such big ambitions. I analyzed again my hindrances, and came to the conclusion that this time it was my gestures. I was describing too much. *Illustrating*. This was a massive banality for me. Demonstrating with my gestures and movements something that had already been said seemed pointless and unimaginative. Surely there must be more potential in movement than just repeating the same what the mouth says? Besides wasn't that also undermining the audience?

Moreover my heightened text seemed silly and amateur to me. I was not aiming to be Shakespeare, but nevertheless I could not help but compare myself to the great poets of the ages. The thought: "writing lyrically is not for me", formed in my head.

31 Authorial reading is a discipline founded by Professor Ivan Vyskočil, also the founder of the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (DACA). Authorial reading could be said to constitute a "reading circle" in which selected readers go one-by-one to read an example of an authorial text to the public, without any introduction or explanation beforehand or after. The aim is to be *aware* of what is being communicated to others through the act of reading. It is encouraged that the author/reader finds a *relationship* in the present moment to the piece they are sharing, as if "viewing it for the first time ever", at the same time being aware how others are receiving the text in the space. This approach aims at the reader to release any pre-planned notions of how the text *should* be read.

32 MGA. Kateřina Daňková is a graduate of DACA, an actress and author of independent and guerilla theatre performances since the early '90s. She has acted in several theatres in the Czech Republic, including Divadlo Komedie and Švandovo Divadlo in Prague. She also teaches Authorial Acting for the first year students, and is an assistant to Dialogical Acting at DACA.

As a filmmaker I had also been conditioned by a search for realism and naturalistic behavior. Exaggerated expressions and forms rarely convinced me. While reading Cicely Berry I came to realize I was not the only one conditioned in this way:

“As I have said already, this reluctance at sounding formal is partly to do with the work in television and film, where you have to be concerned with the behaviour of the character and the need to seem as ‘real’ as possible – like the person next door. [...] But I think there is something more. We live at a time when people are less articulate about their feelings. As we become more educated in the sense that we have more information, we become less in tune with our instincts, and so our response to words becomes only literal: we stop feeling the emotional life of the language. In Elizabethan times, for instance, because of the majority of people were not literate they relied much more on verbal communication: stories, information, whole family histories... Complicated pneumonics were often used to do this, and these latter probably contributed to an ear for word games and rhymes: it was to do with a whole fabric of life. Today, our dependence on the media – where so much of the talk is there to fill out time in a knowing way – on machines, on the speeding up of life that the technology produces, on urbanization, the breakdown of family units, the breakdown of community involvement: all these factors contribute to less real verbal communication between people.”³³

I could not help but feel guilty of possessing such poor command of language, and being inarticulate and thus inexpressive. But I knew the answer was not to fabricate a more poetic language. I had to remain true to myself, but with this new awareness. How to command language in a more expressive way while staying true to myself? I will return later to this point in my journey when reflecting upon the final form of my piece. Instead of lyricism I would return to what I had learned with Jubilo: active texts, which would be heightened in a different way.

Just before leaving, me and Daňková engaged in a conversation about authorial presentations we had seen before. I couldn't help but ask the cliché question: what was the best authorial presentation she had ever seen? She didn't know. It was a hard question, and perhaps even an unfair one. But my mentor did say that simple things were beautiful in her opinion. This reminded her of something. Once a certain student had presented an early memory in which she, the student, was with her father in the woods. There had been a fallen tree trunk on the ground, and in her presentation, this student had walked the length of the trunk in the space.

33 C. Berry. *The Actor & The Text*, 48.

Daňková told me that this simple action had been enough, and seeing my mentor's expression I was moved myself. There I caught a glimpse of the potential of theatre. Listening to what she had witnessed, I came to a better awareness of simplicity. As with the Zen stories, I was provoked and stirred by a simple action and situation. I could understand that this little moment contained life, and a whole depth of emotion could be shared just with that. A sense of something real and truthful, this is what I was looking for.

A frame-story

I had attempted to narrate the tale by speech, and illustrate the *Tale* with simple movements, but speech, and illustration, purely in themselves, felt empty for me. Newly inspired however by the example my mentor had mentioned, I began to look for a concrete, simple, and relatable situation and moment, that I could use in my authorial presentation. Something common that people would understand through their own lives, and something in which it would be possible for me to narrate my *Tale*.

In other words, if addressing the audience directly didn't work then perhaps I could share my fable *indirectly*. For example, if I told my story to someone who was *with me* in the space, perhaps the fable would reach the spectators witnessing the interaction. If I found a proper motivation and reason to tell a story, as part of a concrete situation in the space between myself and someone imaginary, but real for me, then perhaps the fable would come alive.

Consequently, I came up with an idea of telling the story to my imagined little brother. I don't have any siblings so this situation was not from my own life, but this sort of a relationship felt relatable to me. However, my story was not a traditional fairytale and it seemed to me rather awkward to imagine narrating it to a child so that they would fall asleep. They might indeed fall asleep but for a completely wrong reason. Staying aware that my story was complex and often ambiguous I decided to *use* the difficulty of relating it understandably, especially to a child.

The back-story I envisioned was that my little brother had ran away from a difficult situation between our parents at home, and had come to my place for the night. I would be setting up a place for him to sleep and he would ask me to tell him a story. As I wouldn't remember how to recite off-hand any other stories, I would make an attempt of relating this fable of mine, that I had recently written, to my little brother. He would be listening but also stop me whenever he had something to comment or question. I would do my best to

explain in a rather brotherly but also slightly self-conscious way, as the story would also reveal a lot about myself, and also about my relationship to our family. Here's an example:

The old man was wise. He sensed that something was wrong. Vena told him that she had lost her acorn. The old man nodded and was silent. He thought for a moment and then asked Vena if she had made a wish. She shook her head...

Little Brother: Why didn't she make a wish? Why didn't she wish to be back with Mayam?

Big Brother: Because she was afraid. She was afraid of going back home because she had done something.

L-B: What?

B-B: She had hurt her best friend.

L-B: How?

B-B: We'll get to that...

I rehearsed in the space by imagining the different actions and steps I would make, such as setting up a mattress for my brother on the floor, or preparing something to drink for him. I would try to find the right moment to address him and start telling my story. Would I tell the story while making the mattress? While I'm drinking my drink? Or smoking a joint? These details would also tell a lot about our relationship. What would I do with my body in the moments when I don't have a physical action? Would I illustrate again the story? And how would I find the organic transitions between myself and my little brother? The change of voice? How could I do this with flow and naturalness, and so without being awkward or creating something fabricated? How could I find a sense of truth in these actions?

Very early I realized that I didn't have to portray daily actions realistically and instead I tried to find the expressions that simply felt for me truthful in intention. I had a reason for doing something: for example taking a cup, even if it was stylized, but the

intention was real. I needed to give it to my little brother. Sometimes making a stylized version of an action would feel more truthful than trying to reproduce precisely how I would do it in real life. It was a strange thing, and in this area I simply followed my ‘gut feeling’. Certain stylized movements felt more easy to repeat also with energy rather than strictly keeping things natural. All of this meant I didn’t have to portray my little brother as in real life either. What was my intention? To help my little brother to fall asleep? To calm him down? To entertain him? To offer guidance?

I was experiencing troubles trying to find a satisfying way to portray my imaginary little brother. The main problem wasn’t the style. Our interactions felt pretentious. I began asking myself: what was my intention having this back-story. Why was it important? To evoke sympathy or pity? Just to evoke emotions for the sake of being able to do it? Was this back-story even important to my original fable? Maybe it was a good idea, but in practice I realized it was not important for my *Tale*. It could work as a separate performance, but now I was concerned about the story I had written.

A reminder from my first year

Needless to say, this idea also flew to the trash bin and I was once again on a journey to discover the right *form* for my piece. It was not all in vain though; a valuable aspect from this attempt remained in my consciousness. Later, when I reflect on the final form of my authorial presentation, I will explore how I came back to the principle of imagining someone in the space with me while telling the story.

But at this point of my journey it felt important for me to stick to the original fable and respect the value it had in itself. If I didn’t work with the back-story of an imaginary little brother, then what if I applied the same approach of being “in” the situation just with the fable? What if I was *inside the tale*? That would mean something else than narration. I would *show* it instead. Show, rather than tell! - that used to be the most important catchphrase of the pedagogues in my film school, but what would that mean in theatrical terms?

Our first year Authorial Acting³⁴ classes with Daňková came back to my mind. Our

34 Authorial Acting is a discipline studied at DACaP, in which performative fitness and techniques are trained in space with other students with the help of a mentor(s). During the semester there is usually some “project” to be developed, usually devised from the proposals of the students. This can mean adapting some classical material from literature, or other areas of art, through the lens of each student with the help of the mentor. This can also mean devising completely original work by examining for example selected memories from each student’s life, according to some theme or topic, and gradually composing and polishing these moments into an overall piece. Students are not “taught to act” as such, but rather encouraged to have broad awareness of themselves, and what is going on in the space, and act rather naturally, at the same time keeping in mind the heightened investment in

project had been a “Life Journey”, a map of certain moments that we selected and revisited from our past, thus being inside the situations again. I remember enjoying this project very much. It felt close to storytelling. The drama and the emotions hidden in simple moments could reveal so much, not only about the *author*, but also about universal aspects of being human. This is what I wrote in one of my reflections³⁵ from my first year:

“When we were experimenting with some moment in our daily life, for example entering the school or crossing the street, it was interesting because it was acting but we were not trying to strive for some technical mastery or express some character but rather observing the situation and ourselves, hence the similarity to dialogical acting [...] I liked these try-outs very much because you can discover something new for yourself as a person, some relationship to the moment and space, and you communicate something to the audience by being personally involved. It's hard to define... I guess it's also important to keep distance... not to get too stuck into for example some hard emotion... that is something I have to still understand and learn [...] But I remember a moment when I saw Antonio doing something at the “airport” [...] suddenly I could read from his eyes so much [...] I didn't see him only as my colleague but also as a portrayal of a human being in a certain situation and with certain emotions. It communicated very clearly certain emotions and it was a strong moment, which happened spontaneously and I believe was not planned at all. It was a surprise probably for him and also for us.”

Authorial acting in Daňková's classes was firmly rooted in staying aware of the present moment and observing what kind of impulses, thoughts, associations, and actions arose in us when projecting our past moments in the space. It wasn't necessarily about acting accurately to-detail how we had been, nor was it about precisely having to follow the linear sequence of the situation as it had been. Rather it was sharing the moment in a storytelling fashion, but not only through narration or speech. Sharing the story happened also indirectly by being attuned to the scene, observing what details seem important here and now about the memory, and what associations and responses one felt naturally come up. Gestures, sounds, movements, going in and out of character(s), all these theatrical devices

action that the space and public demands. If anything, authorial acting can be compared in some ways to “Brechtian” *alienation*: an approach where actors distance themselves from the role, don't pretend to be “it”, and rather present themselves as actors portraying a role. What I learned in these classes contributed greatly to my rehearsals that I've outlined in my thesis. For more references on Brecht and *alienation*, see James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, (London: Routledge, 1989) 69.

35 During our studies at DACaP we are asked to write reflections about our experiences in classes, mainly in an aim that we students ourselves would be able to clarify things in the process of reflecting back.

could be made use of. In a similar way as in Dialogical Acting,³⁶ the person in the space shares publicly his/her process.

What differentiated it from Dialogical Acting was that we began forming a loose structure, a road map as our mentor used to say, but the way we maneuvered through the memory could have different variations and emphasis. Sometimes we would also discover completely new things that we had not remembered before. In my reflection it is clear that I resonated with a certain truthfulness in our exercises:

“They were for me inspiring, above all because of the approach that we are not trying to act but somehow to communicate something genuinely by being ourselves, authors... This was important for me as I relate myself at the moment more easily by being honest and true to myself on stage rather than hiding behind a role. Even though working with roles is something that can communicate authentic meanings as well, and I don’t want to disregard them either. But as an actor I still feel inferior. In this moment it is still easier for me to relate to this Dialogical Acting concept of being myself in the space. For me it was like laboratory work exploring performative situations where you try to be yourself. Yourself doesn’t always mean the everyday you but you use your own being in expressing and communicating something.”

I mention feeling insecure about acting and roles and as I read this I realize I still have the same question as I had back then. In regards to my authorial presentation I felt satisfied as an author. The plot and dramaturgy seemed to work for me. The feedback I had

36 Interacting with Your Inner Partners, or Dialogical Acting, is a discipline founded by Professor Ivan Vyskočil, which forms the core integrative study subject at DACaP. It is not a technique, nor a method, and in fact is not goal-oriented in itself. Rather it is open research, a kind of a collaborative process and opportunity for people to experience open dramatic play, and “public solitude” (a term originally used by Stanislavsky cf. Alison Hodge, *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 18.). The way Dialogical Acting works is that there is an assistant or two who usually have more experience in the discipline, and other participants (usually varies from 5 – 10). They gather in a space (usually a classroom), and sit at one end of the room. Apart from the assistants, each participant goes one by one into the space, usually for 2 – 5 minutes, with no prior planning of what to do. In the space they have the chance to be aware of what “is”, in other words what is going on with them, including thoughts, associations, and impulses that arise in the moment. The other participants observe, and their presence influences the person on stage, *objectivizes* them, meaning that the person on stage becomes less subjective and less dependent on how they view their own actions. The aim is that they start expressing by voice, speech, movement, any way natural to them in the moment, whatever they find suitable to express in the space. There should be a suitable intensity in the expression, so that the participant can become aware of a response that is evoked in them. Thus, there is a chance to begin expressing all kinds of impulses, thoughts, gestures, musicality, just by playing with yourself, and establishing relationships, a “dialogue“, with these responses, or “partners“ that arise in each moment spontaneously. As Vyskočil stated, “...it’s important to perceive and become aware of what is happening in the space, “who” is saying and doing what, or perhaps what it is or could be about, and take notice of what is significant, what matters: the offers and new opportunities we present to ourselves. That is why your expression needs to be comprehensible and intelligible. It needs to go out at the appropriate intensity and go beyond the fourth wall (we all have our own inner fourth wall), so you can get a response, and so that that response, or challenge, can return to you.“ Ivan Vyskočil, trans. Alexander Komlosi, “A Discussion with Ivan Vyskočil about (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner“, *Ivan Vyskocil*, cited. 25 Sept. 2020, <<https://www.ivanvyskocil.cz/html/english.html>> further cited as “A Discussion with Ivan Vyskočil“

received from others who had read the story seemed to also confirm this. But the question at hand now was: if I was to share my story through acting, *how could I act well?*

Acting = ?

How to define acting? As I was researching definitions I realized there is no one right way of viewing acting. For example, Eugenio Barba³⁷ defines in his comprehensive *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, something he called daily and extra-daily behavior in an actor or performer. Daily behavior being that of regular habits and ways we go about our normal routines and interactions with people and ourselves. Much of this behavior is culturally conditioned, and we can take these things for granted. There is generally no need to bring our conscious awareness into much of this routine behavior. Extra-daily however would be something of a special quality. This extra-daily is what we wish to see in theatre as spectators, and this is what actors train and strive for. It's the kind of behavior that is full of energy on stage, scenic life, that replaces the daily techniques of the body with something that does not "respect the habitual conditionings of the body."³⁸

In other words, acting would then be something in which techniques of body, voice, dramatic text in some cases, are expressed in ways that are not-daily. This makes sense considering the vast amount of theatre and film where it is clearly distinguishable how the use of body and voice is strongly exaggerated or stylized in contrast to everyday behavior. The forms of doing this obviously vary in respect to cultural traditions and eras. But something was missing for me still. What about extreme realistic forms of acting, which are close to civil behavior? Surely, there must be something else that defines acting other than just mechanical and technical ways of using the body?

To give a contrasting example, I'll speak of Marlon Brando. There is something exceptionally stirring for me in what this legend said once during a broadcasted interview in the '70s after he had already established worldwide fame and was considered by many to be one of the world's best film actors. His thoughts: "I don't think we could survive a second if we weren't able to act... we act to save our lives actually every day. People lie constantly everyday by not saying something that they think, or saying something they

37 Eugenio Barba (1936) is an Italian author, actor, theatre director, and founder of Odin Teatret, and of the International School of Theatre Anthropology. He is a former student of Grotowski, and is widely known for his definitions of theatre anthropology and influences he gathered from Asian theatre traditions. See Alison Hodge, *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 209.

38 Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, The Secret Art of the Performer*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 9.

don't think, or showing something they don't feel, or trying to give you an appearance of feeling something they don't..."³⁹ Point being: everyone knows how to act. Dick Cavett, the talk show host proceeded to offer conflicting views and provoked Brando by asking him if he truly thinks that he, Cavett, could play any role as well as him. A pause. Brando replies, "...well that might not be true but I don't think I could play some roles as well as you could play them... I don't think I could play the role you are playing now..." A longer pause. Cavett retorts, "But this is me, I'm letting it all hang out!"

When I wrote in my first year reflections about how relieved I was that I could just be myself in the space rather than act, I was not seeing the fallacy. What is being yourself? Wasn't I simply acting a role which I felt more comfortable to act? In other words, when I was on stage "just being myself," I was in fact acting the role of "just being myself." It wasn't possible to just be, because that *being* is in itself *acting!* Declan Donnellan⁴⁰ says more eloquently:

"A baby is born not only with an expectation of 'mother' and 'language', but also with an anticipation of 'acting'; the child is genetically prepared to copy behaviours that it will witness. The first theatrical performance a baby enjoys is when its mother acts out appearing and disappearing behind a pillow. *'Now you see me; now you don't!'* ... After a while the child will learn to be the performer, with the parent as audience, playing peek-a-boo behind the sofa; and eventually the game will evolve into the more sophisticated 'hide and seek', with multiple performers, and even a winner. Eating, walking, talking, all are developed by copying and applause. Whatever human instinct is latent, it only reaches virtuosity after acute observation, repetition and performance. Acting is a reflex, a mechanism for development and survival. It isn't 'second nature', it is 'first nature' ... So, if acting in itself cannot be taught, how can we develop or train our ability to act?"⁴¹

Donnellan maintains that learning acting is very much *unlearning*, so how *not* to block ourselves. This goes hand in hand with what Grotowski says in his article *Towards The Poor Theatre*, about training his actors gradually to become more free by: "...via negativa – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks."⁴² It seems to also go hand in hand with the principles of Dialogical Acting where there's no right way of "acting"⁴³.

39 *The Dick Cavett Show*, ABC, US, 12 Jun. 1973. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tvca0FcuSs>>

40 Declan Donnellan (1953) is a Irish film/theatre director and author. He is the co-founder of Cheek By Jowl theatre company and has made theatre, opera, and ballet across the world with various companies. He is well known for his book *The Actor and the Target*.

41 Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, (London: Nick Hern, 2002), 1-2.

42 Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

43 This is based on what I heard often in classes from the assistants in Dialogical Acting. Consider also what Prof. Vyskočil says: "...I would like to once again emphasize that Interacting with the Inner Partner is about experimenting, trying out and becoming aware of, coming to know, and not about competing to see who's doing it better or more successfully. I know it's pointless telling that to those who have certain predispositions, talents

But even though all of this seemed rather relieving and made me feel more accepting towards myself it still didn't give me an answer on "how" to act. If I could not do anything else than be myself because we all acted constantly anyway then how to do that on a theatre stage so that people will like the show?

The funny thing is that before I started researching the definitions of acting for this thesis I realized I had never seriously asked myself what acting means to me. It was true that I had taken part in an introductory class to authorial acting, but I had not embodied the information. I observed in our department that people devised performances by using material mainly from their own lives. I had understood from pedagogues that the "authorial" approach in acting meant not being "in" the character, but rather expressing your own personal relationship to it. If there were dramatic characters, they had guided me to merely *play* with the attempt of becoming another character. Even if I had understood all of this logically, this was still not *embodied*. I did not understand it in my core, and on stage I still felt confused.

It felt critical for me to define what acting meant for *myself*. Would I understand these notions profoundly in my pieces, or would I come to some other conclusions? This was something I was clearly still unaware of, and yet it seemed it would be an essential key to my work. With a touch of irony, I reflected: what had I actually been doing all this time? And what was I to do further?

Before all of this "theatre business" I had directed actors myself. Surely I must have had an idea back then what I wanted from my actors. What had I tried so rigorously to evoke in these people playing in my films?⁴⁴

and ambitions, to those who have been, and are led toward that kind of competition. That's even more reason to try to approach the discipline keeping in mind that that is not what it's about; rather, that it's truly about experimenting, perceiving, noticing and realizing what is happening and what is – and responding to that." cf. I.Vyskočil, trans. A. Komlosi, "A Discussion With Ivan Vyskočil" <<https://www.ivanvyskocil.cz/html/english.html>>

44 During my studies at the Baltic, Film, Media, Arts & Communication School of Tallinn University, in Estonia. I wrote, produced, directed, edited, and partially sound designed my three *main* short films. These are: "Ritual?" (2015), "Kiss Me Tenderly" (2016), and "A Cat In The Night" (2017). To view "Ritual?" see <<https://vimeo.com/120731137>>, with the password: bfm14 To view "Kiss Me Tenderly" see <<https://vimeo.com/208633847>>, with the password: 2017 "A Cat In The Night" is my graduation film but not available online unfortunately. If you wish to obtain the file contact me on alex.asikainen@gmail.com.

Views from the outside and inside

In filmmaking, I recall making an effort to shed all theatrical imitations and illustrations that seemed artificial and unconvincing. I wanted to see something *real*. Occasionally I roused my actors to reveal genuine emotion. Capturing these moments on camera showed a response and relationship between people that felt convincing to myself. I could *believe* what I saw; there was something *truthful* happening. It felt as if momentarily the social masks, constructs, and patterns my actors had developed in their lives loosened their hold. As I was so intensely aware of my own walls, it was exhilarating to see through *their* walls, to see something full of hidden life spontaneously reveal itself.

Was this “truthfulness“ an aspect of human nature that remained unconditioned, naked, and instinctive, as opposed to our “daily“ behaviour which was moulded by social constructs? Did we suppress parts of our nature in order to co-exist with one-another cohesively in society? Was this the reason why witnessing good acting produced such an *revitalizing* effect in me, because it showed the emotional life, that we normally weren’t encouraged, or even allowed to show?

It made sense intellectually. But if I was profoundly honest, I had to admit that I was not fully able to explain what I was aiming to evoke in actors, or in myself when I acted. The only thing that I knew *profoundly* was how witnessing someone act well, or feeling that I had acted well, gave a visceral bodily sensation in me. This felt like a spark full of energy, and of life. It resonated deeply and in those moments I didn’t feel the need to analyze. There was simply great joy in it.

When I entered the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague⁴⁵, I told myself that I am largely here because I wish to develop as a director, and that I would better know how to direct my actors if I understood acting through my own experience. I was surprised that I took the risk of sidetracking myself from filmmaking. Moving away from the seat of the director and entering the realm of the actor/performer was challenging. Yet a long-subdued part of me had always harbored a secret passion to become an actor.

Despite the passion, there was an aspect in me that felt at times like a *phony*, someone pretending to be something they are not. This aspect was connected to the fact that nearly all the theatrical productions I had witnessed thus far in my life had felt dull and unconvincing for me. This feeling lingered through most of my studies, even after seeing more plays and performances. I began asking myself more harshly: why am I trying to enter the world of theatre if I don’t even *enjoy* going to the theatre? I remember feeling

45 DACaP, our department is part of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, CZ.

much more enthusiastic about cinema.

Films were a strange force. What I witnessed in them was a thoroughly manipulated, massive fabrication that was captured in the past, and yet I became instantaneously immersed. I could forget where and who I was, captivated by the actions that were not happening in real time or space, but which still felt so *real!* Even if the film was science fiction, for example, with unrealistic visual effects, I still felt *invested* and *captured*. What was this strange magic of cinema? Was it all based on technological superiority and the intricate, powerful, multi-faceted means of evoking different sensory responses and even emotions? Was it this technological might or the way cinema could capture and magnify naturalism in its tiniest detail? Was it the quality of reproduction that made it somehow more accessible for spectators? Maybe what would prove more useful would be to examine the hindering factors in a theatre experience.

To me, it seemed that in most theatre performances the exaggerated expressions in voice, gestures, movements, and words seemed caricature-like and un-relatable. As I mentioned before, I had attempted to rid my actors of this sort of “theatricality”. Incidentally, at a recent casting a film director had told me exactly the same, “I see that you have studied theatre. Now our goal is to get rid of all the expressions that are too *big*.” For me this seemed to be one of my integral problems with theatre: how to reach the audience in the last row with behavior and expression that was *big enough* for them to see, but also retained the quality of truthfulness and sincerity.

If I considered more deeply how I had acted initially in that casting session, I realized that I had *illustrated*, in other words I had tried to show how a person in a given situation would behave. In an attempt to help others understand I instinctively started exaggerating, stressing certain details, in other words: becoming theatrical. But directors are good observers, and the camera sees even the tiniest expressions. My behavior was fake because I was only portraying something. So what was the antidote? Perhaps finding a different intention? After few tries, that’s what started happening. Me and my acting partner began forming a relationship on a intention we shared in the space between ourselves.

There had also been performances in which I was not put off by “unnatural” behavior. I had seen grand expressions and yet I had felt captivated. Curiously enough, some of my favorite moments in theatre had actually happened during classes at DACaP. In authorial acting for example, I recall witnessing spontaneous moments of emotion, similar to my mentor’s example of the tree trunk, filled with beautiful sincerity, fragility,

and even a degree of heightened expression. In Professor Jana Pilátová's⁴⁶ workshops, I particularly remember feeling exhilarated by the relationships between students in the space. Professor Pilátová had for the initial stage of the workshop instructed us to create "partitures"⁴⁷ which were highly stylized, completely unnatural, short physical scores. Yet, when we properly embodied these partitures and went into the space with them, we began subtly relating and having dialogue with one another. A life of its own sprang up where traditional modes of communication were nonexistent, and instead we had to find a way to form relationships through the use of our fixed movements, fixed sounds, and/or fixed keywords. We were allowed to maximize or minimize our partitures, and also play with the tempo. The result was spectacular. You could clearly see that *something was happening on stage*. To define it was tough, but you could see the vitality in the way people tried to find communication with one another with these absurd means. Gradually it was also possible to begin distinguishing relationships from one another, distinctions we could see in everyday life. A whole range of emotions was evoked, and on stage we saw everything from melancholy to comedy. These relationships happened spontaneously and naturally in the moment. It was improvised, but also structured.

What I distilled from these experiences and observations was that even heightened and highly stylized forms of theatrical expression could be *truthful*. If there was a real intention, something honest and transparent, I believed that the audience would see that and respond.

I began questioning what I was witnessing in performance. Are these actions meant to communicate something? What is the intention, and why are they there? Is the actor doing something to *share* something with me, or for his partner on stage? On the other hand, what if the actor is focused on their own agenda and not trying to establish contact at all? In this case, is the actor *pretending* to share something, but is in fact invested in something else?

These were important considerations for me. I began feeling more emphatic towards performers and actors, including myself. Clearly, there were great responsibilities implied on the person standing in front of others in the space. Yet this aspect of having a

46 Professor Jana Pilátová (1945) is a Czech dramaturg, author, pedagogue and former student of Jerzy Grotowski. She is well known for bringing awareness of Grotowski's work to the Czech Republic, and her collaboration with the international theatre company Continuo Theatre as well as Farm in the Cave, based in Czech Republic. In the past she formed an Integration Programme at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, which was meant to use theatre as a tool for people with various disabilities and handicaps. Currently she teaches theoretical seminars and intense short workshops of physical work, inspired by Grotowski and Odin Teatret, at the Theatre Faculty.

47 "Partitures" was a term used by Professor Pilátová in our workshops, which meant short physical scores of our own devising. Usually, there was a theme at hand to help us construct the score.

live relationship in one way or another, this biggest challenge seemed to also hold the greatest potential in theatre. I was reminded of what Grotowski had said. That is, to discover what theatre essentially was, you had to strip away every superfluous element until you found what theatre could not exist without. The conclusion he had come to was that theatre could not exist without an actor and a spectator. Theatre is essentially a relationship, a “live communion”⁴⁸, and this was different from cinema.

It was a beautiful definition for me, one which made me consider acting with a sense of integrity. But it did raise a question in me: was it actually possible for an actor to be in live communion with every single spectator? I could imagine being in touch with one, or a couple, or even a handful of people, but what about the rest sitting in possibly tens and tens of rows? And what about the fact that each individual was different, and might have their own reasons for sitting in the theatre, and thus also bring different *needs*. How to be in a relationship with all of that? In fact, what does “relationship“ actually mean?

The online Cambridge dictionary defines it simply as: “the way in which two things are connected.”⁴⁹In my mind this implied that something was shared in one form or another. This was a solid base to start building upon. To take the example of an authorial presentation, I had to be aware of the audience, and aim my overall objective to them, or with them. It seemed to me that I could state or show something directly *to* the audience, but that I could also experience something *with* them. In other words, there was feedback between us: a *connection*.

So a relationship consisted of something more than just me. However it seemed that there was also a potential of danger because I could never *fully* control what was not me. The way I saw this was that if I, or most likely anyone for that matter, was to have a relationship in theatre with spectators, one had to feel *safe* with others and with themselves. Similarly, the spectators had to feel safe with them. Each person had their own “boundaries“ and each of us displayed these uniquely.

The fact was that I was quite afraid to be on stage in front of others. I wanted to share something *profound* with the audience, and that was my aim with my acting and with my *Tale*. But how could I muster the confidence and safety in front of so many eyes? How could I relax my nerves so that they wouldn’t hinder my actions from expressing the *truth*! If I could find a way to feel at ease, with focus and control in my presence and actions on stage, I felt that I might be able to share something profound!

48 Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, 19.

49 Cambridge Dictionary, “Relationship”, 26 Sep, 2020,
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/relationship>>

To ease my ambition I decided not to worry for now about being in contact with hundreds of spectators. A good handful, or a full classroom could do for now. Even this would be frightening.

I didn't know how to fully relax my nerves and maintain control over my trembling hands and feet, and I wasn't sure how would I find this communion I spoke about either. But curiously enough the strongest and most natural impressions of communion with others, sharing something truthfully, and feeling safe and playful, had happened during a strange discipline, that was not theatre per say, yet contained many of it's principal elements. Perhaps the most mysterious yet intriguing subject of DACaP, this was *Interacting With Your Inner Partners*, in other words *Dialogical Acting*.

Dialogical Acting

This strange new subject captured my attention at DACaP. Here I saw a discipline which was so linked with theatre and yet it was not about going on stage to "act"⁵⁰. Precisely because there were no objectives of trying to convince people through a performance, I felt free. There was a person going into the space with spectators watching as in a theatre setting, but what happened in the space felt more real and truthful than perhaps any show I had seen thus far.

I saw people step into the space and be utterly confused and awkward, unsure what to do, attempting with mannerisms to hide their vulnerability that many pairs of eyes could clearly see. Words echoed in the space, footsteps thumped the floor, and hands waved in the air, and yet the interesting thing lay *beneath* these actions.

One could see the rigidness of the movements, hear the faint shakiness in a spoken word, and see the subtle trembling of a hand, but what was liberating was the fact that here suddenly we had an opportunity to be completely sincere about things that would have traditionally been considered "bad acting". We had the opportunity to be free with ourselves, and play with these parts that normally we would have to hide under layers of technique.

In *Dialogical Acting* it did not matter if your hand shook. If it did, it was a great opportunity to be open about it, stay with it, say something about it, and/or follow the impulse and transform it gradually into something else. There were no objectives other

50 *Dialogical Acting* was founded, studied and developed by Professor Ivan Vyskočil (1929). He is also an actor, author, psychologist, pedagogue and founder of DACaP, and a prominent figure in Czech absurd and small forms of theatre in the 1960s.

than what you created yourself. I finally saw people being *real* and revealing something hidden not just by being caught by a film camera but actually in the space and in real time.

Through Dialogical Acting I became freer in my expression. I could suddenly become enormously playful and feel a surge of creative energy and joy if I managed to somehow go beyond my usual inhibitions that I had developed throughout my life. These moments felt truthful, however theatrical or absurd, because they did not serve the purpose of a performance. It was pure play – that is why it felt real. I was not concerned about convincing people that I know how to act. I was simply myself with an extra-daily expression.

These moments were spontaneous, and if I tried to replicate them I realized that forcing the same effect was impossible. That wasn't truthful of pure play because my motive became goal-oriented and immediately created stress. This is a perfect opportunity to consider something Eugen Fink wrote about the nature of play and its relation to the usual, or "normal" human state:

"The *fatal* situation of the human being, however, shows itself in the fact that he cannot become absolutely certain of the final purpose by himself, that he staggers in the dark when it comes to the most important question of his existence [*Existenz*] if no superhuman force helps him. For that reason we find among human beings an utter confusion of language, as soon as it is a matter of saying what the ultimate purpose, the destiny, the true happiness of the human being [*Wesen*] is. For that reason we also find unrest, haste, agonizing uncertainty to be characteristic features of the human being's projective manner of life. Play does not fit into this manner of life in the way the other activities do. Play is conspicuously set apart from the whole futural character of life. Play does not allow itself to be incorporated without further ado into the complex architecture of purposes. It does not happen for the sake of the "final purpose." [...] One often says that playing is a "purposeless" or "purpose-free" activity. Such is not the case. It is purposively determined as a comprehensive activity and has in each case in the individual steps of the course of play particular purposes that are linked together. But the *immanent* purpose of play is not, as with the purposes of the rest of human activities, projected out towards the highest ultimate purpose. The activity of play has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it."⁵¹

51 Eugen Fink, "Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts Toward an Ontology of Play", trans. I. A. Moore and C. Turner, *Purlieu: A Philosophical Journal*, (Texas: Purlieu, 2012), 8-9.

When I read this I was astonished by the striking similarity in principals with Dialogical Acting.⁵² It also made me smile as I recollected the many times my colleagues and I had been at a loss because of our teachers' ambiguous responses to our questions: *what is the purpose? Why are we doing this?*

If I have finally understood the essential nature of Dialogical Acting, then the answer is that it is in fact *purposeless*. The only purpose that appears is *what we ourselves create in the space*. It's the same essential thing as Fink proposed: "play has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it."

Because of this there was a freedom to do anything and not worry about what you *should* be. If I became aware of any goal-orientation that usually engendered stress, then one way of turning that into play was by being sincere about my *attempt at reaching the goal*. If I acknowledged the natural frustration I felt and didn't try hiding or blocking it, usually my attempt transformed spontaneously into something organic and playful once again. I could be at ease simply with the attempt rather than the goal itself, and yet the attempt did not exclude the possibility of *reaching the goal!*

In Dialogical Acting I have witnessed in my own and others' experiences that people often do become aware of inhibitions and blocks, but in fact these "blocks" are exactly the redeeming factors that can bring life and spark immense creativity and playfulness in the actor. I felt as if I had seen little sincere and beautiful moments of truth spontaneously appear.

"I don't think theatre is to do with communication, [observed Peter Brook⁵³ in a television interview on the BBC] that's journalism. When theatre is true, there is an actual 'moment of truth', and when that happens there is a change of perception. Every one of us, most of the time, is blind to reality; but when life, or some aspect of life, is perceived more intensely, then there is real food for the soul. I personally have need of this. When it happens in theatre, the outward silence of concentration is transformed into a living silence; there is a miraculous moment of grace in the theatre. And when that happens, there is a change of perception and what is received is for life. In the theatre there is a special possibility, for a short time, of seeing life more clearly."⁵⁴

52 To my knowledge Professor Vyskočil was in fact familiar and inspired by Fink's writings. In addition to Fink's notions Johan Huizinga (1872 - 1945) was also an important influence. He was an important historian and cultural theorist, who wrote a treatise on the play element of culture. See Johan H. Huizinga, *Homo Luden, Study of the Play Element in Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1980)

53 Peter Brook (1925) is an English author, theatre and film director, and considered by many to be one of the greatest living directors. His span of work is extensive, ranging from classical plays of Shakespeare to experimental theatre. In 1970s he co-founded the International Centre for Theatre Research in Paris, France. He has written influential books on theatre and its function in human culture. See A. Hodge, *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, 174.

54 James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, (London: Routledge, 1989) 168.

I was inspired by Brook's words about truth and I felt that something like this was coming through in Dialogical Acting. After experiencing Dialogical Acting over the years, and reading Brook's words about the function of theatre convinced me even more. But I still had no clues how to do this in a structured performance and not just in an open play. The essential principle of Dialogical Acting was "public solitude"⁵⁵: no eye-contact with the audience, focus on yourself. That was not the case with authorial presentations. Also, in Dialogical Acting I could free myself of any objectives and structures and transform as I liked. If I was to act out my *Tale* I could not do that because there was a structure to follow. Lastly, if what I said was true about Dialogical Acting being purposeless, then how to work with a performance where I did have a purpose?

Later when I was reading Donnellan's book, this mysterious word "truth" reappeared. "How can we speak of truth in performance, which is of its very nature is a lie. But we never tell the truth. We cannot properly 'tell' the truth, because our words are crude tools to express something, 'the truth', which may well exist, but which we cannot define... Acting is the nearest we get to the truth. There is always a gap between what we feel and our ability to express what we feel."⁵⁶

In that moment I saw something that both cinema and theatre shared: truth through fabricated means. Films never expressed complete reality either, but what filmmakers could create was a "cinematic truth"⁵⁷, a sense of truth through clever manipulation and mechanics. I felt that the same must apply in theatre, but in real time and space. Through myself, whether in my daily life or on stage, acting was all I could do to express the reality

55 "Public solitude" is originally a term conceived by Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 – 1938). He was a Russian actor, theatre director, and one of the most well known and vastly contributed theatre pioneers in the West. His "System" of acting, influenced by naturalism, has left a lasting and wide-spread impact on the way acting is seen, and trained in the West. He has greatly influenced other practitioners such as Meyerhold, Chekhov, Grotowski, Brook, Strasberg, Vyskočil etc. Stanislavsky describes "public solitude" as a state in which actors tune out everything external to the play. In Dialogical Acting, this is not as strict, because the person in the space can in fact also *use* what they pick up from the audience, even though traditionally it is encouraged that the observers stay quiet, with minimal reaction to the person in the space. See A. Hodge, *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, 18.

56 D. Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 4-5.

57 There have been many approaches and views in the history of film about unveiling the "truth" through the means of cinema. One of the most notable ones is the "Cine-Truth" or "Kino Pravda" movement in 1920s Soviet Union, founded by Dziga Vertov (1886-1954), a Soviet film theorist and documentary filmmaker. He proposed that through the lens of the film camera, capturing fragments of reality differently than the human-eye, and by means of editing, one could show a "deeper underlying truth" that was invisible to the mere human eye. Later in 1960s France, largely inspired by Vertov's work, arose the Cinema Verité movement, meaning "truthful cinema". The point was to make the filmmaking transparent in itself, acknowledging the role of the filmmaker in the attempt to capture something. Both of these theorists and practitioners inspired my way of understanding cinema. When I say "cinematic reality", I mean that that it is never objective, absolute reality, but always presented from a subjective point of view. This subjective, indirect way can still reveal something truthful.

About Dziga Vertov see p.185. in D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, *Film History, An Introduction*, 2.nd Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2004)

About "Cinema Verité" see p.483 in *Film History, An Introduction*.

I was aware of.

In hopes of learning how to share the “truth“ in a structured performance I turned my attention to the work of the theatre practitioner I most respected, the person who I felt had pushed the boundaries and dove deeper than anyone, even nowadays. I turned to the approach of Jerzy Grotowski.

Grotowski and Richards

Throughout my studies Grotowski had been my main inspiration because of his extraordinary insight into our universal human condition and his ability to reveal the hidden realities on stage. When I saw his work I was stunned. Never had I seen actors so spontaneous yet in control, and reveal such depth of emotion that both deeply unsettling and profoundly understood. Because of the intensity of the emotions and the breaking down of conditioned ideas and ways of behaving I felt that this type of work had a special significance in the world. I was astounded by how Grotowski managed to train his actors to achieve such extraordinary work. I had seen video recordings in classes at DACaP of Grotowski’s stage productions, such as *The Constant Prince*⁵⁸. The silence afterwards was profound.

One day a friend of mine suggested me to read a book his student, and later a collaborator, Thomas Richards⁵⁹ had written about his experiences with him. The book was about a practice of *Physical Actions* – finally some clue to his techniques for actors! In hopes of getting something useful for my authorial presentation I waited impatiently until it arrived from overseas and set myself to study it excitedly.

I was surprised to discover that Grotowski had asked Thomas Richards and a number of other actors to perform authorial presentations for him, although he called them

58 Professor Pilátová showed us a video recording of this one of the most famous theatre productions of Grotowski, which also established Ryszard Cieslak’s (1937 - 1990) excelling fame as an actor. This was part of our semester subject at DACaP - “Texts and Contexts of Grotowski“ - “The Constant Prince“, a performance by the Laboratory Theatre directed by Jerzy Grotowski based on Juliusz Słowacki’s reworking of Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s drama [...]The drama focuses on the martyr’s fate of the Portuguese Infante Don Fernando (1402–43) who having found himself imprisoned refused to agree to being freed in exchange for ceding the strategic port of Ceuta to the Moors. As a result, he died of exhaustion, considering it a voluntary death which sanctified his sacrifice. Written in 1843, the Polish version of the drama is faithful to the original, yet at the same time it went deeper and was supplemented by elements exploring spiritual transformation linked to the readiness for the complete sacrifice of anything sensual and corporeal for supernatural values.” cited from “The Constant Prince” , *The Grotowski Institute*, 8. Mar. 2012, 25. Aug. 2020, <<https://grotowski.net/en/encyclopedia/constant-prince-ksiaze-niezlomny>>.

59 Thomas Richards (1962) is an American actor and director, a former student of Grotowski, who Grotowski later trusted to become his successor and artistic heir. He is currently one of the Directors of the Workcenter of Thomas Richards and Jerzy Grotowski, at Pontedera, Italy, and continues experimental theatre work.

“mystery plays”. The principle was quite the same: one-man mini-drama containing a personal topic or theme, although in his case there was a particular emphasis that it should contain a traditional song, something the person knew from his backgrounds. What astounded me even more was the way Thomas Richards wrote about his experience, which reminded me of the general feedback I had so often received from pedagogues and friends about my authorial presentations.

“First: what *I* understood as the story of the ‘mystery play’ and what the others who were watching understood, might be two different things. I naïvely assumed they would understand the same thing as I, that the stick was my father, for example. I thought they would see the story of a boy’s traumatic separation from his father, a complex story, rich in meaning to me. But it did not reach them at all. They just saw me sing a song in a forced way, pump an emotional experience, execute an unarticulated dance with a stick, and then stand the stick in a pile of rocks. This could only give them the association of a bad mumbo-jumbo priest. The complex story about the separation of father and son never reached them. The first lesson I grasped from Grotowski’s criticism was that the story arriving to those who watch is not necessarily the same as what the actor perceives in his imagination. And as actor as well as director in this situation, it was my responsibility to create *consciously* the story that they would receive.”⁶⁰

Again, I felt immense relief that I was not the only naive amateur. If Richards had had such similar experiences and managed to become later the Director of the Grotowski and Richards Workcenter at Pontedera, Italy, then it must mean there is a way! I ravenously continued reading.

“Second: I was using ‘symbols’ in a mistaken way. Rather than doing concrete actions, I represented them symbolically, assuming that those who watched would understand the symbol in the same way I did. For instance, the stick as my father: they had no way of understanding it. I substituted symbols for actions. Instead of reacting to my father before me with a line of actions, remembering truthfully what I had done when I danced on his feet, refinding our precise physical behavior and details of contact between us, I symbolically represented him with a stick, and tried to pump myself emotionally to convey an idea: the traumatic separation of father and son. I had constructed my ‘mystery play’ with symbols that were not understandable, and then pumped ‘epic emotion’ related to some past event. Third: I thought that the audience would experience the same so-called intensity that I felt while performing, that they too would experience this ‘epic emotion’. I

60 Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 35. Further cited as *At Work with Grotowski*

did not see that often I would convince myself of having ‘felt something,’ while in reality all I had felt was excited nerves due to the fact that I was ‘acting’ in front of someone. In other words I had mistaken agitated nerves for true emotions; I had avoided true practical work, and tried to pump an emotional state.”⁶¹

I could fully relate to everything Richards wrote about. Each time I had presented my work I had taken on personal, emotionally loaded topics, tried my best to make the spectators understand the message and experience an inner revelation. I imagined that I was doing something special, fragile, naked and of an illuminating quality on stage, something people rarely saw and that could perhaps make them feel similarly cathartic as I did on stage. After a performance maybe one or two people might come talk to me. Some had understood parts. Mainly, the feedback I received showed me that most of the people did not understand what I was doing on stage. They did not pick up on my message, nor were they moved. They were more bored or even agitated, hoping to see a completely different quality in my expression. I felt like a phony, and always withdrew to reflect on what had I done wrong. Why don’t people understand? Am I the only one who cares about these matters?

While reading I became aware of certain key principles Grotowski emphasized, and I believed I could use them for my authorial presentation. It seemed that Grotowski had been profoundly influenced by Stanislavsky’s work, and in some ways continued it further in his own way. Similarly to the great Russian master, Grotowski focused on the logical continuity of actions that an actor could follow and repeat each time. The ability to repeat exactly was a necessity to Grotowski, and he stressed the importance of improvisation *within* that structure. In the book there is an example of a river with the banks on each side. On one side sits the rigid structure that must be followed, and on the other the internal energetic stream of life within the actor that can be expressed spontaneously each time while following the *precisely* structured steps. The river is the scenic life; the fight of the opposing forces, the two banks, make the river flow smoothly.

Another important inspiration from the book came to me through the example of a famous Russian actor who Grotowski spoke about, and who demonstrated concretely the difference between “physical activities and physical actions”. The actor had to present a lengthy monologue with a big risk of becoming boring for the spectators, yet he managed to bring great vitality and life to the scene. This happened through the mastery of a clever and subtle physical score of little actions.

61 T. Richards, *At Work with Grotowski*, 36.

“... the actor lectured the other characters, but what was his ‘physical score’? It was *the fight for attention, the recognition of allies and adversaries* (through observing the listeners), looking for support from the allies, directing his attacks towards characters he suspected as adversaries, etc. [...] Perhaps he utilized his small objects? The taking of the cigarette, the lighting of it...? His ballet with the small objects could all have been empty activities, Grotowski said. But it was the *how* and the *why* that made them, not activities, but *physical actions*. Suppose, for instance, the character takes a cigarette; in reality he is stalling, taking time to think of his next argument. He now drinks the water on the table; actually he does so in order to survey the others, to see who is on his side, who agrees with him [...] The Russian actor of whom Grotowski spoke had, with his score of physical actions in relation to his partners, transformed a lengthy monologue into a battle.”⁶²

Equipped with these tools I felt ready to transform myself into the characters of my fable. I set to work and only realized once working my superficial understanding of these ‘methods’. Richards wrote about himself, “At the time I thought: ‘I understand. It seems simple enough as a method, logical... however, I would begin to learn that to understand something with one’s mind alone is a far cry from being able *to do* something. To know something is a different matter, related more to one’s ability to do, to put into practice. After this lecture, I naïvely assumed my mental understanding of the ‘method of physical actions’ was sufficient.”⁶³

Even after reading this warning I still managed to wander into the same trap.

Being “in” my *Tale*

I had promised my pedagogues I would present a piece of my authorial presentation, a work-in-progress, at “klauzury”⁶⁴. This felt like a good opportunity for me to test my initial work with an audience.

I decided to try and assume Vena’s role, to become her, and act in the scenes of my tale as Vena. In the opening scene she is standing on top of the Mountain and looking towards the horizon. I tried to imagine myself in this kind of circumstance. How would I walk? How would the wind feel on my skin? How would I move my body in response to it? How would I do all of this if I were a woman?

62 T. Richards, *At Work With Grotowski*, 29-30.

63 T. Richards, *At Work With Grotowski*, 32.

64 “Klauzury” is a term used at DACaP for the final examination week at the end of each semester, during which each student normally presents their authorial presentations, and also work from other study disciplines.

Intuitively I adjusted my movements, my breathing, and tried to imagine the space around me. I also took the liberty to modify details of the scenes to better fit a stage adaptation and make the movements more economical. For example, in the opening scene I began already holding the acorn against my chest. While doing this I would be gazing at a fixed point on the horizon. I believed that the audience would interpret these details and understand Vena's longing.

I tediously fixed my steps, the turns of my head, and the direction of my eyesight during given moments, keeping in mind important associations such as home, future, doubt, and constructing logical steps I could repeat and understand in terms of Vena's motivation in the scene. Remembering that Grotowski had said that "emotions are independent of the will," I tried not to force myself to feel in a given way. This was surprisingly challenging as I realized I housed strong preconceptions that this was something necessary as an actor: make myself feel in a given way. I felt both anxiety and boredom while trying to refine my movements in the most precise and natural way. However, after reading Richards' accounts of training with Grotowski I believed that if I worked diligently enough with my body, the emotions would come also naturally as a response. This process drained my energy and excitement. Each time I forced myself to repeat a physical score, convinced that I had to 'embody' it fully, I was scrutinizing myself whether I was doing it the 'right' way.

Finally, I managed to assemble the opening scene. I decided to show Emily to test whether I had discovered something stronger through my study of Grotowski and Richards. I performed in our studio room, and while acting the scene I became aware of a quality of heaviness. I did not feel convinced of my actions, nor did I feel I was living up to the image I had hoped to achieve. I had a goal of showing something profound. This goal, as in Dialogical Acting, created a lot of frustration and rigidity in my body and voice, and seemed to create a heavy cloud above me. After the piece finished I looked at Emily to see her response. My own intuition seemed to be mirrored: I had not achieved what I had set out to do.

After this attempt I withdrew so familiarly into my own mental space and began my ruthless troubleshooting. I was in a bad mood and my frustration was highest so far. I had a nagging sense that reading about Grotowski's work seemed to have backfired somehow. It was difficult for me to admit this to myself because he was a great role model for me. But I realized that I could not expect to fully understand the depths of his work by reading a few chapters about someone's experiences and trying to copy them by myself. The result was superficial and forced. Of course if I were a student of Grotowski or Richards it would be a

different story, but I had a creeping suspicion that I could not fully understand those methods by myself. I could attempt fully embodying Grotowski's techniques but this could take years, time which disappearing in front of the looming deadlines. I had to reassess and make a strategic maneuver. I decided to forget about Grotowski for the time being.

Next, I dove into Donnellan's *The Actor and the Target*. This book was specialized in liberating actors from their blocks and helping them understand concretely where to put their attention in the moment when they act, this being the "target".

The "target" seemed to be a simple, practical solution to some universal, interconnected blocks that actors experience. Examples of these blocks would be: "I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know what I want, I don't know who I am, I don't know where I am, I don't know how should I move, I don't know what I feel, I don't know what I'm saying, I don't know what I'm playing."⁶⁵

The solution is to find a "target", an objective that infuses the actions with energy and motivation. This means not doing something arbitrarily but for or towards something. For example, "...an actor cannot play: 'I die' because there is no target. However, the actor can play:

'I welcome death.'

'I fight death.'

'I mock death.'

'I struggle to live.'

'To live', although a verb, is here a target. The wounded soldier fighting to live will have a very specific image of the next living moment that he needs...All an actor can play are verbs, and each of these verbs has to have a target after it. This target is a kind of object, either direct or indirect, a concrete thing seen or sensed, and needed."⁶⁶ Naturally the book provides more elaborate applications as you go deeper but this seemed to be the root of all confusion on stage.

I started examining what my targets were. Standing on the mountain – what was my aim? Why was I there? To do what exactly? These were the most rudimentary questions that could be asked even without any prior knowledge of acting techniques. It was common sense, and yet I struggled to answer them.

Vaguely I had an idea that Vena went to the peak to have a meditative moment, to observe her feelings, and perhaps draw some conclusions. Was this understandable

65 D. Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 13.

66 D. Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 19.

though? Observe what feelings? Draw what conclusions? And why was it crucial? *What* was at stake? I realized it was hard for me to crystallize the target because I hardly understood myself why Vena was doing what she was doing. I wanted to symbolize something and leave people to their own interpretations, but then I remembered Richards' words of warning about the use of symbols in place of actions, and the responsibility of conveying something that others can concretely understand.

In the end, it was helpful to visualize what I would see from the top of the mountain. What was Vena looking at? Slowly, a more concrete understanding began to form. Up there, she saw an important place in her life far away in the horizon. Yet, there was all the rest of the landscape which she was free to explore. She was weighing her options, and holding her acorn against her heart. Vena's target was simple only in words: 'to know'.

Understanding the target helped, and slowly I began moving forward. I managed to move through the opening scene and enter the following ones and even embody new characters. This felt exciting and fun. However I couldn't keep the targets in mind all the time, and even though I knew better what to do, I wasn't feeling the surge of energy and flow that I had desired. Analyzing everything logically was sometimes tedious work, and as I was going through the scenes I was constantly checking back whether I knew what was my next target. Some of my character interactions felt contrived. I noticed a similar kind of frustration as with the guidances of Richards and Grotowski, and began to look for ways how to tap into feelings of organicity and truthfulness in my actions.

I remember that at some point I started bit by bit listening more to my own intuition. I gradually began feeling more free, more at ease, more enjoying the process of rehearsing when I allowed myself to not constantly check whether I was obeying the "rules" of what others had instructed. Sometimes if I felt stuck I would do something completely opposite as to how it was supposed to be, for example make something intentionally badly acted. This was a trick that my mentor had suggested me, and I understood why. It gave an immense sense of play and new creative energy! I was more relaxed, had more fun, and felt more truthful within my piece when I allowed myself to forget what others had said and rather tuned in to what I was feeling in the moment. I felt that my experiences with Dialogical Acting helped me to rehearse this way.

While doing the scenes I began following a 'gut feeling', sensing which impulses and nuances seemed truthful for me to follow. There was a sense of improvisation within a structure, reminding me of what Grotowski used to teach his actors. Sometimes I simply didn't know why I was doing something but it just felt *right* viscerally. I didn't always

have a clear view of the target, but yet I managed to do actions, movements, sounds and voices, be my characters just by following my intuitive feeling and sensing the next step. This seems very abstract, vague and ambiguous, but I felt that perhaps I worked better when I let my analytical mind rest and simply trust my emotions, feelings and sensations.

After showing another version of my work-in-progress to Emily and later to Daňková, I felt that I had finally found a potential form for sharing my story. I had to make it clear and understandable, so I adjusted my movements and actions and omitted superfluous details. I prided myself in finding organic ways of showing the *mise-en-scène*, such as the rain or wind, through my use of body and voice, and also felt good about the ways I found transitions between characters. For me it felt important to maintain an organic flow, so all kinds of transitions had to happen with a sense of naturalness and fluidity. I was very inspired by a short text of Eugenio Barba in which he proposed that “all theatre is made of dance”.⁶⁷ Everything was a type of choreography, and this is how I started viewing my piece.

Rhythm, tempo, and motion were all essentially connected to something I had also read from Yoshi Oida⁶⁸, whose work was introduced to me by my mentor in Authorial Acting classes. It was an Asian concept regarding a certain rhythmic pattern, something that could be observed in nature too:

“...a rhythmic structure called Jo, Ha, Kyu. (The word jo literally means 'beginning' or 'opening', ha means 'break' or 'development', and kyu has the sense of 'fast' or 'climax'.) In this structure, you start slowly, then gradually and smoothly accelerate towards a very fast peak. After the peak, there is usually a pause and then a recommencement of the acceleration cycle. A new Jo Ha Kyu. This is an organic rhythm which can easily be observed in the body's build-up to sexual orgasm. Almost any rhythmic physical activity will tend to follow this pattern if left to itself. This rhythm of Jo, Ha, Kyu is quite different from the Western idea of 'beginning, middle, end', since the latter tends to produce a series of 'steps' rather than a smooth acceleration. In addition; the concept of 'beginning, middle, end' usually only refers to the overall dramatic structure of the play, while Jo, Ha, Kyu is used to support every moment of a performance as well, as its structure... There is another factor. Since the Jo, Ha, Kyu pattern also exists within the body of the onlooker, the audience experiences a sense of organic 'rightness' when actors use this rhythm. The bodies

67 Eugenio Barba, ed. L. Masgrau, trans. J. Barba, “All Theatre is Made of Dance”, *The Moon Rises from the Ganges, My Journey through Asian Acting Techniques*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 195.

68 Yoshi Oida (1933) is a Japanese actor, writer, director and author. He has worked extensively in theatre, with the likes as Brook, and also performed his own authorial work. He has also starred in several films and written books on acting, such as *The Invisible Actor*, and *Actor's Tricks*.

of the actors and the bodies of the watchers become connected, and it feels as if they are sharing the same journey. Many Western performers use the Jo, Ha, Kyu rhythm subconsciously. They can sense when a performance is getting 'bogged down', when you need to 'pick it up' and 'keep it moving'.⁶⁹

This concept has stayed with me since I first heard it. It has indeed been something I believe I have been able to pick up subconsciously in the past, and nowadays with more awareness I believe I can sense it when I am on stage. It has always felt for me very understandable and relatable, and personally it feels like a solid anchor I can always return to whenever I am doing an action on stage.

Finally came the time for me to present my work at the spring “Kluzury”. It was only about a quarter of the whole story, but I wanted to show it nonetheless and see how it would be received. This would help me determine if I am moving in the right direction with my form. Personally I felt I had found something important, but I knew from experience that I had blind spots in my work. How would it be this time? Would I make the same mistake again of presenting something incomprehensible, or would I finally manage to touch the audience?

Crucial feedback

The nerves were the same as always. I was terrified. Panicking about blacking out and losing everything I had worked on. Constantly playing out scenarios in my mind and worrying incessantly about the judgment from the audience.

When I went on stage I felt stiff and heavy. But I had managed to embody the steps, and so I began, slowly releasing the cumbersome stone-like tension, freeing my voice, following the steps of my piece, and eventually becoming more at ease to follow the flow I had practiced. I felt the panic loosen its grip on me.

As always there were moments in which I felt confidently able to share something followed by moments in which I felt clumsy and unconfident. Overall I felt uncertain after it was finished. In some ways I was happy, relieved, and proud that I had made a unique form, something people were surprised about. But the point was my story, not to present showmanship. I felt sure that the parts that had been clear were also interesting, and I believed that people wanted to know what happened next.

On the other hand, I was also doubting if I had been clear enough. Had I managed to make the story understandable? Had I managed to bring each character alive and show the

69 Yoshi Oida, Lorna Marshall, *The Invisible Actor*, (New York: Routledge, 1997) 32.

distinctions between them, or had Vena, Grigor, and Danim just melted together? What about the locations and the whole *mise-en-scène*, soundscape, and atmosphere of the environment? Had the story evoked something in others, or was I again blind to my work? Finally, my own acting skills; had I been overly theatrical? Had my actions been truthful, or had they been merely illustrative, pretentious, and caricature-like?

Afterwards a few students approached and congratulated me on an interesting piece and story. I heard praise about the form and imaginative way of presenting my story and the characters. To my surprise I heard positive reactions about my expressive voice. Pleased to hear these comments I ventured back into the classroom where the pedagogues would voice their feedback for everyone.

It was tough to swallow. Even though the feedback was given in a kind and respectful way I felt stung by the points I heard from various pedagogues. Sharp, piercing, and illuminating because they brought into my awareness aspects I was not aware of. I thought I had had a strong foundation, and although I expected to hear some criticism, but I had not anticipated to it to such an extent. There were a few people who liked my presentation and could follow the form. They were fascinated by the story and my approach, but it didn't change the perception of the majority. I distilled two major points:

- 1) It was generally confusing for a spectator to watch the piece in its current form. There were problems differentiating between dramatic characters, and time and place. In moments it was unclear which character or where I was. A comment was made that some transitions, between characters in dialogue was done in an unimaginative way – too expected and cliché. More fluidity was asked for. But all in all it seemed it was too demanding for spectators to concentrate so much in order to understand. I was wasting time and energy showing all the details in the interactions and scenography, and the question arose whether my fable is too much for a solo performance without a set, props, or partner actors.
- 2) The overall myth was lost and not understood. I was not able to bring out the depth I wanted. The reason for this could have been the lack of distance and play with my theme or topic. It seemed I was so close to the story that people could not see the *play* between me and the story. The myth might have been communicated if I had had more distance from it. The question arose: what is the difference between art therapy and theatre? This stung me deeply and I was frustrated to hear the same criticism I had heard many times before. Was I trying to do art therapy

on myself? One comment was that someone had sensed a wall between me and the audience. I was not sharing with *them*. This seemed to strengthen the notion that I had been doing something solely for myself. I was shocked. I thought I had managed to keep contact with others. One of the essential questions was: does the theme have me or do I have it?

On the other hand, I also received praise again for my detailed and expressive voice that managed to transform the space and communicate to the audience. It was surprising and also frustrating because although this was a nice feedback I had never paid extra attention to my voice while rehearsing. Of course I had considered how I could share information non-verbally through my voice, for example creating a night ambience or a fire crackling in the fireplace. These details did not need narration, and the ideas I used had come naturally to me. But it seemed secondary as my piece was not meant to be about voice.

Another frustration was the way my *Tale* and its natural tone, a quality of darkness and mystery, seemed to be undermined. I received feedback stating that it might work better if I made my piece *deliberately* into an *attempt* of me trying to share it. This could be done within the framework of a failed film, for example, and for me to be a separate storyteller or narrator.

I accepted the fact that perhaps my role-work was not the best, but I was aggravated by feedback suggesting to change my piece into something laughable. Humor is something I never had problems with, but throughout my time at DACaP I came to have feelings of resentment towards the incessant use of comical elements, slapstick, sarcasm, inside jokes from our department, and the exaggerated distance from heavy topics⁷⁰ that I had witnessed in most authorial presentations. Curiously enough, I observed this pattern mainly in students from the Czech program⁷¹. Was it cultural? Why did this comical approach irritate me so much? In the end, weren't my professors simply trying to help; surely they must have had their reasons for advising me towards humor?

70 This is only based on my personal experience. Whenever there were more "heavy" presentations, either from international or the Czech side, they provoked more intense discussions afterwards. My understanding of the usual case from the pedagogical side is that the issue is not whether a topic is too "heavy", but rather it is a matter of *form* and *articulation*. If one wishes to present vulnerable material it has to be done in a form on stage that feels safe and distanced enough for the actor and for the audience. I felt that the Czech students had a bigger tendency to approach their topics with more humor and distance whereas in the international programme I saw a stronger sense of realism, and bigger transparency in vulnerability. My personal opinion is that Czech students had a stronger tendency to choose lighter topics, whereas in the international programme the case was opposite. There were also exceptions and I'm not stating absolutes. It is my own observation of tendencies.

71 In DACaP, there are two programs of Authorial Acting, one in Czech, and one in English. Even though the programs are essentially similar, consisting of same core subjects and approaches to psychosomatic disciplines and acting, there are some differences that come naturally through different pedagogues teaching, seen through the different levels of emphasis placed on various aspects of the program or performing.

I contacted Professor Přemysl Rut⁷² from the Czech program after being encouraged by a friend. I decided to take seriously even the feedback I felt resentful towards. I wanted to understand better what was meant by *distance*, a term that to me represented the Czech way of thinking about theatre. Hand-in-hand with distance I felt was also the realm of comedy, or *play*, which was perhaps a more accurate way to define the keyword I felt most of my Czech pedagogues embodying at DACaP.

During my meeting with Professor Rut I did not show any further work. I decided to take a break until more feedback, as I was no longer sure I was going in the right direction. Previously I had understood that Professor Rut had questioned whether this story was suitable for an authorial presentation. When we met in person I was relieved to find out that his conviction was not so strong, but rather it was a matter of finding the right form. This I completely agreed with. So how to shape the material into a more suitable form?

Professor Rut proposed that if I worked with fantastical, epic-like, imaginative and not naturalistic/realistic interpretation, it would likely give me more freedom, distance, and essentially play. He was interested in seeing me, Alex, with an exaggerated, extra-daily expression. Through this point we came to the question of roles, and especially Vena's dramatic character. How to portray her? Professor Rut's suggestion was to do it *indirectly*, so not assuming her role, but through being me in the space and perhaps imagining her there with me. As myself, I could address her, interact with her, and through the means of communicating with Vena the audience would also see her. This was not something I had previously considered, and it intrigued me. I sensed something exciting, something playful and freeing.

Then there was the question of the story itself and the dramatic structure. Professor Rut suggested me to do a scheme of the whole plot and define with a short sentence what each scene meant. I should understand what was essential for me to share in each part. I began wondering if I should make drastic changes to the story itself in addition to my performative techniques.

Finally, music and singing was addressed. This was a realm that could work nicely with the fantastical approach if I chose to follow it. Professor Rut spoke about Greek dramas and their way of using the chorus with a heightened form of singing and lyricism, which I could consider utilizing as well. Overall, *magic* seemed to be one of the keywords that I should keep in mind when working on further on my piece.

After our meeting, I felt refreshed with a new perception, and I felt I could filter the suggestions through my own vision, style and taste. Many of these suggestions would enable me to maintain distance and a more playful attitude to my piece. I started to understand that if I

72 Professor Přemysl Rut (1954) is a Czech actor, theatre director, singer, pianist, poet, former head of DACaP and current pedagogue in the Czech Authorial Acting programme.

invested myself too emotionally, I would become blind and deal only with my private material rather than addressing the audience and consider how they feel while watching me. I was, after all, creating something for the sake of others, not only for myself.

Professor Rut had not told me to be funny. In fact, I had never heard anyone suggest that to me directly. My interpretation of the feedback was that *I should be more funny*, but this had never been explicitly stated. Now however, I understood that distance did not necessarily mean *being funny*. Perhaps one of the reasons that humorous qualities often appeared in authorial presentations with suitable distance was because once you view a personal or private topic from your life with space, often surprising realizations and responses arise naturally and spontaneously in the moment! It seemed to be consistent with the principals of Dialogical Acting. When the frustration is *used* one can find play, no longer trapped in a cycle of trying to find the way out of a situation, or trying to be something other than oneself. If one acknowledges something, accepts and relaxes into it, then there can be a different surge of energy. Perhaps a push towards something that could potentially have an element of play and humor, more exaggerated and thus distanced, can reveal a pathway to navigate the topic with lighter boots. Perhaps then rather than wading through the topic like a swamp it can become more of a dance.

This was my intellectual understanding of it so far, but how would it be in practice? I was still unsure but felt more comfortable with the idea of distance, play, and even comedy. I was not exactly looking for these elements, because I felt that these things had to appear naturally, but perhaps I was more open now to what the pedagogues were encouraging.

But my question remained: can we be at play with something that is also emotionally heavy? Was it possible to find suitable distance from themes connected to very personal topics? The pedagogues had never said that this was impossible. In fact I had heard several of them say that there was no wrong topic or theme, but it was a matter of finding the most suitable form for it, yourself, and others: a form that allowed freedom of movement, a form that did not trap you and drag you down. This was nicely formulated in theory, but only practice would show the real results.

The final inspiration

One of the first things I did was reshape my whole story. This brings me back to the first part of the thesis in which I examined the function of myths. I began removing every element which I considered to be superfluous, like Grotowski's examination of theatre. Grigor, Danim, the Elder, the cabin I now considered unimportant to the main point. Vena's journey was the main point, and only the skeleton remained: the journey inside the mountain to retrieve something precious that was lost. The acorn and the flower, the Wolf and the other animal, all still played a function. They represented the dual sides of Vena's life and personality. The Wolf and the other animal companion would test Vena, but also offer guidance and help along the way.

The *Tale* became much more dream-like but also much more to the point, and immensely shorter. It seemed to me that the myth in this form would be easier to present on stage just by myself. I would not have to stress about time restrictions either. All in all I felt good about this new version, but at the same time there was a new alarming point I had to be very aware of. I still didn't know how this new *Tale* would end. I did have an idea for the climax, but what was the resolution, I still didn't know. Even if it was a risk, I felt the urge to trust my intuition. I took the risk.

I began sensing that I would have to assume the role of a storyteller again. As I heard in the feedback sessions I could go in and out of the role of storyteller. At times I could put myself in the action, and then return to the narration. I imagined Vena in the space with me while narrating. This brought a raised level of attentiveness in me when there was a person a measurable distance away from me in the space, and that changed something in the way I narrated my story. It became more intimate. I sensed a relationship coming to be between me narrating and the protagonist of my story sharing the same space.

Once again I presented my work-in-progress to my mentor Daňková, but I was ill-prepared. What I showed became largely an improvisation, more a test of the new version of the fable. Even though I used certain principals, such as imagining Vena in the space with me, performance-wise I had not prepared concrete structures, and thus resorted mainly to narration with illustrations. My conclusion was however that the myth worked better. At this point I still was unsure how this new version would end, and so I had to stop at a point from which the rest was still unknown. Even though my mentor saw my unprepared work she could still see the danger of me being too close to my material. That cursed word "distance" came up yet again. But I listened.

She suggested me to find some tool or some kind of a contrasting structure within the overall form that would provide levity from the darkness of the myth. The juxtaposition would

give me chances to get away from the story and briefly assume something more playful. She believed that this type of interplay would not actually take anything away from the seriousness of the myth but rather enhance it. She maintained that the myth would communicate everything I wanted by itself, but as an actor I needed to find ways to take care of myself on stage. Shedding blood would not work.

This reminded me of something I had seen in Poland during a work session with Jubilo. We were presenting short proposals of physical scores and transcripts of our daily mornings to our director, Diego. To start her proposal, Emily hummed a song; Diego saw something in that. As Emily was performing the simple actions of waking up, making our bed, etc., and at the same time reciting certain keywords and phrases from her transcript, Diego asked Emily to pause at certain moments and sing the song. Slowly, the piece was being shaped into something very moving, simply with the interplay of the two sides. Actions and words were one thing, and the song gave a sense of something else. These two in cohesion created a synthesis beyond both, and the overall short piece surprised all of us. There was life and there was action: *something* was being shared. I felt that perhaps something similar could work in the way Daňková had guided me. I was inspired to use music as a way of distancing myself, finding playfulness, and creating a contrast to the story.

Shortly after this we had a meeting at DACaP with the students and pedagogues about what *is* an authorial presentation? Even though we had been part of our department for several years it became clear after last “Klauzury” that there were gaps in many students’ definitions and understanding of how and what to create in this realm. This was an important opportunity to make a bridge between the students and pedagogues. What I gathered from this meeting was a broader understanding of the relationship between myself and the audience. As I mentioned earlier I had frequently been criticized on making my presentations accessible only for myself. I had not succeeded at accounting for the audience’s needs. Finally, an aspect of authorial presentations became clearer: there was a constant relationship happening between myself and others. It was my job to be constantly aware of what I was doing and communicating to the others. I had to stay in tune with the spectators and sense, discover what the best means were for them in the moment of communicating my story.

Our session with the pedagogues was a useful one and made me think. Had I up till now always hid myself in a structure, rather than *shared it with people*? Was it because essentially I was *afraid* to be fully in contact with the audience? Was I afraid to be constantly aware because of the possibility of *judgment*?

After finishing a shift one recent evening I sat down to have few beers. The teahouse / bar / culture hub where I worked gave me the chance to meet many fascinating people, artists,

and actors alike. As I relaxed with a loyal customer, Robert,⁷³ who was an English actor with a diverse training, I gradually learned more about his backgrounds and artistic journey, which would teach me a lot that evening.

He had started his acting journey in the UK with text-based theatre, such as Shakespeare and other classics, and later relocated to Poland to gain deeper depth at Gardzienice, in the Centre of Theatre Practices⁷⁴ established by Staniewski,⁷⁵ who collaborated with Grotowski in the 1970s. Here the training was intensely physical and musicality and traditional songs played a key role. The performances he witnessed were technically flawless but yet after a time he grew tired of seeing these works. Most of the times, there was one crucial element missing, and that was story.

When I heard this I felt reassured that I was not the only one with similar notions about the importance of sharing stories. Theatre was still a medium where stories should be passed on. I continued listening.

After Gardzienice he pursued again a different perspective of acting, this time being the art of clowning⁷⁶, rooted in the tradition of Jacques Lecoq. This seemed to have struck an important chord in him, and he described the beautiful fragility and vulnerability of being yourself, fully open, in front of other people.

73 Robert McNeill Orr (1963) is an English actor based in Prague, and Oslo, Norway. He trained as an actor in London at the Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, at the Gardzienice Academy in The Centre of Theatre Practices in Poland, and lastly at Ecole Philippe Gaulier in London. The clowning he studied was rooted in Lecoq's tradition but also influenced by Philippe Gaulier, a master mime who trained under Lecoq in '60s. Robert is also a company member of New International Encounter (Cambridge UK, Oslo Norway) and has taught stage and film acting on programmes in London and Prague.

74 The Centre of Theatre Practices was founded in the village of Gardzienice in Poland in 1977 by Włodzimierz Staniewski. It is a theatre, home to Staniewski's troupe, academy for actor training, and an archive and gallery, still active and receiving students and collaborators. See <<http://gardzienice.org/en/Origins.html>>

75 Włodzimierz Staniewski (1950) is a Polish actor, theatre director, and co-founder of The Centre of Theatre Practices. He collaborated with Grotowski, but eventually left the Laboratory Theatre and founded The Centre in Gardzienice. His troupe's work at Gardzienice is considered experimental theatre with influences from anthropology. Staniewski's approach is to move away from constructed theatre spaces and work together with local communities in rural environments, also as an ongoing project rather than a one-time occurrence. Musicality and traditional folk songs are essential to their work.

76 My only understanding of clowning comes from a clowning module during one semester at DACaP guided by Professor Petra Oswaldová (1978), who used to be a movement, Feldenkrais, and clowning teacher at the department. Prof. Oswaldová studied under Ctibor Turba (1944), a renowned mime actor, at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. As I understand her style of clowning was also rooted in Lecoq's tradition and should be the same to what Robert spoke about. While teaching the basics of clowning, Prof. Oswaldová never directed us to be funny, but rather gently pushed us to be in front of an audience to understand how vulnerable and confusing it can feel. Through gradual encouragement she was searching for things that we found spontaneously and organically playful in the moment. I recall feeling uncomfortable and naked in front of others, but this was exactly the key for play, similarly to Dialogical Acting! For consideration: "Nowhere is this more important than in the territory of clowning, where loss, vulnerability and 'not knowing' are the very preconditions for success and laughter. Philosophically, positively to embrace the possibility of error is to allow for movement, for *play*, for a departure from the norm, so as to be open to the new and the different." S. Murray, *Jacques Lecoq*, 53.

At this point something resonated even stronger within me. What the English actor described was something I had frequently witnessed also in Dialogical Acting. A quality of sincerity, a sense of being yourself, openness, and transparency in front of others. All of this was for me special and something rarely seen. Robert's story reaffirmed the attitude and approach I wanted to have in my work, and that was not to hide from vulnerability.

I became aware I had idolized certain figures and approaches, and I saw that perhaps this had narrowed my view, and even trapped me in my own demands. From this point I started working differently in my rehearsals. Fueled by a clarified definition of authorial presentations and an enlightening conversation with Robert, I felt significantly more at ease within the rehearsal space. I could *use* whatever I was feeling, and I did not have to hide my vulnerability or fear.

This refreshed my position in my piece. I would have to be sincere with the audience about my aim of sharing a story for them, and sincere about that *attempt*. I naturally felt a certain atmosphere with my myth, and I was not going to change it into a parody. The main change was the *way* I used my theatrical tools. I wasn't trying to *convince anyone with great effort* that I knew how to act. I accepted my limits. The focus shifted now to perceiving more of what the audience *needed* in order to be connected with my story. Whether something was theatrical, exaggerated, naturalistic, well-acted, was secondary to the relationship. Any method or approach that would feel inviting and safe for the spectator became essential. Thus the range of the performance also widened.

The final form

I selected "This Must Be the Place", a very dear song to me by Talking Heads, to use as a way to distance myself from the story and to make a juxtaposition with a lighter side. This was a song I had already performed in my first year, but it still remained relevant to me. The lyrics fit well with the theme of the story:

Home, is where I want to be,

Pick me up and turn me around.

I feel numb. Born with a weak heart.

*I guess I must be having fun.*⁷⁷

⁷⁷ "This Must Be The Place (Naive Melody)" is a song by Talking Heads, a renowned American art-pop band, started in mid 70's. This song was released 1983, on the album *Speaking In Tongues*. See <<https://genius.com/Talking-heads-this-must-be-the-place-naive-melody-lyrics>>

Even though the lyrics may seem harsh, the melody and tone of the song is very upbeat and light. Through this song I could organically express a very different side to my piece.

Very often when I rehearsed I started warming up by accompanying Armenian duduk music with my voice and movements. This was pure improvisation and experimentation. The atmosphere that the Armenian instrument created was serene yet haunting, and instantly evoked a meditative quality in my movements and voice. As I was moving in tune with the music and allowing my voice to undulate with the duduk, repeating its notes or harmonizing, I became aware that my voice felt very free. It seemed to me that my movements contributed significantly to the quality of my voice. There was a feeling of freedom in my body, chest, throat and mouth. Somehow the fact that I didn't have to stand while sending out my voice, and instead could release it during movement seemed to help my expression to be relaxed while also improving my pitch. Had I really harbored so much tension in my body when I was still?

Cicely Berry noted an interesting exercise for rehearsing speech: to recite during some physical activity. Even though she meant speaking, upon reading this passage I felt there was something applicable also to singing, and perhaps I had subconsciously recognized this same aspect in my own practice. "You will find that it is always valuable to speak text while doing quite strenuous, yet disciplined, movement. Any movement exercise you know will do [...] The movement itself makes you breathe more freely and releases you physically; it also has the advantage of taking the concentration away from the voice – the over concentration – and so allows the voice to take on textures that are not consciously produced, very often releasing quite rich sound and different rhythms in the process. It is rather like learning to ride a bicycle: to begin with you hold on too tight and you are unable to balance properly, and it is only when you relax that balance becomes natural."⁷⁸ This notion of constructive physical activity also reminded me of our experiments in Michaela Raisová's⁷⁹ speech class. I remember pushing against a wall and counting out loud, or reciting a line from a text. As I was pushing against the wall I noticed a different timbre in my voice. There was a surprising feeling of relaxing something in my voice even in this simple example.

This Armenian music did not serve only as a basis for warming up the body, but also inspired a certain *tone* for my presentation; I started moving in my piece with a similar quality. Bluntly said, one could call it slow, but for me it was about tuning into myself, staying sincere in my expression and respecting the dream-like atmosphere of the story itself. Nature and its

78 Cicely Berry, *Voice and the Actor*, (New York: Wiley, 1973) 31.

79 MA, MFA, Michaela Raisová (1984) is a Czech actress, dancer, pedagogue, and vice-head of the English Authorial Acting programme at DACaP. She teaches us Speech, Interpretation Seminars, Movement and also mentors me and my colleagues in various areas of study.

elements were a strong motif throughout the tale. Wind, and later water, played a crucial part, and this imagery had to be intrinsic in my movements and voice. I began going through the story in a dance-like manner, with fluid and light movements that came naturally as I rehearsed.

Additionally, I began expressing elements in the scenography with my voice, similarly to previous versions. This was meant to help the audience imagine the world in which the story took place. These illustrations were not meant to be strictly naturalistic, and again, *how* I should use these was dependent on my intuition and attunement with the audience. How strong and often does the wind blow? How exaggerated or minimal is my gesture for this? How many hoots does an owl make in the dark forest? What is the intensity of howls coming from the wolves, and how do I *show* a wolf with my hands and feet and my way of running? I realized that if I have myself freedom to be transparent in my *attempt* of showing these things, then I would find more playfulness and sincerity on stage also.

At the same time, I was finding moments when I could assume the role of the Storyteller, speaking directly to the audience. As storytelling had always been important for me I felt it would be a genuine attempt to do that directly also. Rather than using meter, rhyme, or contriving lyricism I composed simple sentences and phrases that could easily be followed. I tried to find minimal but specific details that would shape the imagination of the spectator. Recalling Diego's notion of *active texts*, I examined whether the lines I spoke were energizing, housed a natural rhythmic pulse, or a specific detail that could evoke a larger perspective.

For example, "A deer, standing in a patch of moonlight, gazing at her," or, "there was another tunnel hidden in the shadows, with no light at the end, but with a breeze gently blowing from within." These were simple lines with minimal description but important details that gave the story momentum. They aroused the sense of "what next?" I allowed subtle allegory in moments. I wanted some symbolic imagery for the audience to consider, but understanding the proper balance between confusion and a playful sense of mystery. The main thing that helped me determining figures of speech was when I forgot about *trying to prove that I can be poetic*. What was more important was to tune into the audience and consider how to help them understand the essential details and nuances of the myth.

I also decided to retain the pyramid structure of plot. This way of understanding progression in stories was embedded in me and I also felt it was genuinely effective. However, I realized I had to find Jo, Ha, Kyu, this natural rhythmic progression not only in the plot but also in my actions and presence on stage. As Oida and Marshall said, the beginning, middle, and end of an overall dramatic structure was an essential thing, but in addition to that, every moment and scene on stage had a similar natural pattern. If I was not rhythmically in tune with each scene itself, then the overall dramatic peak of the story would also lose its effect.

As I mentioned earlier, having Vena in the space with me as a Storyteller began to mean that in addition to narration I could also observe the story unfolding in the space with me. Yet between me and Vena, there was an invisible wall. She was not aware that the Storyteller was observing, and I could stay in touch with the audience and *illustrate* to them what I was seeing myself. But was I again merely doing superficial “activities”, or was this different? Were these illustrations actions with a purpose?

What I distilled were two kinds of illustrations: conscious and unconscious. Conscious illustrations had a special quality when done with awareness. I was trying to mimic something someone else was doing in the space (even if imaginary) and show that to the audience. The overall target was to share the *Tale*, with all its depth. If the illustration did not serve this purpose, it was lifeless.

Unconscious illustrations were still “activities”, but empty expressions, movements, or gestures that I was using without *full awareness of why and how*. For example, there was still vagueness during some moments of singing. Outside the dramatic realm, I was conscious of the interplay between the different atmospheres I was creating as a performer. But within the dramatic play I was not aware of a fixed target, and while singing I was not sure *what my purpose was* doing this, or if I was Vena or the Storyteller while singing.

This was still the problem. I had to determine the moments in which I was Vena and when I was not. My piece had three layers now: songs, storytelling, and scenes. In the songs I still wasn't sure who I was. In the scenes I was Vena “in” the scene, similar to my previous version. However, often when I was rehearsing as the Storyteller, engaged in observing and showing Vena's actions, suddenly I would realize that I was so engrossed in the action that I had transitioned automatically into her role. The borders between the Storyteller and Vena were too fluid and it seemed I was going in and out without concrete awareness of *how, why and when*.

When I met with Professor Rut again, his feedback verified the same point. I had to find a conscious structure in which I would know what to adhere to and how to find the distinctions between each layer. I asked myself, why was it important to be Vena at certain key moments? The Storyteller was there to share a story, but what was Vena doing for the audience? Professor Rut also pointed out another consideration: how could I be Vena without falling into caricatures? What could be a simple but *special* quality, I could embody as her?

I had to still refine my piece, but I knew this form was the right one. This would be my final authorial presentation. Soon after my meeting with Professor Rut I showed my work to Emily. This time I felt I was finally bridging the gap between myself and the spectator. While performing I felt the sense that I was *sharing*. It felt I was on the right track, and I could see something new in the reaction of the audience.

A “Holy Trinity“

“...experimenting, perceiving, noticing and realizing what is happening and what is – and responding to that [...] Few know how to experiment.”⁸⁰

At the time of writing this I have one whole week until my final performance. During this time I must do my best to find answer to the questions I still have. However, the purpose of my thesis is not to analyse the final attempt but to document the *process*. Now is a time to draw connecting points between three most essential lessons I learned through my journey. These three lessons represent three aspects of theatre and are very rudimental and basic principles. They were addressed and studied throughout my studies at DACaP, however as I mentioned earlier, it is a different thing to understand only mentally and superficially. Even though these are not exotic things in any way, it took me time to deeply embody and understand these principles in practice. This reminds me of an anecdote: you can point out an open door to another person, but they have to walk through it themselves.⁸¹

Relationship

I could see two distinct ways to share something with the *other*. In one way I may have a rigid expectation of how something should be and turn out. Let’s say that my standpoint is to evoke *catharsis* in the audience. I may have various reasons for maintaining my standpoint. The *Tale* might be precious to me, or a personal source of *catharsis*, which is why I am eager to share the experience with others. It can also be that through witnessing others’ *catharsis* the validity of my own cathartic experience will be reaffirmed.

In any case, I desire to create this experience in others, but what happens if I don’t manage to achieve the result? What if people laugh instead? If I maintain my standpoint I will likely feel the need to protect the validity of my experience because it is so important to me. This is exactly the place where one can become blind or biased. The “truth” is seen only through the personal lens.

80 I.Vyskočil, trans. A. Komlosi, “A Discussion With Ivan Vyskočil“
<<https://www.ivanvyskocil.cz/html/english.html>>

81 This is my interpretation of an anecdote I heard once in a audio recording of a talk given by a philosophical teacher, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895 - 1986). He is well-known for his extraordinary insight and original thinking. From his childhood he was proclaimed by theosophists to become a spiritual “world teacher“ but in 1929 Krishnamurti renounced the role he was expected to play and dissolved the Order that had been created around him. He is one of the most significant role-models to me. Unfortunately I could not find anymore the original source of this anecdote. But here is an online repository and webpage dedicated to his teachings. See <<https://jkrishnamurti.org/about>>

Here is a crucial point of awareness, that is to say, relationship is not *just you*. It is the interplay of you and something else. Relationship has potential risk because it is impossible to predict how the contrasting side will react and how its natural responses will affect you.

On the other hand, the way I communicate, perceive, and respond will change quality if I share my *Tale* with the notion that it can evoke *catharsis*, yet at the same time remain open to something *new* and outside of my standpoint. If I could stay tuned to the audience while sharing my *Tale*, responding and adjusting in accordance to what I sensed from the spectators, then our relationship has the possibility to be fluid and show something new to both sides. If I have a fixed relationship with my own theme, I cannot have enough distance to see things in a new way. If I staid open I might surprise myself and receive a lesson from the audience.

In fact, the only way for me to profoundly and fully share the myth of my *Tale* was in relation and response to the audience. I could not entirely know beforehand what my aim was with my story or with the means of my acting, because only in real-time space, forming a relationship with the spectators, could I begin to sense what the audience might *need from me*, and *from my Tale*. This reminded me of the polarity between *Ying* and *Yang*, in which both sides are not struggling against eachother but rather *define* eachother in a continuous process⁸².

In practical terms this meant that I would determine in relation to the spectators *how* I would do my actions. Naturally, I had always been doing this but now I felt more *conscious* in it. Whether my physical score needed to be more maximized or minimized, whether I should take more time or go faster, whether I should adhere strictly to my structure or follow something more intuitive in the moment, all of this would be defined by my awareness of the audience and what sort of responses I sensed.

I had been concerned about my acting being “truthful“ but would it be *just* for me, or also for the others?

82 To examine more closely polarity and interdependence consider this following excerpt from *Tao Te Ching*, one of the most fundamental, philosophical, by some considered also religious, Taoist texts. It is commonly held that *Lao Tzu*, the ancient and central Chinese sage, wrote it. As elaborated by A. Watts: “‘*To be*’ and ‘*not to be*’ arise mutually; *Difficult and easy* are mutually realized; *Long and short* are mutually contrasted; *High and low* are mutually posited; *Before and after* are in mutual sequence.’ They are thus like the different, but inseparable, sides of a coin, the poles of a magnet, or pulse and interval in any vibration. There is never the ultimate possibility that either one will win over the other, for they are more like lovers wrestling than enemies fighting.” See A. Watts and A-C-L. Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 23.

Truth

Paradoxically, while I was trying my best to find means of expression that were not simply illustrative but full of these “glimpses of truth”, I could not see what this attempt revealed in itself. It revealed the deeper truth of a young actor with extremely high, self-set demands, trying not to be superficial while simultaneously protecting himself from judgment, and above all rigorously attempting to prove something to himself, thus forgetting about the audience.

I could view truth in many different ways. If I set my goal only on revealing something deeply hidden in me and in others, I would indeed be showing a spectacular “moment of truth” as Brook said. But these masters who inspired me had worked diligently for years. I must also accept the truth of my own experience and craft. Was I really only concerned to prove to myself that I could be like them? What about the truth of my relationship on stage with the audience? Hadn't Grotowski also stressed that this was the essence of theatre? If I was to listen to the spectators and be aware how my rehearsed theatrical tools and expressions resonated with them, I might find the “truth” that was valuable and constructive in *this* moment.

I would like to offer a short, playful experiment on “truth” for consideration: Imagine you have never experienced an apple before. I tell you about apples and describe their taste. If you have never tasted apples, how will you perceive their taste from my description? I may attempt to describe that the taste of an apple is of this and that quality, produces such responses in your tongue, is similar to this other fruit, has this type of a fragrance. Although the information is logical to understand I am still not sharing the whole reality of what it actually is. To know the taste fully you have to perceive and digest the sensory information yourself. Even then the quality of taste you perceive may be slightly different from what my taste buds pick up, because of biological differences etc.

Thus how can I express something “true” when the only truth I know is what I am personally aware of? My biological, social, psychological and cultural factors determine the ways I perceive and process reality. In other words, it seems that I can only share a reality that is biased and distorted in one way or another. There would always be a gap between myself and the other that could never be fully crossed. As Donnellan put it, “...we never tell the truth. We cannot properly ‘tell’ the truth, because our words are crude tools to express something, ‘the truth’, which may well exist, but which we cannot define...”⁸³

83 D. Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 4-5.

What if I considered that *this* was the reality? What if this whole unity and totality of all the paradoxical biases, was the most real and tangible thing in itself? This brought me full circle to the function of myths: to help us see not only the two separate polarities, the *Ying* or *Yang*, “red” or “white”, but the *whole*. Thus, if I embraced the fact that it was impossible for me to be fully objective, and that there was a strange “gap” between people that we could not ever fully be crossed; what happened then? What would happen if I was aware and accepted the limit that we all faced?

For me, there was something freeing in this awareness, something playful and light, a marvelous “moment of truth” that we all participated in. This finally brings me to the final principle, and my newest discovery.

Play

The only reality I could present to people would always be biased, with more or less subtlety. As with films, one could only present a “cinematic truth”. This awareness calmed me. I felt that I could view *A Mountain Tale* and myself on stage with more freedom, and with a wider perspective. I felt I could relax more into my goal, accept that I wished for a certain result, but also accept that I might not achieve it. If I did not achieve it, I could accept that I might be upset.

With this awareness I felt I was being sincere with myself, which again reminded me of Dialogical Acting. Whenever I had acknowledged and embraced something, eventually some response had come from a “partner”. As I mentioned earlier, I had witnessed most beautiful moments of life when people became aware of their “blocks” and found a way to embrace them. You could see a burst of spontaneous joy whenever a freeing “partner” appeared after someone acknowledged something. It was wonderful to witness someone surprise themselves. I had seen this happen in conditions where the person was completely attuned and relaxed into the present, without presiding expectations of what *should* happen next, or *how*. It seemed to me, that to be surprised, was to leave restricting intellectualism aside. As Huizinga said: “Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.”⁸⁴

If I did however go on stage and feel blocked or restricted, and I would indeed have a natural compulsion to become free and confident in front of others, then what? Could I

84 J. H. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens, Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 3-4.

acknowledge the fear I experienced? Could I do that in a situation where I had to perform, a situation in which there were very real expectations of me? Being aware of all that, acknowledging this truth, would any “partners” come to the rescue and free me from my binds? The answer to that, frustratingly enough, would only present itself in the moment. As were the rules of Dialogical Acting: don’t try to sketch or plan something in your head before you go into the space. Trust what will come and happen to you naturally. In that case, would I have faith in that while performing my *Tale*?

Eventually on stage, I would indeed have a series of embodied steps and structured actions. However, I always had the chance to still use the principle of Dialogical Acting of being *aware*. As I would begin my piece and start making each “step” I had rehearsed, I had the possibility to stay tuned to the range of subtle impulses and associations naturally arising within me in relation to my *Tale*, in relation to the spectators, and in relation to the *present moment*.

If I trusted the *moment*, had faith in these unfolding relationships and let go of strict notions of *what* and *how* the next step should be, then I could perhaps begin to feel as if I was *floating* down a river, rather than fighting against it. “To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don’t grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax, and float.”⁸⁵ Wouldn’t it be better if I simply stopped analyzing, planning, thinking and *controlling* so hard all the time?⁸⁶

If I allowed myself to relax into the broad awareness that *essentially* I was presenting an illustration with my crude tools, if I felt free to attempt any goal but also accept any failure, if I accepted the totality of what the present moment contained, perhaps there I would realize that above all I was simply *playing*. The relationship which we share in the theatre is in itself an attempt of communication, full of this mysterious thing called “life”, a “live communion”, and also an occasion for the most irrational thing of all: fun.

Don’t I remember having fun whenever I heard an exciting story as a child? Wasn’t I enjoying myself when I shared a thrilling story with my friends? Was there not this great sense of *play*, that we never even thought about?

85 This is a quote from a lecture of Alan Watts on Zen. Knowing how illusive and misleading any definition of Zen could be, he attempted to give a more poetic image instead. I heard this lecture on Youtube, and unfortunately didn’t find information on it’s original source, nor date. However you can listen to it here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF-wKPKSjCc>> see 00:02:20 in the recording.

86 This reminded me of Robert De Niro (1943), a renowned American Hollywood film actor, who once said in a broadcasted interview about acting that: “It’s simpler than you think. It’s very hard for actors - and I get caught up in that myself - where you have to do more, do something - well you *don’t have to do anything!* Nothing, and you’re better of that way, and it’ll work – the way people are in life! They don’t do anything .” See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z4aO940Czc>> Unfortunately I could not find the details of the original source.

Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to offer an honest account of my creative journey with the hope of encouraging and inspiring others on their own journey. I believe I have managed to go deeply into the essential aspects of my process and remain true to what I experienced in those moments. I have also tried to be aware of my personal subjective views and account for them openly, making it clear that this is solely *my* experience and my perspective. I am fully aware that many of my experiences may not make similar sense to everyone, and yet my hope is that some of these reflections would resonate strongly with people who have similar inclinations to mine in the world of theatre. Ultimately however, my aim is to encourage people to explore in their own ways, and to use my accounts only as a springboard for their own process. My process may be copied, but at the end of the day each of us has our own journey and way of seeing things. I strongly encourage people to be themselves and examine, explore, and persevere in the ways that feel uniquely natural and truthful for each one.

Realistically, I am unable to reflect every aspect that influenced or hindered me in my creative work. My attempt of outlining my journey in the style of the previous chapters was to share the most vital moments along my journey and in a sense create a story about *myself*. Although this is an academic paper I did intend to create a narrative-like form so that it would be easier for a reader to immerse themselves in the reflections and perhaps reach a culminating insight through the “build-up”.

I did not mention much about the spectrum of experience, knowledge, and embodied understanding I have gained over the years studying various disciplines at DACaP, and more recently the theatre company Jubilo in Wrocław, Poland. It is important for me to acknowledge both of these here, as they form a solid base for me to build upon. DACaP helped me understand what being an author entails, and Jubilo showed me practically how theatre can connect people. I owe them a great deal.

At the beginning of my thesis I examined the notion of *catharsis* and proposed that as my main motivating force in storytelling. However by the end of my paper I became more relaxed and simply opening myself to the element of *play*. For further exploration I would be interested to examine if there is something connecting these two elements. Are *catharsis* and *play* different from one another, or do they share something under the surface?

Furthermore, I would have wished to examine more thoroughly the practical applications and results of my newly-embodied discoveries in rehearsals and performances

— the “Holy Trinity” of relationship, truth, and play. I felt a great sense of renewal while forming my awareness of these principles in a theoretical and philosophical realm, but I still have little practical experience of them. With more time I would wish to examine and reflect how they influence my work in real time and space, and especially in front of spectators. Is my understanding embodied?

However even in the present moment I have noticed that outlining thoroughly the different stages, moments, and details in my journey has noticeably influenced me as an actor. For instance when I rehearse nowadays I feel a sense of play and freedom I did not experience before. It seems that I am able to let go of strict notions of *how* I should be rehearsing. This means I can be more present and allow myself to experience different playful ways of exploration, rather than one rigid image of how I have to portray myself and my actions. I also feel more excited to go on stage because I am not compulsively focused on *goals*. I have come to understand that a more constructive goal is to focus on the relationship with the audience in the moment and how each affects the other. This brings a different quality of lightness and sincerity in my attitude. I can only hope that these insights will be embodied when I finally go on stage with my *Tale*. That remains to be seen.

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Appendix: here is the original version of “A Mountain Tale“, the story that I wrote.

Working title: **A Mountain Tale**

Twilight. A fire. People gathered around. Community. Last of them sit down. Everyone is huddled close to each other by the fire. An old Elder comes forward. People shush. He sits down.

“This is a story about a young spirit, a woman, from our tribe, who was looking for something precious on a Mountain far away... “

ACT 1 – DEPARTURE:

1. Call to Adventure

Vena, a girl in her mid-twenties, is at the top of a Mountain peak, standing next to the edge of a cliff. She admires the view around her. The endless forests and fields, a river, and the rest of the Mountain range. She examines something in her hand. An acorn... She closes her hand around it and places her hand on her heart.

She pockets the acorn and sits down against a tiny ragged tree growing near the edge. It’s roots go inside the Mountain through a crevice in the cliff. Vena closes her eyes, breathes, and just sits there. The wind starts blowing hard. After awhile she opens her eyes and is about to get up when suddenly she notices something.

Close to where she was sitting there is a hollow in the bark. Inside, there is a tiny fragile flower growing. She stares at it, transfixed, then cautiously reaches in and picks the flower. While she is getting up something drops from her pocket and falls into the crevice where the roots go down into the Mountain. Vena examines her pocket, and realises it was her acorn.

She goes on her knees and covers her face with her hands.

2. Refusal of the Call:

There are dark storm clouds in the distance. Vena is following a path leading down the Mountain. Up ahead there is a cabin. She comes to the porch and is about to open the door when suddenly she notices again something.

There is a man, a traveler, with a big trekking bag on him, coming up the path from below, and noticing the cabin. He comes closer and Vena turns towards him. They greet.

“Good day!” The man exclaims.

“Good day.” Vena replies.

“I’m travelling here to see the Mountain. I heard down at the village that I could possibly ask for lodging here closer to the peak?”

Vena hesitates,

“You would find better accomodation down in the village. It would suit you far better.”

She points to the dark clouds in the distance.

“Besides, it’s very foolish to try ascend the Mountain in such weather...”

The man nods.

“That’s very understandable...” He hesitates. Vena sees that.

“Is there something else I can help you with?”

“The villagers told me of an old man living up here...”

Silence. The man gestures with his hands towards the cabin.

“Would you happen to know anything about him, or I mean... doesn't he live here?”

“He's not in at the moment.”

“Would you happen to know when would he be?”

“Unfortunately I don't know.”

The man looks dissapointed.

“I really don't. I'm waiting for him myself.”

The man nods, and gives a dry smile.

“Well... I thank you for your help. May you have a lovely rest of your day...”

“Thank you, and for you too! May the clouds pass soon!”

The man turns around and starts going back down.

Vena goes inside and immediately picks wood and puts it in an old wood-heated stove. She picks up a kettle and pours some gathered water into it. She looks for matches, finds them, lights a fire in the stove. Takes out the flower, examines it. Looks out of the window. The man is descending out of view.

-

The sun is setting down. Vena is kindling a little fireplace of the cabin. She sits down on an armchair. On the small table next to her she has a steaming mug and a folded patterned cloth. She unfolds the cloth and reveals the flower she picked up on the peak. It has little white petals, and a center that has a silvery, moon-like tone, and a faint dark blue hue around it's rim. She raises it to her nose, her lips, touches it's petals with her lips... then opens her mouth... about to eat it... closes her mouth. Places the flower back on the cloth. Takes a sip from her mug. Looks into emptiness. Gets up and abruptly goes to the kitchen, then comes back with a glass of water. Puts the flower into the water. Leans back in her chair, and examines the flower. Leans back her head. Closes her eyes... sighs...

FADE OUT

3. Meeting The Mentor:

Sound of rain. Night. Rain is tapping the roof. Gently glowing coals in the fireplace. Vena is sleeping in her armchair with a large cotton cloth over her. A figure walks past her. Sits down on a chair opposite her. She opens her eyes slightly. Dim. Can't see properly. Closes them. There is an old man sitting in the chair opposite her. He kneels down closer to the fireplace. He blows into the coals and they start glowing brighter.

“You went up the Mountain...” The old man says.

“I was looking for you!”

“Were you really?”

Pause.

“You miss him.” He adds.

“Yes.” She replies.

Hesitation.

“Climbing up *our* mountain. Sitting in our treehouse... waiting for the animals... and eating oranges. Sitting there, waiting and eating oranges...” She continues.

The old man keeps blowing into the embers, making the glow stronger. He smiles.

“I miss oranges too.”

“We used to make tea from the orange peels.”

“You can brew orange peels?”

“I didn’t believe it either, until Mayam showed me.”

Pause.

“There is something else, isn’t there?” He asks.

“I picked a flower... ” Vena replies.

Pause.

“It was growing inside an old ragged tree...” She adds.

“Those flowers only blossom in the shadows...” He replies.

“I’m tired of riddles.”

“This is your dream. You are creating it yourself.”

“I lost my acorn! But I’m sure you know it already, as everything else.”

Pause.

“Did you make a wish?” He asks.

“Not yet...”

Another pause.

“Have you ever tried to make an acorn grow?”

“No. We just collected them with mom and granny.”

“Where did your acorn fall?”

“Through a hole in the ground.”

“So in that case the Mountain has your acorn... It is safe within.”

“Thank you.”

“Unfortunately I can’t give it to you. That is something you have to ask from the Mountain.”

The fire blazes. The old man stands up.

“The Mountain doesn’t have the... easiest of characters. Perhaps it would like to hear an apology...”

“When will you be back?”

“There are still things I need to tend do... But there is someone else... Unfortunately, you were not very kind with him today...”

“What can I do?”

“In the future treat your guests honorably. Haven’t people been hospitable towards you on your journeys?”

“Yes...”

“And remember don’t lie, or you will be turned into a...”

Sound of a CROAK.

4. Crossing the First Threshold:

Vena wakes up. Dim. Coals are gently glowing. Everything is still. The rain has stopped. Occasional tap of a waterdrop. She gets up from her chair. Stumbles, as if drunk. Turns her head. Sees a frog on the floor. She rubs her eyes. The frog is still there. Sitting next to her water glass that is turned over. Water on the ground. The flower. She looks at the door. It's shut. She picks up the flower. The frog hops away. Vena folds the flower back in its cloth on the table. Turns towards the frog. Goes and picks it up and opens the door. Frogs croaking. A concert. Full moon.

She walks off the porch onto the trail. Looks around. Croaks. Croaks. She walks forward. Stops. Places the frog down to the ground. It starts hopping forward into the darkness. She hesitates, then starts walking after it. Listens. Walks. Listens. Walks. Listens. Walks. She leaves the other frogs behind and sees her frog hopping ahead.

Sudden stop. She hears a rustle.

Turns to look around. Nothing. Starts moving again but suddenly realizes that not far ahead there is a man lying on the ground, unconscious. Vena runs to him and kneels over him. It's the man from before.

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Back at the cabin. He is shivering. Vena is removing his wet clothes. Warm bath. She helps him get in. He is barely conscious. Slowly starts shaking less. Relaxes.

"Hey, hey!" Vena talks to him in a silent voice, trying to see if he's conscious.

He doesn't answer to her voice but begins relaxing more. Leans back his head. Mutters something in his sleep. Vena gets up and goes away into the kitchen. Boils some water, and sets about to prepare a hot brew. She peers into the bathroom. The man is still sleeping. Vena hesitates, then leaves the kitchen, and goes and picks up the cloth with the flower folded inside. She places it in her pocket.

Vena is again on the porch and peers into the darkness. Nothing.

Comes back in and sees from afar into the bathroom, where the man is sliding into the water. She runs forward just as his head goes underneath the surface. He starts trashing and she helps him up above the surface and he gasps for air.

"Uma!"

He looks at the woman. They both back away.

"I found you unconscious outside! You're safe, you're safe!"

He takes his time to take everything in.

"I saw you earlier!"

"Yes, you came by my lodge."

He relaxes.

"Wait..." She goes quickly into the kitchen and brings the mug.

"Drink this. It will help you."

She gives him the mug, then turns slightly away, sitting on a stool facing the other direction trying to give him privacy. He tries to raise the mug, but seems weak.

She turns around and comes to help him take a sip. She tries to keep her eyes away from his private area. He manages to take a sip with her help. Vena stays closer to him and helps him get a more stable sitting position in the bath.

“What is this?”

“It’s against poison.”

“How do you know I’ve been poisoned?”

Hesitation.

”Well, I didn’t see any marks on you of an attack, or you falling into a crevice and breaking something, yet you were lying unresponsive in the cold pouring rain at night. If you’d be drunk I’d have found a bottle or smelled it on your breath. So I guess you must have eaten something that grows on the Mountain.”

Silence.

“What’s your name?” She asks.

“Danim.”

She offers her hand. He takes it.

“I’m Vena.”

“You’ve lived here for a long time?” He asks.

Silence.... She hesitates and avoids the question.

“Do you wanna tell me what happened?”

He hesitates. Looks out of the window.

“The rain has stopped...” He replies.

“These herbs won’t be enough. I need to know what poisoned you in order to know what to give you next.”

He examines whether he’s able to get up. It seems to be a big effort. He comes back to sitting.

“I ate a flower.” He says finally.

Pause...

“A flower?” She asks.

“I didn’t go back to the village. I went up the Mountain. I wanted to go all the way up but the clouds were approaching faster than I expected. You were right. They were gathering above me and I decided to turn around again and head back finally. As I was descending back down I realized however that I had lost the trail...”

Pause.

“While I was searching for it I heard something. It was very faint, couldn’t quite make it. Sort of a whimper. Like of an animal... I followed the sound and that’s when I suddenly found a cave.”

“A cave???”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never seen a cave on this Mountain.”

“Well, I found one... I heard the whimper coming from within. I stood there unsure what to do... I was about to go in but... at the threshold there was this neat bundle of tiny flowers.”

“How did they look like?”

Hesitation.

“Tiny white petals, and the center resembled the moon... Also, it seemed to me that each flower had a different colored rim around the center... I’m not sure. I didn’t examine them for long... I just took one, and started walking away...”

“You took the flower?”

“I wanted to get back to the village as soon as possible. It was getting dark and I got a strange feeling from the cave and wanted to be far away from it. But even so, as I was walking I felt... I felt I had done something wrong... It’s stupid I know... But I stopped, and decided I’d go back and return the flower. It’s strange... I was walking back when suddenly I heard a howl. And then another responded. I forgot about the stupid cave. All I wanted was to get back to the village alive. I ran as fast as I could, and as I was running I started hearing more howls around me. I never looked back and I never saw them, but I felt them. It was already dark, and I couldn’t see properly and didn’t know how far away I was, but I started feeling I might not make it...”

Pause.

“What happened then?”

Danim hesitates. Adjusts his position.

“It seems I can move better now...” He says.

“What happened then?” Vena asks again.

Danim stops moving and considers.

“Have you heard the stories?”

Vena hesitates also. Finally she replies.

“Stories about flowers that grow hidden here on the Mountain that can grant wishes?”

Danim nods, and then continues.

“I ate the flower and just kept running. At some point this dreadful wave of tiredness overcame me. I kept on going but my feet started getting sluggish and at some point I tripped badly. I hit the ground and remember feeling the rain starting to pour on my face. Then all went black... when I woke up I was here...”

Pause.

“Strange dreams...” He mutters under his breath then looks up at Vena.

“How did you find me?” He asks.

The girl hesitates.

“I was having a walk and stumbled upon you...”

Silence. She gets up.

“I will prepare you something more.”

She is walking away.

“Who is the old man?” Danim asks suddenly.

Vena stops.

“You are in his house... But he is not here... He is out in the mountains doing his business. We must wait for his return...”

She is about to walk away, but Danim stops her again.

“But who is he?”

Vena hesitates.

“He’s name is Grigor. He’s an old ranger. He teaches people about the plants, animals, and passes here on the Mountain. I stumbled upon him four months ago in the forest while he was releasing a deer from a trap. I helped him and he invited me to stay if I liked and learn more about the wilderness here.”

Danim stares at her. She goes away. After a moment she returns to the doorway.

“I don’t actually know how I found you. But before that I had a dream of Grigor. He told me I had not treated you well, and he also told me not to lie. The truth is... I followed a frog in the night and then suddenly there you were.”

Silence. Both of them are awkward. Danim looks down.

“And you don’t know when he’ll be back...”

Vena shakes her head. Silence. After a moment she continues.

“I’m sorry about not taking you in before...”

Danim gestures with his hand in a dismissive way.

“It’s alright...”

He hesitates, then takes the towel on the stool next to him. Vena observes him shyly, takes a step closer.

“It’s better that you take it easy.”

“The flower didn’t poison me.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

She moves ahead, but he is getting up naked anyway. She opens her mouth to say something but doesn’t. Danim grabs the towel, and glances at Vena. She turns around and leaves the room closing the door behind. She is moving away when she remembers something, comes back to the door.

“I’ll leave you some fresh clothes behind the door.” Exclaims from behind the door.

She takes quick steps away.

-

Bedroom. She finishes preparing it. Danim comes to the doorway in his new clothes. Vena straightens herself, glances at him, and smiles faintly.

“I hope he won’t mind...” Danim says.

“I prepared his bedroom also for you.”

Danim nods.

“Thank you.”

Vena nods. Silence.

“You should rest.”

“Thank you. I guess you should too. ”

-

Night. Vena is lying in her bed. Awake. Danim is lying in his bed. Awake. He hears something. Gets up. Sneaks out from his room and almost bumps into Vena. He yelps, curses in his own language and jumps back.

“What are you doing?”

Vena lights up a candle. She is in full clothing.

“I need to go to that cave.”

He hesitates.

“It’s not safe. There are wolves.”

“There are no wolves on this Mountain.”

“I heard them.”

“Grigor has never mentioned anything about wolves to me! There’s not enough for them to eat round here.”

“Well you said you’ve never seen a cave either, and yet, I assure you, it’s there.”

“So point me to the direction.”

“I’ll take you there.”

“No!”

Silence.

“Why do you need to go up there?” He asks.

Hesitation.

“I picked the same flower today and lost something because of that...” She says.

Pause.

“No-one else lives up on this Mountain. If you really found a cave, and a bundle of these flowers, that’s no coincidence. It might be a sign from Grigor. And if there are wolves, it means he’s alone with them...” She continues.

“I shouldn’t have taken that flower either. I have as much reason to go there as you do. I can help.” Danim replies.

Hesitation.

“You’re gonna need something warmer than that.” She finally concludes.

5. Belly of the Whale

Full moon. Clear night-sky. Atmospheric night soundscape. Serene. They are walking upwards through thicket and shrubs.

“Is it far off still?” Vena asks.

“I don’t know, it’s hard to say when I’m not being chased by wolves and running down a mountain for my life.”

Pause.

“Why was it so important for you to go up the Mountain anyway?” Vena asks suddenly.

“You found yourself here also, didn’t you?” Danim replies.

Silence. After a moment, he continues.

“I was sent here by the Elders of my tribe. They told me this is a... Holy Mountain...”

“A Holy Mountain?”

“Yes... A place where one goes when you have something to...”

“... find.” Vena concludes for him.

They glance at each other, then away. Danim continues.

“To be honest, I don’t know exactly how will I find anything here but... my Elders have never been wrong...”

Pause.

“Why did you do it? Why did you climb here?” He asks.

“It’s difficult to explain...” Vena says and stops beside a tree. She goes to the tree, takes out a small knife and cuts the resin from the bark.

“I don’t think we have anything else on the schedule right this minute...”

She takes out a jar from her bag, offers it to Danim, and passes the resin to him. He proceeds to put the resin in the jar.

“I’m sorry, you don’t have to...” He adds.

“My Elders didn’t send me here. They didn’t get the chance. I ran away from my tribe...” She suddenly replies.

They continue moving. Vena considers.

“I came to this Mountain because...”

Flashback: two little kids, Vena and Mayam, climbing a tree on top of a cliff rising above a vast forest. The tree grows near a precipice. The kids climb the tree and reach a treehouse. Get in. Peer out of the treehouse with mouths open in awe.

“As kids, me and my best friend, used to always climb this big cliff in our village and call it the *Mountain*. The forest extended onto it and we built our tree house on a big oak by the precipice. We used to just sit there and wait for animals to come by. Spotting different birds, snakes, hare, foxes, deer... Wolves... We came up with this story about a Master, who lived on a Mountain, and who could transform into animals during the night but by dawn he had to return home and return to his sleeping human body, otherwise he would be trapped as an animal forever...”

Pause. She goes again to a tree and cuts resin off the bark. Danim is silent. Observes her. Takes the resin. Vena considers again.

“When we grew up it became his dream to come here one day. He had heard about this place and about Grigor from one of our tribe Elders. They said he was the best ranger, and he could teach everything about animals. It was Mayam’s dream to come here and become a ranger...”

They continue walking. Vena stares ahead.

“But he left his dream for the sake of something else. That’s why he can’t come here anymore. But I can, and I’m doing it for him...”

She turns away from Danim and goes to another tree to cut off some resin. Danim stays a bit behind.

“That sounds beautiful...” He says.

Vena gives him the resin again.

“May I ask what is it that you’re looking for up here?”

“Forgiveness.”

Vena looks at him. Danim hesitates.

“Well, more like I was sent here to find out if I’m able to forgive...” He adds.

“Yourself?”

“Someone...”

Silence.

“My to-be-wife.” He concludes.

Vena nods.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to...”

Danim motions with his hand again. Looks around. They stop.

“I think it’s time to leave the trail.” He says.

They walk off the path.

“I’m sorry I don’t do small talk very well...” Vena says.

“Neither do I...”

Suddenly Vena stops them. Danim is confused. She shushes him. Points to something. It’s an owl sitting on a branch in front of them. They smile.

“Wow...unbelievable...” Danim says. Vena nods. After a moment they continue walking and Danim continues his story.

“I didn’t know what to do upon coming here... My Elders never told me how would I... you know... find an answer to my question... But then on the road I heard a story about these flowers...” “

Pause.

“I heard that story also while traveling here...” Vena says.

Danim nods.

“...and then I came to the village today and heard of this old man, Grigor... Something about the way people were speaking about him...” He continues thoughtfully.

Vena smiles.

“Is he the Master from your story?” He asks and grins.

“Maybe...” Vena grins too.

Silence. Danim continues.

“I wasn’t sure which one to look for; the flowers or this... person... but the flowers just presented themselves before me...”

Vena stops Danim. They look at each other. She isn’t sure what to say.

“What is it?” He asks.

“Just be careful.” She finally says.

“I’ve been here only four months but... The Mountain has a way of knowing what you need, and in some moments it might present that to you. But what you need might not always be what you want.” Vena concludes.

“You mean... The Mountain is testing you?”

They look at each other but suddenly Vena’s expression changes. She sniffs the air.

“Do you smell that?”

Danim’s expression changes also. He is excited.

“Follow your nose!”

They start moving hurriedly and after a moment see the cave. They come in front of it and just stand beholding it.

“ ‘When in doubt, always follow your nose’, as a wise man once said.” Danim says cheerfully.

Vena goes cautiously forward and picks up the bundle of flowers. They examine them. Each has a different colored rim around the center. They look at the cave.

“A part of me thought I had imagined the whole thing...” Danim says.

Vena places the flowers in a pouch on her shoulder bag, then starts looking for something in silence. She picks two large sticks off the ground, then takes out a big bundle of cloth from her bag. Motions Danim to give her the jar. He gives it to her. She gives him another knife.

He observes and copies. They both start smearing the resin on the cloth. Silence. After that’s done Vena rips pieces of the cloth and wraps them around the two stick heads. When she’s finished she looks at the cave, and stays kneeled down. Danim observes her.

“You know we don’t have to...”

Suddenly Vena bows her head, mutters something, makes a hand gesture, then stands up and goes closer to the cave entrance. She kneels down closer to the entrance where there’s more dry ground, and takes out her flint stones. She starts sparking them.

“Back in my tribe, I never was the one who heeded well to what the Elders said. But something always struck me when they spoke of...” She hesitates.

“Spirits and ghosts...” Danim finishes her sentence.

“... that dwell inside lonely places like this. ‘Never enter a cave without first paying your respects to the inhabitants that may dwell inside, for it is not in vain that haunted spirits choose to remain in the dark.’”

She takes a pause from the flint stones. Danim comes and crouches next to her. Helps her out.

“Back in my tribe they used to always warn not to look into a reflection inside a cave. I never fully understood what that meant... They just said they could lead you astray and that you might never find a way back...”

They manage to ignite one of the torches. “But to be honest...” Danim stands up with the burning torch.

“I’ve never really believed in afterlife...” He offers to ignite Vena’s torch. She refuses with a gesture.

“Later...”

She stays in her place.

“Could you please do it for me...” She asks silently.

Danim hesitates, then goes on one knee, does a hand gesture, and mutters quietly something. Both of them stand up and look at each other. Vena nods thankfully. He takes out the knife and is about to offer it back to Vena but she shakes her head.

“Keep it. Just in case...”

Pause.

“Thank you for talking to me.” He suddenly says to Vena. She nods, and smiles.

“Thank you also.”

They look at the cave.

“Are you ready?” She asks. He nods.

“Let’s do this.” He enters the cave.

Vena takes a step to follow when suddenly she hears a rustle. She looks behind, but doesn’t see anything. She enters.

ACT II - INITIATION

6. Road of Trials

They move through the dark corridor deeper inside the Mountain. After a moment he stops her.

“Let’s stick close...”

They start walking again, huddled closer to each other but stop soon very abruptly. Danim retracts his step in a rush. There is a great black puddle that extends to the sides. They stand still.

“What is that?” He asks.

Vena shakes her head and looks ahead. Darkness.

“I don’t know...” She replies.

Danim tries carefully if his step is wide enough to reach the other side but it’s not. Vena doesn’t say anything, but instead picks a rock and tosses it into the puddle. The rock makes a splash and disappears, but makes an immediate thud at the bottom, so it doesn’t seem to be deep. They look at each other. Both of them take few steps back. Danim starts running and makes a leap. He reaches the other end although his foot slips and brushes the surface lightly. It gets slightly stained. Vena has a weird sensation... *some optical illusion...*

Danim turns towards her and reaches out with his arms. Vena runs after him, leaps, and during mid-air she again has a queer sensation *as if the pool extended, or seemed smaller standing from there but while jumping realizing its actually bigger... like an optical illusion...*

She reaches the other end barely and one of her feet slip. She falls backwards but Danim manages to grab her but her momentum makes them both go over the edge. Vena splashes with her both feet into the pool and Danim with just one. He pulls her out. She catches her breath and looks at her shoes. They leave stains on the ground, and so does Danim, however more with one foot, less with the other.

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay! It’s nothing.” He says. Silence.

“It might be blood...” Vena says. Silence.

“Blood from what?” He asks.

Vena shakes her head. They look ahead and see that on the ground there are already wet tracks leading further in.

“Someone is here?” He asks again.

“It looks like it might be two sets of tracks...” Vena replies.

Hesitation.

“Let’s stay close...” Danim repeats. They move forward.

They start moving forward and after awhile stop as the tunnel separates into two separate tunnels going left and right.

“That’s convenient...” Danim says. “We just both go separate ways and never see each other again.”

“Or we choose one together...”

“That sounds better.”

“But these tracks...” She comes closer.

“They go separate ways.” Danim says.

Vena is silent for a moment.

“The trail going right is lighter...” She says and then looks to the left.

“And the left...” She says but doesn’t finish as she observes something confusing.

Danim peers cautiously into the right tunnel, takes a whiff.

“Your nose smell any leads?”

Vena takes a whiff at the left one. Shakes her head to Danim. She kneels down to observe the tracks on the left closer. Danim observes her.

“We don’t have much time with these torches...”

“I have enough cloth.”

“But if it *does* run out?”

Pause. Suddenly Danim reaches for her shoulder bag.

“May I?” He asks.

Vena nods. He takes out the bundle of flowers.

“What if we left these here to guide us back by their scent? Here, smell them. Is it strong enough?”

“We don’t know how far this cave goes...”

Hesitation.

“Unless we eat them...” He adds.

Vena looks at him.

“Do you really believe it?”

Danim is silent. After a moment he continues.

“I don’t know. But I do know when I was running away from those wolves I made a wish. And here I am.”

“But none of the stories actually explain what to do with the flowers once you find them, do they? Even if it was true, how do you know eating is actually the right way?”

“It just felt logical, I mean that’s what you do with other plants that people claim to be magical, right?”

“You don’t believe in ghosts but you believe in this?”

“Well what harm would it do in any case?”

Vena raises her hand for them to be silent. They look at the flowers. There’s five. Danim gives her one, and holds another for him.

“One wish for each that we get out of here alive.” He says. Vena nods.

“No cheating!” He whispers, as a joke. Vena gives him a glare. Danim’s expression changes.

“What?” She asks.

“I’m just thinking is this actually the right wish? I mean, what are we doing here?”

Silence. He continues.

“You said it’s possible that Grigor is somewhere here, but you also said you lost something...”

Vena bites her lip. Danim looks at the remaining three flowers.

“After this we would have three more wishes... Don’t you think each of us should take one more and ask for whatever it is each of us is looking for?”

Silence.

“No.” Vena finally replies.

“Why?” Danim asks.

“Because we don’t know what is out there and what is the best way of using them.” She says.

Suddenly they hear an echo of a whimper. They turn their heads abruptly towards the two tunnels.

“Which one did it come from?” Danim asks.

“I told you we shouldn’t babble here!” Vena moves closer to the two entrances.

“No you didn’t!” Danim follows.

Vena keens her ears to the left one. Danim does the same with the right one. Nothing. They step back.

“I have a feeling...” Vena says slowly.

“What?” Danim asks.

“That I should take left...”

Danim makes a frustrated gesture.

“Why would you want to go separate ways suddenly? Don’t you find it risky at all? You said yourself we don’t know what’s out there.”

Vena shushes him with a gesture.

“Keep your voice down! It’s disturbing the...”

“What???”

Silence.

“How do you know you have to go left?” He asks sternly.

“The tracks... I dipped into the puddle... stronger than you did...”

“And?”

“And these tracks leading to the left look more like mine...”

“But that would mean...” Danim hesitates, then the realization comes. He is clearly frustrated.

“That’s... How can *you trust that?*”

Echo of a whimper again. They look around, then at each other again.

“It makes sense! We’re both here looking for different things!”

“How can you say that when you don’t even know...” He stops.

Silence.

“I know what I am looking for.” Vena answers.

“Why don’t you take the flower then? What is stopping you from wishing what you want?”

Silence.

“I’m gonna go left.”

“What about the flowers then?”

“Is that all you’re thinking about?”

Echo of a whimper again. Suddenly Danim moves to the right tunnel and makes a loud call. Vena is startled and Danim also by the surprisingly loud echo. They shun away from the tunnels.

“What is wrong with you? Are you completely mad??”

“Sometimes you have to call in order to get an answer!”

“What does that even mean?!”

“I was just trying to help...”

“You’re gonna get us killed!”

“Well if you had been a tad bit more graceful with your toes maybe you wouldn’t have gotten that nonsense into your head that your following your own footsteps!”

Silence.

A whimper. Danim looks at her in surprise. He calls out again into the right cave. Again the sound of a whimper. Danim looks back at Vena. She looks away. Silence.

“I’m sorry about what I said.”

“I shouldn’t have dragged you with me...” Vena replies.

“You didn’t drag me...” He hesitates, and takes a step closer.

“I’m doing a lousy job searching the thing I need... I’m sorry Vena.” He says.

Vena turns to look at him.

“I’m looking for an acorn that Mayam gave me. He was my to-be-husband... and also my best friend. We came up with the story as kids, and it was his dream to come to this Mountain.”

Silence. She takes out from her pocket the cloth with the flower. Folds it open and reveals the slightly wilted flower from before.

“This is the flower I picked today.”

Danim observes it. Vena folds it back and puts the cloth back in her pocket. Silence. Danim examines his bundle of flowers.

“I don’t deserve these...” He says.

Vena abruptly slaps his arm.

“Oh for pity’s sake!” She cries out and comes closer to him, taking two flowers from the bundle, one for her, one for him.

“Let’s do this.” She says.

She raises the flower. Danim hesitates, but after a moment raises his flower also.

“Each of us wishes to get out of this hole alive.” He says.

She gives him a look, asking whether his sure. He nods.

“There will be time for the rest.” He says. Both of them nod.

They both eat the flowers. Chew them. Danim offers her the rest of them. She shoves them back to him.

“Put them in the bag and keep it.”

“No, but you’re going...”

“I’m coming with you. If there is a wounded animal we might be able to use them... Keep it.”

Danim is silent for a moment. Vena punches him in the arm.

“Ow!”

“Let’s move! Light up my torch! Your’s is dying...”

He hides the flowers away. They move to the mouth of the right tunnel. Danim lights up Vena’s unlit torch as his is dying. He then takes out fresh cloth, and starts making a new bundle on his torch.

“If there is an animal wouldn’t Grigor also be there more likely?” He asks.

“We’re about to find out.”

“Are you sure about this?”

He stands up. Vena looks at him.

“No...”

She enters, and Danim follows.

-

Back at the bonfire the Elder pauses his story. Sun has set down. It’s dark.

“Do you think Vena chose the right road?” He asks from the people.

*Some nod, some shake their heads.
Someone raises their hand. The Elder nods at them.*

“Maybe it doesn’t matter so much which road they chose, but what’s more important is to stay together and stick to what you choose.”

“Well said...” The Elder replies.

“But how can you truly know if you made the right turn if you never go and see what’s in the other one?” Someone else suddenly adds.

The Elder smiles and nods silently.

“That is the question...”

-

The tunnel goes downward and becomes tighter, narrower, lower. It’s hard to breathe. They have to crouch. They stop. The dark tracks continue into a narrower and narrower passage, merely a hole. Some light is however entering from there. Danim crouches and peers into it. Vena crouches behind holding the torch.

“I don’t know where is it coming from but there is some light...”

He gestures Vena to give him the torch, after which he moves a bit further in. He stops soon, and comes back.

“I don’t know if it’ll be possible to use these torches... I think we might have to crawl through...”

Vena is silent. She looks around herself. Finds a cranny and lodges the torch into it so that it holds the source of light.

“Let’s leave this here just in case...”

“Are you alright?” Danim asks her.

“Yes Danim.”

There is an echo of a whimper again, coming from the other side.

“You don’t like tight places?”

“It’s alright.”

“We can go back if you...”

“No, we should move forward.”

Pause.

“Would you like me to go first?”

“Please.”

“Please tell me if something...”

“I will. Thank you.”

Pause. Danim starts moving forward holding the unlit torch. Vena follows, trying to maintain her breathing calm.

Flashback: Vena, as a small kid, climbing up the same oak by the edge of the cliff. She’s pushing herself up, holding onto branches. She passes the treehouse which is situated not far above the ground.

As they move along, the tunnel gets even tighter. Vena's breathing becomes heavier. Danim has to crawl forward on his belly. Vena follows his example but with more effort.

"I can see the light stronger!"

Danim moves forward ahead of her. She stays in the darker shadows. Turns to look back. The flame is flickering weaker. Vena turns her head towards Danim. Her breathing is shallow. She observes the rock walls. It seems as if it's breathing.

"Danim!"

"We're almost there Vena! I'm nearly through!"

Vena reaches the near top of the tree and lodges herself in a stable way between branches and sits down. Down below a male figure runs to the tree. It is her father, Edil. He calls out to her from below. Vena shakes her head.

"Danim! I... I can't!"

"What's happening?" Danim stops.

Vena struggles to crawl forward.

"I can't move!"

"I'm nearly out. Are you able to wait for just a minute? I can pull you through then?"

Vena's breath is nervous. The mountain walls seem to be breathing, enclosing on her.

"Vena?"

Her mother, Ayme, runs to her father. She looks up and calls out to Vena also. The little girl is high up, ignoring them, instead admiring a birds nest. Her father grabs hold of a branch and is about to start pulling himself up but the mother holds him back and says something to him. He brushes her hand off and gestures upwards in frustration. The mother shakes her head. Meanwhile in the background a boy appears in the scene. Little Mayam. He looks up at the tree.

"Vena, are you alright!?"

"Yes!" She shouts. After a moment continues hesitantly.

"I'm fine! I just... my legs feel really numb..."

"Mine as well but we can do this! Push with your arms!"

"Okay, you can do this..." She whispers and starts pushing forward.

"I'm almost through! My hand is out! I'm going out!"

Danim's voice echoes ahead and suddenly the light at the end of the tunnel disappears. It becomes dark.

"Danim!" Vena screams.

The rock walls make a tremor and some dust and rock rubble fall down on her. She gasps in panic. The walls seem to close in on her.

Little Mayam runs forward for the tree and jumps up grabbing hold of a branch. He starts climbing it immediately. Vena's parents notice him too late. They run after to catch him but he's too fast. He starts climbing in a rushed manner. Vena looks down. Shouts at Mayam, but he keeps climbing up.

Suddenly there is light, coming through at the end of the tunnel. Danim's face is there.

"I'll pull you through! You're almost there!"

He reaches out with his hand.

Young Vena stands up between the branches and shouts again to Mayam. He stops and says something to her. Pleads her. Points down to her parents. Vena shakes her head. Mayam offers calmly his hand. The parents down below are still, observing... Mayam and Vena look at each other. Vena hesitates. Suddenly Vena's father grabs hold of a branch and starts climbing the tree also. The mother looks away in distress. Mayam and Vena see the father coming up. Mayam keeps offering his hand to Vena.

"Take my hand! You can do it!" Danim urges.

Vena reaches out with her hand. Their fingertips touch ever so slightly.

Vena turns away and starts climbing even higher. Mayam goes after her. While she is reaching the top, she grabs hold of a branch and shakes off accidentally a couple of acorns. They fall down. She turns to look behind her.

"I can't feel my fingers!"

They grab each others fingers clumsily.

"It's alright! Just push Vena! We can do this!"

Suddenly there is another tremor in the rock walls. Rubble falls down again. Vena whimpers.

"Push Vena!"

"I'm trying!"

Vena sees the acorns fall towards Mayam's face. One of them hits him square in the middle between his eyes, and makes him lose foothold on a branch. He starts falling. Vena screams and shoots out her arm.

The rubble falls more intensely. "No!" She screams and retracts her hand.

"Vena!" The tunnel starts shaking and Vena starts going back.

"I had you! I had you Vena! For God's sake!"

There is dust everywhere and Vena keeps coughing. She retracts faster and finally manages to pull herself back out into the space where she can be on her knees and where her torch is still lighted up. She looks through the tunnel to the other side, and manages to get a glimpse of Danim's face before dust and rubble blocks it out of view. On the ground in the tunnel she catches a sight of an acorn. She blinks her eyes. There is only rubble falling down...

Vena pulls out her head and coughs. She takes the torch, and crouches back to where she came from. She sits down, leans against the wall.

Vena's father releases his grip on a branch and tries to grab Mayam as he is falling. Mayam hits the father not far above the ground and they fall together and hit the ground. The mother runs to them. Vena just stares in shock up in the tree.

After a moment she tries to get back up, but finds it difficult. She almost collapses back onto the ground. With effort she manages to pull herself up. She tries to move up where she came from, holding the torch in front of her and trying to have a calm breath.

She eventually comes back to the crossroads leaning against the stone walls, moving strenuously. Her torch is fading. She doesn't have the bag with her anymore as she gave it to Danim. In the last flickers she moves to the mouth of the left tunnel.

"These are my tracks." She says.

-

Back at the bonfire the Elder pauses again. Looks at the community.

“How do you feel about Vena’s decision?” He asks them suddenly and adjusts his sitting position.

Silence. Whispering.

“She says those are her tracks... How does that make you feel?” The Elder continues.

“It seems to me that she’s choosing to suffer.”

The Elder’s eyes widen. He nods.

“She’s afraid.”

“Of what?” The Elder asks.

“Of hurting him...”

“No, she’s just afraid of hurting herself!”

“She would rather choose to be alone than be saved by Danim. She thinks she deserves to suffer because of her past!”

“I just think she didn’t believe enough in herself earlier. Maybe the Mountain gave her a chance to go back and choose the right option – like a second chance. She wanted to go left in the very first place but then that guy just manipulated her.”

“He didn’t manipulate her!”

“He’s attracted to her!”

“He’s afraid himself!”

The Elder smiles. Raises his hand. Silence falls. An old woman raises her hand. The Elder nods at her.

“Sometimes it’s easier to stick together and fall together than stand on your own legs alone.”

The Elder nods.

“And do you think those are her own tracks? Can she really know that for sure?”

Silence.

*“Maybe it depends on what happens next? Perhaps that’s the only way to know if that was the right path?”
Someone else says silently.*

“What does happen next?” Someone else adds.

The Elder opens his mouth but closes it. Someone has their hand raised up.

“Yes?”

“May I share quickly a story my grandfather once told me? It might have something to do with what we’re talking about here...”

“By all means!” The Elder says smiling.

*“Well, whenever I felt down, he used to tell me this same story... It’s about a farmer. One day this farmer’s horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors came around to commiserate. They said, “We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate.” The farmer said, “**Maybe.**” The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and in the evening everybody came back and said, “Oh, isn’t that lucky. What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!” The farmer again said, “**Maybe.**” The following day his son tried to break one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors then said, “Oh dear, that’s too bad,” and the farmer responded, “**Maybe.**” The next day the conscription*

officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again all the neighbors came around and said, "Isn't that great!" Again, he said, "Maybe."

I guess what I mean to say is that we may never know if something is actually good luck or bad luck, right path or wrong path, because everything is..."

"Interdependent in the most unexpected ways..." The Elder concludes with a smile.

-

Vena takes a clumsy step to enter the tunnel and suddenly falls into the darkness. Her flickering torch illuminates for few seconds her flight downward into the cavernous depths of the Mountain and then flicker out. She falls through the darkness until suddenly a freezing sensation engulfs her whole body and pours into her. There is a tremendous splash, her senses fail and she falls into blank darkness.

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Flashback: Mayam and Vena, about 10-years old, are standing at the edge of a cliff of a little waterfall in the forest. Underneath there is a big river. Vena is showing Mayam how to fold your hands above your head when you jump head-first. Mayam mimicks her. Vena adjusts his arms. After a moment she steps back, and Mayam comes to the edge, hesitantly, folding his arms above his head. He breathes deeply, unlocks his knees, and jumps. Vena screams with delight but as he lands he loses his posture and lands on his belly. She laughs. He comes back up to the surface and laughs too. Vena comes to the edge of the cliff.

"Look! Like this!"

She folds her arms above her head and jumps. Falls, and dives head-first into the water.

Vena wakes up violently gasping for air. She's in the water. It's dark but there is a strange glow coming from somewhere to her side. She feels someone holding her hand and dragging her out of the water onto a stone bank. She's coughing water violently. Her hand is laid on the rock surface. She tries to look around her and manages to catch a sight of a strange white glow disappearing quickly from sight. A hand presses her forehead with gentleness and warmth, and she falls asleep...

Sunshine. Summer meadow full of flowers of various kind, white, yellow... Hills and meadows and forests in the distance and a clear blue sky. Vena is lying amidst the flowers, smiling. Feels them around her with her hands. Smells the fragrance in the air. Sits up. Her hair is lush and vital. She is tanned, with freckles. Big smile on her face.

Walks through the meadow, feels the tall grass slip through her fingers. Picks a flower. Puts it in her hair. Whistles. Suddenly from the distance a mighty light-brown horse gallops to her. She caresses his head.

She is riding fast through the meadows, the hilltops. There is a village ahead, by a forest. There is a fence and next to it there is a bunch of her aged men, doing some field work with shovels. They're muscular, sweaty, good-looking. They see her, gather together, lean against the fence. Vena steers the horse to ride by the fence. The men whistle at her and she flashes them a playful look as she rides past them.

"Where are you going?" One of them shouts after her.

Vena suddenly stops her horse and turns towards them.

"I'm looking for a place to stay in the village. Would you happen to know anything good?"

The guys start talking on top of one-another, but one of them slips through the fence and jogs to Vena and her horse.

"I can show you." He says.

"Hop on then." Vena says with a smile.

Vena and the man start riding towards the village. Meanwhile back at the fence, there is another Vena looking after them. This is the one that is drenched from water and dirty from the smut from the tunnel. This Vena looks around herself. The men have disappeared. The fence is still there. She looks around her more. Notices something in the distance. Another horse galloping towards her and the fence. A white horse with a different rider. She hears sounds from the direction of the fence. Turns around.

There is a group of other boys, younger this time, maybe 12-years old. They're talking to each other and pointing to the direction of the horse and the rider. One of the boys looks very familiar to Vena. She comes closer.

"Dad?" She asks.

Vena looks back at the horse and realizes it's her mother, Ayme, same age as the boys, riding the horse closer to them. Edil, Vena's father gets excited.

"It's her, she's coming now!"

He starts waving with his hand. The other boys follow his example. Ayme rides past them. Vena's father opens his mouth and makes a loud tribal call. The other boys follow his example. Finally Ayme raises her hand and waves back to them. She rides forward towards the village that was there but now has disappeared. Instead there's just more meadows.

"Wait!" Edil shouts after her.

"Stop!" He shouts and slips through the fence.

Ayme stops. Looks behind her.

"Teach me how to ride a horse!"

Ayme turns away and rides into the distance. Edil looks after her. The boys groan. He comes back.

"Sorry Edil..."

"Let's go to the river. Maika and the other girls will be there. You'll feel better."

"What am I doing wrong?" Vena's father asks.

"Maybe you're trying too hard?" One of the other friends reply.

They leave the fence and start walking over the hill. Vena looks after them and then looks into the direction where Ayme was riding. In the distance by the fence she suddenly notices two figures crouched by the ground. Vena starts walking towards them. After awhile she begins to see that it's her mother, Ayme, again, but this time with a friend of hers and both of them are in puberty now. They're both sitting in the grass leaning against the fence, making flower wreaths. Ayme is struggling with hers. Vena comes next to them.

"He doesn't actually know me. He just thinks I'm a wild *schventim* like all the other girls he chases because I ride a horse. But I'm not like them! Riding a horse is a totally different thing. You have to have a relationship with the animal. That takes time and patience, and you have to trust it. If I would explain this sort of stuff to him he would get bored and realize I'm not what he thought I was..."

She drops the wreath on the ground. Puts her hands on the sides of her temples.

"I can't finish this fucking thing."

Silence. Her friend takes out an acorn from her pocket. Hands it to Ayme. She smiles.

"I had a feeling these might come in handy today."

Ayme takes it. Holds it in her hand.

"My mom will be happy. They had a fight today in the morning. This might make her feel a bit better... Thank you."

Her friend smiles. After a moment continues.

"I just don't get it..."

"Me neither... But even granny does it." Ayme replies

“And probably you when you’ll be old...” Her friend replies. Ayme chuckles.

Vena sees someone approaching further down the fence. It’s her father, also older, probably on the brink of 18 years. He’s walking by the fence, contemplative, his eyes on the ground even though it’s beautiful weather. Vena comes closer. She realizes he has a black eye, and one side of his face is swollen. She sees him stop, slip through the fence and sit against the pole. Suddenly from ahead of him rides Ayme with her horse again. She is the same age again. Edil sees her and as she rides closer she slows down. He looks at her for a moment. Gives a faint smile, nods a greeting with his head. Ayme does the same, then rides past him. She stops this time however and looks behind her. Edil looks at her. She looks at him. Considers. Then starts trotting back towards him. Edil smiles. She stops with her horse in front of him.

“Are you alright?” She asks him.

Edil sighs and looks away.

“Certain realizations hit you hard. Especially when you’re the only one to see them.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand.”

“Home, or school?”

“This time I believe is on me, myself, and I...”

Pause.

“Well how about we don’t talk and I just take you for a ride?”

Edil looks at her in surprise. Ayme offers to pull him up. Vena observes them and smiles. Suddenly she hears galloping, shouting and laughing from behind her.

The sun is setting down and over the hill ride Ayme and Edil, young adults now, both on their horses, Edil on a black one. They’re laughing and making loud tribal calls while racing against each other. Vena runs after them. Ayme and Edil come to the edge of a forest.

“I see a path!” Edil exclaims and turns to Ayme. She hesitates. Looks at the sky.

“We don’t have to go...” Edil says to her. Ayme looks at him. Smiles. Suddenly dashes forward in. Edil laughs and goes after her.

Vena follows them into the forest but as she enters she realizes she’s lost sight of Edil and Ayme. But instead she sees someone else. Vena stops in her tracks, holds her breath. Mayam, around 8 -years old is walking around in the forest, looking around himself as if searching for something particular. He has a closed fist, as if he’s holding something in it.

Suddenly he dashes forward. Vena follows. She sees him kneeling before a small deer buck that has gotten one of its legs ensnared in a trap. Mayam puts whatever he was holding in his fist into his pocket and then touches the buck gently. Its little antlers have just began to grow.

Mayam stays with it for awhile. Then grabs its leg, takes a pocket knife from his belt and begins to cut the snare. Vena smiles and kneels down by them. Mayam manages to cut the snare and the small deer runs away immediately. The boy smiles and sits down putting the knife to the side. He puts his hand back into his pocket and takes out an acorn. Vena comes even closer. Mayam takes the knife and begins carefully inscribing something onto the acorn.

Vena just observes him and smiles. After a moment Mayam holds the acorn in front of his eyes biting his tongue. It’s a small deer inscription. Mayam smiles, jumps and starts running away. Vena tries to follow.

Mayam comes to the edge of the forest where there is a path leading either further into the forest or out towards the meadows and to a house not far. Mayam stops and sees something. He’s looking behind him and a bit farther up. Vena comes to him and turns her head also in that direction. Farther off in the distance, rising higher up, is the cliff, with the great oak tree by the precipice, and trees descending behind it down the cliff. By the tree there is a wolf. Mayam and Vena stare. The wolf stares back, but after a moment turns away and disappears into the forest.

Mayam sits down on a tree trunk and puts the deer acorn next to him. He takes out another acorn from his pocket. Begins to inscribe something else. Vena comes to look over the shoulder of the boy. She sees a wolf on the acorn. Vena wipes the tears from her eyes. Suddenly he jumps up again and starts running down the pathway. Vena laughs and follows him. The deer acorn is left on the trunk.

They run on a gravel road leading up to the house and eventually come to it's yard, that has a stable and the main building. Mayam goes up to the door. Catches his breath first. Vena goes to the window. She sees her mother, older now, showing a box of collected acorns to Vena, who is the same age as Mayam. Vena gets startled from a noise of a shutting door on her side. She turns her head and realizes that Mayam has gone in. She sees him appear in the living room and sees her child-self run up to him. He takes out his acorn and shows it to little Vena.

At the same time Vena's mother comes to the window and looks outside. Sees something. At that moment Vena also hears something from behind her. She turns around and sees her father's horse galloping down the road back to the house from the direction of the forest. The saddle is empty. Ayme comes out to the yard and waits for the horse. Meanwhile inside Vena sees her child-self and child-Mayam hugging each other. Vena leaves them and walks up to Ayme at the same time as the horse trots into the courtyard. Her mother grabs it's reins.

Vena hears the sound of a bottle with liquid inside swooshing around. She hears a gulp and a grunt of satisfaction. She turns around. There in front of her on the doorsteps are sitting butt to butt, Ayme and Edil, her parents, older, about 50 years or so, sharing a bottle of some strong clear alcohol. Ayme passes the bottle back to Edil.

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7. Meeting The Goddess

"Remember the time when you came back for me in the forest?" Edil asks Ayme.

"How can I forget..."

"You know I've never felt so at peace like back then... I couldn't do anything, I couldn't even eat my own damn food. All I could do was lie on my back or sit on my ass and stay home. Stay here. With you. When that horse kicked me off it's back in that forest that was the best blessing I ever received."

He takes a sip from the bottle. Ayme laughs.

"I'm serious!"

Ayme takes the bottle off him and takes another sip.

"You don't believe me." He states.

"Do you think our daughter is making a mistake?" She suddenly asks him.

He looks away.

"You're suggesting that we've fucked her up, right? And that she will end up miserable because of us?"

Ayme takes another sip, and then offers him back the bottle.

"What do you honestly think? Is that gonna happen?"

He looks at her. Takes the bottle but no sip.

"You know why I think we got together? Because I'm the black horse and you're the white horse. When that black horse kicked me off I finally discovered my white horse. You needed a black horse in your life, something you couldn't control, and that's why you were always attracted in me."

Ayme is silent. Tries to grab the bottle but he doesn't let her take it. She doesn't mind. Finally she replies.

"You're right. I was always attracted to you because I felt that if I could tame you then that would prove that I'm worthy myself. That I'm..."

“A black horse yourself.” He concludes.

He takes a sip. Gives the bottle back to her. She takes a sip.

“I was jealous of your freedom... of your power...”

Edil is silent. Takes the bottle away from her. Puts it down.

“I was scared...” He says.

“Scared of getting bored with us?” She asks.

He hesitates.

“Yes.”

Silence. Ayme looks away.

“I wanted more...” He continues.

“I wanted more also.” She says after a moment.

He nods.

“It’s like when I was a kid. I was always craving for new toys. I would get excited for two days and then get bored. So I would ask for another toy. Again, the same thing. And so on, and so on.”

Ayme nods. Takes the bottle. Takes a sip. Passes it to Edil. He takes a sip also.

“For me it was animals. I would have a favourite animal one week. Then I would get bored and switch to something else.”

“What about horses?”

She scoffs.

“If I could have ridden wolves or dragons I would have left my horses.”

They chuckle. Silence. After a moment Edil continues.

“I had plenty of time to realize that my whole life was built on acquiring more...”

Ayme nods.

“Never being content with what you actually have right here and now.”

He nods.

“Just simply being alive...”

They hold hands.

“I almost died back in the forest...”

“I know...” She whispers.

He puts down the bottle. They embrace each other. The bottle gets knocked over. They stay like that for some time.

Vena goes up to them. Touches their faces.

Ayme and Edil detach. Vena steps back.

“Remember the time when I caught that boy falling down from that tree...”

Ayme shakes her head and looks away.

“Edil, that wasn’t a catch...”

She is silent for a moment then looks at him and grabs his hands.

“Can you believe that it’s actually happening tomorrow?”

She exclaims and shakes his hands. Wipes the tears from her eyes.

“He’s a good lad. They’ll be happy.” He says silently.

They hold hands. Look at each other. Kiss.

Vena starts taking steps back.

“I would still love to ride a dragon...” Edil whispers.

They laugh.

“Me too...” Ayme whispers back.

They go back to kissing.

Vena turns around and starts walking away. She notices something in front of her however.

It’s her. Same clothes as in the beginning by the meadow, but on top of them she has warmer travel gear. Beside her horse. By the gate. Looking at the house, and tying a big bag by the saddle on top of the horse. She stops and just looks at the house.

Vena comes closer to her. This other dream-self turns her gaze and looks Vena into the eyes.

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8. Temptation

“You can either ride with me or stay.”

Vena is silent for a moment. Then takes out from her pocket the cloth. Unfolds it. The flower is still there. Both of them look at it. Then at each other.

“I lost my acorn because of this.” Vena says to her dream-self.

Dream-Vena nods.

“And found the possibility to fulfill your wish.” She replies.

The moon begins to rise. Stars begin to light up in the sky. They turn to look at the moon. Vena smells the flower while looking at it. Suddenly there is a wolf howl in the distance. After a moment she lowers the flower and folds it back in the cloth, and puts it in her pocket.

Dream-Vena starts walking with the horse out of the courtyard. Vena follows them and closes the gate behind them. Dream-Vena mounts the horse and looks at her other self. There is a howl echoing in the distance. Vena hesitates.

“We can’t linger! We have to get away from the wolves!” Dream-Vena urges.

“The howls are coming from the forest... Same one where dad got injured...” Vena says.

Another howl.

“He’s home now.” Dream-Vena says.

“What happened to Mayam after we left?”

Silence. Dream-Vena extends her hand.

“I know you want freedom.”

Vena looks towards the forest. Startles. There is a pale glowing figure of a wolf standing in the darkness of the forest. It looks at Vena and then turns around and disappears. Dream-Vena abruptly commands her horse to stand in front of her and block the view.

“What are you so afraid of? You know what you want, so take it finally! Otherwise you’ll be trapped forever!”

“This is a dream.” Vena whispers to herself.

“Aye, this is a dream.” Dream-Vena replies.

Vena turns to look at her.

“This is my dream.”

Dream-Vena just stares.

“I can do what I want...” Vena continues.

Dream-Vena smiles.

“I am free.” Vena continues again.

Dream-Vena extends her hand. Vena grabs it.

“And you are too.” She concludes.

“Because I am you.” Her dream-self replies with a smile.

She pulls and Vena gracefully flies upward and lands on the horse. The horse starts with a neigh and starts galloping at immense speed. The horse gallops towards the forest and when they get close Vena jumps off the horse. She turns back and waves to her dream-self, who returns the farewell and starts galloping towards the meadows. Vena turns towards the forest. She sees the pale ghostly wolf deep within the forest looking at her. It turns and begins to run away. Vena enters the dark forest and starts running after it.

Twigs, branches, leaves and roots lash out at her in the darkness, but she keeps running, following the glimpses she catches of the ghost wolf up ahead, and soon she realizes they’re ascending upwards in the forest. She seems to be getting closer to the wolf until suddenly the ghostly figure vanishes, and after a moment Vena realizes she’s come to the cliff. She walks up to the precipice and admires the spectacular view opening up ahead in the moonlight. Vena continues her way to the very top peak and sees the mighty oak in front of her with their treehouse built above the ground on sturdy branches.

It’s silent. She looks around. The ghost wolf has disappeared. She stops her eyes on the treehouse. Climbs up. Enters. Gets startled.

Mayam is sitting inside, silent, with a solemn face. He has a bow and a quiver of arrows next to him. Vena comes closer.

“Mayam... “ She whispers. Extends her hand to touch his face...

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9. Atonement

Suddenly there is a loud ringing snap and a pained bellow coming from outside. Mayam stays sitting and doesn’t mind the pained yelps. Vena stands up.

There is a big adult deer with its antlers ensnared by a trap. Vena turns to look at Mayam who is finally moving and climbing out of the treehouse.

“What did you do? What are you doing?” She cries out.

Mayam goes out. Vena follows him. Outside Mayam walks up to the deer that is trashing wildly and bellowing in pain. There’s blood oozing from the velvet of the antlers. Mayam just watches it without any expression. He looks into the woods standing before the precipice and the oak. Takes out an arrow, and prepares it ready for his bow. Vena runs up to him and grabs his shoulder.

“Mayam, please, you don’t have to do this! Please stop! This is my dream! I won’t allow this!”

The deer stops its trashing and stumbles on its knees out of exhaustion. It breathes heavily. Mayam just keeps staring up ahead into the woods.

“I’m so sorry Mayam! This is my fault I know...”

The deer begins to bellow again. Suddenly Mayam turns away from the woods and walks up to the deer. The deer falls silent. Mayam watches it. Bows down his head.

“Please Mayam...” Vena whispers.

Suddenly however there is rustling from the woods. Mayam turns his head sharply and raises his bow towards the sound. Wolves begin to emerge from amidst the woods. Vena steps in between Mayam and the wolves.

“Don’t do this! Go back!” She shouts to the wolves.

The wolves keep circling to and fro, gradually coming closer but still keeping a distance. Mayam keeps his bow strung.

Vena suddenly realizes something. She puts her hand in her pocket, takes out the cloth with the flower, unfolds it and gasps with relief. The flower is still there.

“Come on... Come one!” Mayam hisses.

The wolves are only observing but not moving forward.

“You devils! Have me! What are you afraid of?” Mayam shouts.

He shoots an arrow. It deflects off the trunk of a tree. The wolves retreat a bit back, snarling. Mayam steps forward and draws another arrow.

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10. Apotheosis

Vena eats the flower quickly and goes after Mayam.

He springs his bow again. While he’s stepping forward some of the wolves come closer to the deer from the side. Mayam observes them, turns, and shoots again. He misses a wolf by an inch. At this moment some of the other wolves that were retreating see their opportunity. They make a dash forward. Vena swallows the rest of the flower and runs forward.

“Stop!” She shouts and jumps in front of Mayam at the same time as a big gray wolf leaps for an attack. Mayam turns to see the oncoming attack but too late. He doesn’t have time to take a step back or draw the bow.

However in mid-air the wolf suddenly collides with something else. Mayam’s eyes widen in shock. The other wolves’ fur bristles on their back and they crouch down. Vena feels the claws and fangs rip into her flesh. There is a flash of light and then nothing more.

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“Wait, she died?” A girl whispers.

“Did she save Mayam?” Another one asks.

“What was that flash? Was it a thunderbolt!?” A boy exclaims.

The Elder raises his hand with a smile.

“In that moment Mayam witnessed a miracle that truly set his path on becoming an Elder... And Vena...”

He is silent for a moment, then a curious smile appears on his face.

“Well, we’ll get to her... but first I would be curious to hear what kind of miracle do you imagine happened?”

“Vena ate the flower and that gave her some magical power!”

“She sacrificed herself to save Mayam’s life!”

“But you said she saw a ghost of a wolf?”

“Yes?”

“Well, there was a flash of light, right? Maybe it was the ghost?”

“Maybe the ghost wolf symbolized a part in Vena? Maybe she was a wolf in a sense herself? Maybe she transformed in that moment into that ghost! Or it came and helped her...”

“I think spirit is a better word!”

“What do you think she wished for in that moment?” The Elder asks suddenly.

“To save his life...”

People nod.

“To save the wolf’s life...”

Some people laugh. The Elder nods.

“A sacrifice one way or another... that could be a good way of putting it...”

“Maybe she just had a dream!” Someone exclaims.

“Was it just a dream? What about Mayam? What about the wolves? And what about the deer?”

“Did it happen actually? Was it real?”

“Oh, my boy, what is real and not-real is a topic that would keep us here all night...”

“But this sounds very similar to what I heard actually happened to a real person in these parts...” Says a young man.

Silence. The Elder looks at the young lad.

“Yes? Would you like to share what you heard happened?”

“Well, from what I understood, one night this man trapped a deer also... He was using it as a lure to attract wolves to his place. He was armed, also with a bow and arrows, and he wanted to kill them. When they finally came, he started shooting at them, but something went wrong, and one of the wolves managed to attack him. The wolf knocked him over and bit into his flesh but at that instant the deer that the man had trapped suddenly broke free from his trap. It dashed forward and hit the wolf with its antlers. After that it ran away into the forest and the wolves left the man and began to chase the deer instead.”

The young man pauses. Complete silence. Everyone is looking at the young lad.

“The story continues, doesn’t it?” The Elder speaks silently.

“Yes. It is said that the man searched for the deer for the rest of his life, but he never found it...”

Some people have tears in their eyes. The Elder nods.

“Thank you my boy. That is the story of Mayam, indeed, and that...”

He pauses.

“Was the miracle...” He concludes.

“Why wolves though?” Someone whispers.

“They reminded him of his love...” The young man answers.

“What about her? What about Vena?” A young girl asks.

The Elder turns his head towards the young girl.

“Did she die?” She asks.

The Elder smiles.

“No. She woke up.” He whispers.

Pause. He suddenly adjusts his position and does a little stretch, then continues.

“In order for us to understand what happened to Vena we must first go back to our second hero of the story, young mister Danim...”

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Darkness. Sound of bats. A dim ray of light enters a cave. Shiny sparkle reflections on the cave walls. Bats flying in the cave. Some of them flutter above Danim, who is lying on the ground, unconscious. A faint glimmering light hits him. Then a bat swoops by his face, and he wakes up with a gasp, and pushes himself abruptly onto sitting. He covers his eyes but after a moment removes his hands. In front of him he sees a crystal formation on the cave wall, reflecting the light coming from somewhere in the ceiling. He looks up and sees shadowy figures of bats flying around. He relaxes. Admires the crystals, and the bats flying around him. He rests his head in his arms. The ray of light begins to get stronger and the crystal glimmer lights up the cave more.

Suddenly there is an abrupt snatching sound, and a squeal. He looks abruptly up, and sees a snake in the ceiling returning to its little cave on the ceiling with a freshly caught bat in its mouth.

Danim looks down and sees a snake slithering over his waist. He freezes, holds his breath. The snake passes over him calmly, without minding him, finally moving the end of its body over him and making its way farther away into the cave. Danim exhales sharply and with trembling feet gets up, grabbing his shoulder bag.

He looks at the crystal formation one last time. He takes a step closer.

After a moment he starts walking away.

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Rays of light from above enter a great cavern with huge stone formations rising high towards the ceiling.

“Vena!” Danim shouts.

He looks at the cavern from a little cliff above. Tries to descend down but trips, falls and slides down the crumbly wall of the cave down onto the ground of the cavern.

Down at the floor of the cavern there is a little stream of water flowing. Danim comes to the stream. Kneels down to drink. He notices something. In front of him the light floods a patch of ground near the stream. Amidst the stones

Danim sees little flowers sprouting upwards. He comes closer and kneels before them. Watches in awe. The flowers look strong. He starts gently picking them. Opens his bag and is about to put them inside when suddenly something black leaps out from the open bag. Danim lets out a yelp and falls backwards.

A huge dark snake jumped from the bag and bit him in his hand. It slithers away from him and disappears amidst big rocks close to the stream. Danim breathes heavily. Looks at his hand, which begins to swell up. He is about to get up, but notices that the old bundle of flowers fell from his bag on the ground, and is lying next to the new flowers. He picks up only the bundle, examines it...hesitates... then looks at his hand.

Suddenly he freezes. His eyes move to a direction ahead of him. There is a young famished and bruised looking wolf staring right at him about 60 meters away. Danim gets up. The wolf snarls, and starts walking towards him. Danim moves closer to the stream. Steps into the water.

The wolf suddenly starts running towards him. Danim turns around and splashes deeper into the water. He suddenly feels something stopping him and pulling. Turns to look behind him. The wolf has bitten onto his shoulder bag. Danim takes it off with a swift movement, and leaves it, diving further into the water and starting furiously to swim towards the opposite shore, fighting against the current. He manages to reach the other side and turns to look back. He sees the wolf swimming after him but the current is too strong. The wolf is being swept away along with his shoulder bag.

Danim starts running along the bank. He can't access the water because of the big stone formations but he keeps on running. After a moment he finds a place where he has access to the water. The stream is narrower here and he makes an effort to stand in one place in the current. Suddenly he sees his bag come around a turn and starting to flow towards him. Danim steps further in towards it. The bag is almost by him when suddenly he notices a visible patch of fur flowing behind the bag.

The bag flows by Danim and instead of it he dashes forward and grabs the wolf that is almost completely submerged in the water. He falls into the current with it and starts splashing furiously to get back to the bank. The current pushes him against a big stone close to the bank that helps to stop his motion. With great effort he manages to push through to the shore again, and he collapses onto the ground with the wolf.

He examines the wolf. He isn't breathing. Danim looks around him.

"Help!"

He examines the wolf again, unsure what to do. He puts his face close to it's snout and listens. Then raises his paw and puts his hand against it's chest. He swears in his mother tongue, looks around again.

"Help! Please somebody, help!"

Danim starts pushing rhythmically the wolf's chest. Nothing. He grabs the snout, hesitates, then lowers himself to blow into the nostrils. He starts again pushing the chest of the wolf. Suddenly the wolf gives a shake and lets out a cough with a sputter of water. It dashes around in panic and tries to stumble up. Danim lets go and backs off against a big stone formation. The wolf gets up clumsily, moves away in panic but then collapses again onto the ground and pants, drawing fresh air. It crawls a bit farther away and then just lies down. Both Danim and the wolf just lie there, panting, exhausted, but alive.

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10. Apoteosis

Danim closes his eyes, smiles, but then begins to sob suddenly.

"I'm so sorry Uma..."

After a moment he stops. Stillness. Both of them lie there, not looking directly at each other. Only the sound of the stream.

"You're not doing anything bad." Danim suddenly says.

"You're just trying to survive..."

Pause.

“You know we’re both wolves, but only one of us is in disguise...”

Pause.

“The fact is, I would be able to do the very same thing she did to me, but I pretend that I’m not really a wolf. I pretend I’m something better. It’s easier to hunt wolves rather than admit that you’re one yourself...”

He looks at the wolf. The wolf looks at him from it’s side.

“It’s not her I should grant forgiveness, but myself...”

He leans his head back and closes his eyes. Scoffles. Holds his swollen hand to his chest. Exhales sharply. Opens them again. The wolf is gone. Danim gets up to standing looks around, and suddenly notices something in the distance. He squints his eyes.

He sees in the distance, high from the ground but not in the ceiling, an opening through which daylight enters. From the opening roots are entering lower into the cave. He realises there’s a tree growing above and there is small gap amidst the roots that is the entrance to the cave. Underneath it is rubble from the soil. The wall leading up is steep. High. No proper footing. Danim sees the wolf appearing again underneath it. Looking above to the opening. Starts to try and climb back up the steep wall.

“That must have been your way in...” Danim whispers, and takes steps forward. He’s dizzy and has to catch his balance. After a moment he starts to walk again towards the wolf.

“You must have been the curious one from your pack...”

The wolf is making efforts to jump and catch proper foothold. It manages to climb higher, not far from the entrance. Danim comes underneath and admires it.

“You can do it buddy...”

The wolf makes steps higher but suddenly one of it’s footholds crumbles and the wolf falls down. Danim dashes forward. The wolf tumbles down the wall and hits the rubble underneath. It immediately tries to regain balance but Danim sees it’s limp. The wolf snarls. Danim stops. The wolf limps farther off and lays on the ground again, panting in pain. Squeals silently...

Danim feels nauseous. His eyesight begins to become blurry. He goes down to the ground and eventually lies down. He’s next to a patch of sunlight. The wolf observes him. Danim sniggers.

“Don’t worry buddy, you’ll get your meal soon enough...”

Danim turns his head towards the sunlight. He crawls into it and closes his eyes. He smiles and lies back down.

“Atleast this...”

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11. The Ultimate Boon

His expression suddenly changes. He feels something on the ground with his healthy hand. Touches petals with his fingers. Gets half up. Looks to his side. Picks a flower from the ground and brings it closer to his eyes. Realises there are tiny flowers growing also in this patch of sunlight, and that there’s plenty of them around him on each side.

At this moment the wolf suddenly rises up, but it doesn’t look to Danim’s direction but somewhere else. Suddenly a dried piece of meat is thrown next to it. The wolf bites into it completely enthralled and without a split-second’s hesitation. Danim squints his eyes. An old gray-haired man comes to him with swift steps.

“Lay down, my lad. It’s okay...”

Danim is able to distinguish a similar shoulder bag to what Vena was carrying and gave him, but this one is much bigger, and bulging full.

“Are you the Master?” He whispers.

He sees the old man pick the flowers from the ground and put them into his mouth and starting to chew. He also takes out a water flask from his bag and offers it to Danim. He takes a sip, and then sees that the old man offers him two flowers also.

“Quickly, eat these, while you still can...”

Danim bites onto them and swallows them down with the water. The old man takes a fingerful of the paste from his mouth and applies it onto his wound on his hand, and also raises Danim’s lips and applies it onto his gums.

“Are you...” Danim is about to ask, but then he loses his consciousness.

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ACT III - RETURN

12. Magic Flight

A ray of sun is shining onto Vena’s face. She covers her eyes. The morning sunshine pours into a large tunnel-like cavern, extending far on both sides. She’s lying on a little rock bank in the middle of a large stream. It looks vaguely like the one she caught a glimpse of in the dark just before she passed out. In daylight everything seems different. The darkness and shadows are gone, no ghostly glow... The water around her is clear and looks shallow. Vena rubs her arms around herself. Shivers. Bathes in the sunlight. Gradually the shivering settles. She lies back down for a moment and closes her eyes. Tries her pocket. Puts her hand inside. Takes out the cloth that is wet. Unfolds it. The flower is still there. She puts it back in her pocket and stays lying down.

“What a fucked up dream...” She whispers and closes her eyes.

“Danim!” She shouts. Nothing.

She goes to the edge of the bank. Puts her foot in the water. Goes in. It’s only until her waist. She drinks some water, and then walks to the shore on one side. She starts walking along the bank, amidst the stalagmites, with stalactites hanging above her.

“Danim!” She shouts again. Nothing.

She continues to venture further, following the bank.

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The rays of the sun have turned into a warmer tone. They’ve moved up the walls. It’s evening. Grigor crawls through the roots into the cave and grabs hold of the rope he’s tied around the roots. He climbs down to the floor level with a small axe secured to his belt, and his shoulder bag on him. He comes to a small fire he’s made in the cave, and takes out from his shoulder bag pieces of wood and twigs that he puts into the fire. It crackles and burns nicely. He sighs with delight and looks over to the wolf that is laying abit farther away. One of its legs is bandaged. After that he turns to Danim. He’s sleeping.

Grigor walks about in the cave collecting the flowers and tying them up in bundles. He comes back to the fire and sees that Danim is sitting up with groggy eyes. Grigor lays down the flowers.

“Come boy, come and have something to eat. You must be starving.”

Danim is sitting by the fire with an overcoat hanging over his shoulders. He’s ravenously eating a piece of dry meat and some bread. Grigor is sitting by the fire also. They sit in silence. After a moment Danim takes a pause from his munching. He observes the bundles of flowers on the ground. Similar bundles as the one they discovered at the cave entrance. Grigor glances at him.

“They really knocked you out good, didn’t they?”

“Was it... did you make a wish?”

Grigor smiles.

“Unfortunately people have forgotten about the wondrous properties of these tiny gems...” He holds one of the bundles in his hands.

“People don’t have an idea of what magic is growing right in front of them...”

Pause. He continues.

“*Umbra talaris polymita, or Shadowgem* as in common tongue. This is nature’s powerhouse of healing properties. Powerful antidote and sedative as you’ve no doubt witnessed yourself. They do wonders for cancer patients. If you’re feeling blue you can make yourself a nice cozy, uplifting mug of hot tea to help your day. Some people drink it before going to sleep. Some people make oil out of them. I’ve heard some people even smoke them and there are some stories of hallucinogenic effects, depending on the strain...”

Pause. He puts the bundles in his shoulder bag, which looks pretty full.

“But no, they do not grant wishes... That’s an old folk saying that came to be because of their strong properties, that later turned into a superstition, and nowadays is sought as an express ticket for...”

He waves his hand in the air. Hesitates...

“Miracles...”

Danim is silent. Looks into the fire. Suddenly one of the bundles falls down from the bag.

“That doesn’t mean that miracles never happen.” Grigor says as he stands up to pick up the bundle and puts it back in the bag, covering it with its flap. He goes back to sitting, glances at Danim again.

“What’s your name lad?”

“Danim.”

“Danim, you did a great job today.”

“What did I do?”

“What did you do?” Grigor scoffs.

“My belief is that you rescued our young boy!” He gestures towards the wolf that looks at them curiously.

After a moment the wolf walks forward, and finally comes to sit closer to the fire, in between Grigor and Danim. They observe the wolf and smile. The old man looks at Danim again.

“Am I guessing right that you resuscitated him?”

Danim is silent, and after a moment nods.

“How did you know how to do that? Have you resuscitated someone before?”

Danim shakes his head and laughs. Pause.

“I was once resuscitated myself when I was a kid. I jumped off a cliff head-first and dove too deep... One of my friends, Uma... rescued me.”

“Thank God for her...” Grigor says. Danim nods.

Silence.

“What about Vena?” Danim asks.

Grigor looks ahead of him, stands up and smiles.

“She’s a miracle.” He says. Danim looks into his direction.

It's Vena, few hundred meters away from them, stumbling forward into the cave and stopping as she sees them. Danim gets up and starts running towards her. She runs also, sobbing with relief. They finally meet, embrace and she begins to cry on his shoulder. Grigor walks to them. Vena gives him also a crushing hug. He smiles.

"Why did you do that?" She whispers, and suddenly detaches herself from Grigor. The old man looks at her.

"Do what?" He asks.

"You left the bundle of flowers for us! You wanted us to go into the Mountain!"

Tension. Grigor observes Vena. Danim bites his lip.

"Did I?" Grigor asks calmly.

Danim takes a little step forward.

"Vena, maybe..."

"We thought you might be in danger!" Vena interrupts and shouts at Grigor.

The old man nods his head carefully.

"I owe you my gratitude for your concerns and efforts."

Silence. Vena hesitates.

"I saw..." She stops.

Grigor observes her. Holds out his hands towards her. Danim observes them. Finally Vena moves forward and they embrace again.

"I saw a dream. You told me to come here." She whispers to the old man. He's silent for a moment.

"Was there a reason I asked you to come here?" He finally whispers.

"Yes..." She whispers.

They embrace more strongly.

"I'm sorry I made you come here." He whispers.

She shakes her head, detaches and looks at him again. Grigor smiles and turns to look behind him. Vena looks in that direction, and sees the young wolf standing by the fire and observing them with his bandaged leg. Grigor turns to look at Vena again.

"I went out to see if the sightings were true. Some people had claimed to have seen a pack of wolves up here in the mountains. That hasn't happened in almost a hundred years. I went out to search for them but it was very strange... I found their trails but never actually saw the wolves themselves. It was as if they were always hiding somewhere in front of my nose. Finally..."

He looks at Danim.

"I heard a call for help. Where was it coming from, I did not understand. As if from underground..."

He gestures to the opening, and the rope tied to the tree.

"Who would have thought that upon climbing down I would discover a young man and his wolf that came back to life..."

He gestures to the wolf, and then glances back at Danim, and then Vena.

"I believe you've done all of the job instead of me."

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13. Refusal of The Return

The rays of light have become more dim and almost orange. Grigor stomps the fire out. Vena applies some of the floral paste onto a piece of dry meat and offers it to the wolf. He gladly takes it and starts munching on it. Vena takes a bite of a piece of dry meat herself and smiles while observing the young wolf. Danim pulls on the rope hanging from the tree above.

Vena leaves the wolf, stands up, takes few steps towards the stream, and looks into the direction it's flowing, further in, into the depths still ahead...

Grigor comes next to her. They stand side-by-side in silence.

"Where does this stream lead to?" She asks Grigor.

"If you follow it all the way you'll eventually come out at the base of the Mountain where the forest begins."

Vena nods.

"And then?"

"Then through the forest, through the valley, through the cities, and finally to your hometown..."

"And then?"

"The sea..." He concludes.

Vena looks down the stream.

"I still didn't find my acorn. There are still places I didn't look..."

Grigor nods. After a moment touches her shoulder gently. They face each other.

"What is an acorn?" He asks.

"A seed..."

"Each of us has our own soil where to plant our seeds. That patch of land is within you, and for that land you don't have to look for acorns outside. You already have them."

Vena is silent.

"Have you ever managed to make acorns grow?"

"No."

"I'll show you how to before you leave."

Vena looks up at him and is about to say something, but Grigor smiles and turns around.

"Oh! I think our young lad has finally fallen asleep. Master Danim, would you be so kind and help me and Vena secure the boy?"

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14. The Rescue from Without

The sun is setting. Outside the Mountain, Grigor emerges from underground, crawling from a hole under some curved roots of an old tree at the side of the Mountain, and hoisting himself up with the help of the rope.

Underground Vena and Danim secure the young wolf securely with the rope. Grigor's head emerges up above.

“Ready?”

They show him the thumbs up, and support the wolf as he begins to pull the rope with loud grunts. The wolf starts rising up. Vena and Danim look after it, then at each other. Vena hugs him. He embraces her.

“Thank you.” She whispers.

“Thank you too.” He whispers back.

They hear Grigor doing a wolf howl above them.

“The wolf has landed!”

They detach and cheer holding their hands up. The rope is thrown back down to them.

“Alright, move those chipmunk butts out of that hole!”

FADE OUT

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15. The Return Threshold

Mayam: Vena, Danim and Grigor took good care of the wolf for the next three days and he seemed to be regaining his former strength fast, and growing playful and affectionate to his caretakers. They named him Afan, meaning curious, in the old tongue. Vena felt joy in her heart for establishing trust with the wolf and being able to even play with him. He was growing stronger every day, but in her heart Vena still felt something calling her...

On the third day she woke up and just laid in her bed for some time... She got to her bedside table and unfolded the cloth with the flower still in it. Wilted and dried... She folded the cloth back on it, and after a moment got up with resolve...

She has her clothes on and closes a massive backpack. Hesitates. Puts it underneath her bed. Stands up and goes out of the room.

Danim is inside a shed with Afan, caressing him. The wolf gives him a lick. He smiles. Grigor and Vena open the shed door. Danim rises up, and urges Afan to do the same. They start slowly moving towards the open door.

Drinking tea on the porch, Vena and Danim. Grigor is collecting some mountain herbs from the shrubs a bit farther off. He stops and looks into their direction. Afan comes into view, walking here and there holding his bandaged leg slightly above the ground. He looks at the Vena and Danim with his tongue lolling out cheerfully.

Danim laughs.

“You’re doing great!” He shouts to Afan.

Vena grins. Afan, turns towards Grigor and starts walking towards him, curious to see what he’s up to. There is a big gust of wind that makes the windchimes resonate.

Danim lets out a sigh, and relaxes in his chair, taking a sip from his tea.

“I didn’t know you could make tea out of orange peels. I’ll have to try that out.” He says to Vena.

She nods, takes a sip from his tea and stays contemplative and silent.

“When are you leaving?” He asks.

Suddenly Grigor waves a twig at them. Vena shows him the thumbs up.

“Master Danim, would you be so kind and bring the water to boil again?” He shouts to Danim.

“Sure thing!” Danim responds. He glances at Vena.

“There’s a lot of tea drinking in this place...” He stays in his place for a moment, looking at her.

“I’m not sure.” She finally responds.

Danim nods, gets up and disappears inside. After a moment Grigor walks to her with Afan at his side. The old man is holding a bunch of twigs and herbs. He comes to Vena and gives them for her to smell.

“It’s beautiful.” She replies.

“It’ll make you live a hundred years! That, and this...”

He offers her some berries. She makes a face and reclines.

“Please, not those...”

“That is the taste of nature’s finest!”

Danim comes back.

“What is?”

The Master offers him the berries. Danim glances at Vena.

“I would be suspicious about his efforts of trying to fatten us up, but...” He pauses. Looks at the old man. Grigor keens his head.

“It’s not like chocolate...” Danim takes the berries and eats them. Twists his face.

The Master laughs.

“It’s incredibly sour!”

“Master Danim, chocolate won’t make you live hundred years, this on the other hand...” He pops a handful of them into his mouth, and gives a wink. He goes inside.

“His tongue must have been reduced into a piece of bark.” Danim whispers and sits back down.

Vena laughs. Afan comes and sits in front of them on the ground before the porch. They look at him.

“Do you feel you found what you were looking up here?” Vena asks after a moment.

Danim contemplates.

“It’s hard for me to put into words... It’s as if...”

He hesitates, then tries again.

“I came here to find out whether I can forgive Uma.”

“Can you?”

“I heard once this saying that I didn’t quite understand. *No tree can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell.* I don’t believe in God, nor hell, but something about that wolf struck me...”

He looks at Afan.

“I’m not that different. But I was afraid to see it. I was afraid because if I would realize that’s me, I would realize I’m capable of horrible things also. I would realize I’m capable of doing the very same what I was condemning others for...”

Pause.

“Did I find forgiveness? If I condemn her I condemn myself... That’s what I found. And I know I don’t want to do that, either to her or myself. Is that forgiveness?”

He contemplates.

“I guess it is.” Vena replies.

Pause. After a moment she speaks again.

“What if you realized that you wouldn’t be able to do the same as that other person. You wouldn’t be able to do something so wicked...”

Danim shakes his shoulders.

“I don’t know... I feel essentially we’re all quite the same. I don’ think...” He is about to say but Vena interrupts him.

“But what if someone really was different, and did something that you could never do? Could you forgive that person then?”

Danim stares into emptiness.

“I don’t know... I think I would feel sorry. I know what I feel now, and that’s all I can know for sure.”

Silence.

“Do you mind me asking what did she do?” Vena asks, glancing at Danim.

Danim hesitates. Opens his mouth... A gust of wind again. The windchimes ring again. Danim closes his mouth and stops speaking.

After a moment Vena stands up. “I did something similar to Mayam... Even worse...”

She stands there looking at the Mountain. Danim watches her.

“Did you find forgiveness?” He asks.

“Only for one of us...” She replies.

Starts walking away from the porch, towards the mountain path. Danim is left on the porch. He looks into the distance. Takes one of the berries. Puts it in his mouth.

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As Vena is climbing up the Mountain she hears a rustle somewhere from the woods. Turns her head towards the sound, but nothing...

At the Mountaintop she comes to the little ragged tree. It has some more tiny flowers. She kneels down and sees the little crack into which the acorn fell. After a moment she gets up and looks around her. In the distance she sees the river.

Suddenly she hears shuffling. Turns around and sees Grigor. He walks next to her and also admires the view and the river.

“I saw something within the Mountain...” “

Grigor looks at her.

“It showed me something Mayam did after I left...”

Grigor nods. After a moment he speaks.

“I packed the herbs and food for your travel back.”

Vena looks down, chuckles and shakes her head.

“There is still so much I can learn from you...” She says.

Pause. Grigor turns towards her. Vena does the same.

“I can’t give you any knowledge, any wisdom, any moral that will be more precious than what you have in your heart. I can only encourage you, and say you are the Master. No one will ever be able to provide you with a better way than what you feel in your heart is right.”

“It felt right for me to come here.”

“And what do you feel now?”

Pause. She looks at the view.

“Mayam was my best friend since childhood. I always knew I loved him. We planned on coming here after our marriage. That was our plan since the very beginning. I’m sure he never thought that would change. Everybody wanted him to be an Elder. They said the path was laid before his feet from the day he was born. But he chose me, and this is where we were meant to come. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I was always afraid... Always afraid of something dark within me... Like a seed in the shadows, secretly growing... The night before our marriage, I ran away. I simply just rode off... I chose freedom. Something I had never done before... How can I love someone and yet do something like that?”

Silence.

“What would I say if I met him now? I love you after all this time? Nothing has changed? How can I say something like that after everything I’ve done?”

“I think every single person wants freedom. Perhaps the question is more about what does freedom actually mean? Does it only come with solitude, or can you be free while being with someone? What is freedom?” Grigor asks.

Vena is silent.

“Did he choose to become an Elder after you left?” He asks again.

“I’m quite sure he did.”

“Don’t underestimate people’s compassion. All of us harbor parts that live in the shadows, Vena. Even the Elders... Do you truly believe that Mayam, after knowing you for so long, after being your best friend since you were babies, that he wouldn’t understand if you were truly honest with him? Also, isn’t it the common saying that the one time and place in your life when you discover who lives underneath your mask is when you’re face to face with an Elder?”

“Not all Elders...” She says.

“Well how about simply trusting your friend then? How about trusting the person you love?”

Vena is silent.

“How can he be an Elder after what he did?” She asks.

Grigor considers.

“Maybe that’s precisely why he can be an Elder...”

Vena closes her eyes.

“He can never leave his village, he can never come here, he can never fulfill his dream, our dream, he can never marry anymore...”

She looks away. Takes a step away. Puts her hand on her eyes. Grigor goes to her and hugs her. They embrace.

There is a gust of wind. One of the flowers blow off from the tree. Vena opens her eyes. Sees the flower in the wind.

“Is freedom allowing the wind to take you wherever?” Grigor asks.

“I don’t know.” She whispers.

“You are free to feel that. That’s freedom.” He says.

They chuckle. Detach. Grigor turns to look at her and puts his hands on her shoulders.

“I’ve told you the Mountain doesn’t have the easiest of characters, haven’t I?” He asks.

Vena looks at him with a smile.

“Yes you have.”

“So remember not to take everything so seriously what it showed you...” He winks. Then remembers something and raises his finger.

“Ah, what I do know is how to properly plant an acorn, and I believe I made a promised to teach someone...” He says.

Vena nods.

“Come!” He says and they turn away from the edge and start walking away.

Vena notices something in the distance.

“Look!” She points to a direction.

In the distance somewhere on the lower mountain ranges they see wolves. They glance at eachother with smiles.

“You found your pack.” Grigor whispers.

16. Master of Two Worlds

Back at the cabin. Vena and Danim are in her room. Sitting on the bed. The backpack is in front of Vena. She takes out a cloth from her pocket and reveals the flower. She folds the cloth back on it, then takes Danim’s hands.

“No, no!”

He refuses. They look at eachother. Vena pushes the cloth back to him.

“Consider it as a souvenir. Keep it. I wanted to give you a gift. It doesn’t mean you have to do anything with it.” She says.

Danim hesitates.

“Otherwise I’ll just throw it into the trash.”

They laugh.

“But I don’t have a gift for you!”

“You’ll stay here and help Grigor reintroduce Afan to the pack soon. That’s a perfect gift for me.”

Silence.

“You’re not staying for that?” He asks.

She shakes her head. Silence.

“Unless you want to leave with me? We could go the same road for some time?” She asks.

Danim considers.

“I feel I would like to cherish this place for a bit more....” He says silently.

Vena nods and smiles.

“I like being here. The cabin. The woods. The Mountain... those berries!”

They chuckle.

“I’m not staying because I want to find something. That something one can find anywhere, be it home, Mountains...” Danim continues.

Vena nods.

“The road...” He adds.

Silence.

“I never got to hear your and Mayam’s story actually...” Danim says finally.

Vena thinks for a moment.

“There was this Mountain and a Master living at the top who could turn into different animals. It was a beautiful place the Mountain, but the Master was lonely, and each time he wandered as an animal farther and farther away from the Mountain, in search of something he could not find there on the highest peak. And one day, he forgot who he was, and where he was from... The Mountain missed it’s Master, and in his memory sprouted a tiny tree at the very topmost peak, in a place where there was bare stone. The tree grew slowly, painstakingly, but it grew, and eventually started sprouting even flowers, fragile, and tiny.

One day a young curious soul climbed there to the very highest peak. No one had been there for such a long time... It was a young lady, who saw the glorious view there from high above, but what really stirred her heart was the lonely but determined tree that was growing in such a remote place. She took it to herself to start climbing up the Mountain each day, and pay a visit to the tree. And with time, the tree began blossoming with its leaves and flowers growing bigger and stronger each day, beautiful, one-of-a-kind, nowhere else to be found.

One day the lady was sitting underneath the tree again, but this time she was crying for she was lonely also. The wind plucked a flower from the tree and carried it away far far into the forest, and it is said that someday if the Master will find the flower he will remember where his home is...”

She stops.

“That’s all so far...” She says.

Danim hesitates. Then starts:

“The flower floated down, down, down into the valley and the forest, and landed right in front of the nose of a lonely Wolf that did not have a pack. This Wolf stopped in his tracks and smelled the flower, and as he did that, something stirred inside of him, a distant memory, a voice, a feeling. He remembered again where his home was, and set out on a journey to find his way back to the Mountain.”

Vena smiles. Danim continues.

“Nobody knows how long his journey took through the forest, but when he found the Mountain, and finally climbed back up, he found the lady sitting there, underneath the tree, looking at the setting sun. She turned her head towards him. The Master was afraid she would shy away from him, for he was a wolf, but she didn’t. Instead she smiled.”

Vena continues.

“In that moment, both of them found something they had been looking and waiting for their whole lives. And they realized it was not something that could be sought or waited for, for it was already in them.”

Silence.

“Does he transform back into human?” Danim asks.

“I don’t know... I don’t like to hint that humans are somehow better than wolves, or any animal for that matter.”

They look at each other.

“That’s a perfect gift. Thank you.” She says.

“I will miss you.” Danim says.

“I will miss you too.” Vena says.

They embrace. After a moment they detach and Danim continues.

“How about the lady embraces the wolf, holds him against her, and then suddenly the Master wakes up in his cabin. It was all a dream.”

Vena smiles.

“And he goes down the Mountain to wash himself in the river, flowing through the forest...” He continues.

“And there he sees someone...” Vena concludes.

Both of them nod.

“That’s a good ending.” She says smiling.

-

Night. Vena comes out of the cabin with her backpack on. Comes to the shed. Enters cautiously.

Stops. The wolf watches her. Vena stands in the doorway. Afan stands up. Vena swallows. Afan comes to her. Licks her hands. She smiles.

She’s lying in the hay with Afan, caressing him. He gives her a lick on the face also. She laughs, and embraces him. Through the slits of the shed, the first morning light starts creeping in. It is dawn. She kisses Afan.

“Take care of the boys for me.” She whispers.

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17. Freedom to Live

The sun is rising. Vena is walking through a forest on a path, when suddenly she hears water streaming somewhere closeby. She steps off the path and moves towards the sound. She discovers a beautiful river. Smiles. Kneels down. Sets down her backpack. Looks around. The river is flowing from the Mountain. She closes her eyes. Touches her heart.

“I’m sorry...” She whispers.

She turns away from the Mountain. Opens her eyes. Bows down her head. Notices something. On the shore there is a bunch of acorns that have floated down with the river. She looks back at the Mountain, then at the acorns. After a moment she picks one from the bunch, stands up, and puts it against her chest.

She hears a rustle. Turns to look back. There is a deer with antlers on the river bank. They look at each other. After a moment the deer goes and drinks water from the river. After that it walks back into the forest. Vena smiles, takes a small pocket knife and starts inscribing something onto the acorn. Finishes and examines her work.

It's a little symbol of a deer with antlers.

She puts the acorn in a front pocket, next to her heart, buttons it, puts on her backpack and sets walking.

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"... *The end.*" The Elder concludes the story.

Silence. Only the bonfire crackling. Slowly, gradually, one by one the community members start rising up and leaving the bonfire. They pass the Elder.

"Good-night... Good night..." He keeps saying as they bid him a good-night also.

Eventually there's only one person left. It's an old woman who looks at him. Smiles. The Elder smiles also. They stand up and come to each other. The old lady holds out her two hands in closed fists. The Elder looks at them and then points at one. The old lady opens it and reveals an acorn. The Elder picks it up. It has the deer symbol. He smiles, with tears in his eyes. The lady smiles also.

They are walking up a hill. Full moon. Stars. Night. Forest. They come to the top and see the old oak and the tree house on it. Close to this great tree, there is another tree that is younger, and in front of it there is a memorial site with ornaments, flowers, and a puppet made from straw and wood of a deer with great antlers. The old man kneels down in front of it. The old lady kneels down beside him. The Elder places the acorn with the deer inscription on the memorial site.

They climb into the tree house and lie down side by side. They look at the stars and the moon. They hold hands. Turn to look at each other.

View of the oak and the treehouse silhouetted against the night sky with the full moon and the stars. A pale ghostly glow appearing somewhere from amidst the woods. A deer with great antlers walks past them, underneath the treehouse. It disappears out of view.

THE END

