

## Nights at the Meru Hotel

Suddenly she awoke in the heart of the night. Somewhere a nocturnal bird sang a wrenching song that shot through the walls. The sound echoed in full volume, as though it had gone through an invisible amplifier, capturing Vera's senses, while she lay, drowsy but lucid.

Vera wasn't sleeping, nor was she awake and she wasn't dreaming. She knew she wasn't in her bed but in the temporary bed of Hotel Meru. The bird's song hypnotized her, captured her attention and, as if invited to witness some arcane rite, she could only stay fixed in passivity. Her mind went over the lay-out of the room on the third floor from which one dominated the hills and valleys of that foreign continent, gathered under the name – India – that swallowed her into the vastness of its mystery.

Her mind stretched out to take in the rhythm of the melody, interrupted by pauses that begged an answer, and which unequivocally came. Was it an echo from the hills or another bird, further away, signaling its presence?

Her obsession with classifications got her to look for a name for that special creature, but all she could find was her ignorance of zoological terms and ornithological categories. She decided it was a Cuckoo, but what if it was a nightingale? How could she recognize it? She decided to stop her investigation and concentrate on the situation in which she had been thrown.

It wasn't the first time, it had happened before. She had to find a strategy to go back and recompose the two parts into one. She made herself keep calm and avoid any movement. Or rather, her body would receive no command, seeing as one of the characteristics of those states of being was the lack of real control.

To find the point of conjunction between center and periphery she had to fend off panic and remember the path covered before, in other, similar circumstances. She must have rolled onto her back while sleeping: a position that favored the manifestation of those phenomena. She learnt to avoid the danger of falling asleep on her back when she was about eleven and, during puberty, had had her first contact with incomprehensible things.

Then too she had had to find a strategy to come awake. She had been struck by a character in a film who had had a lengthy heart attack and was given up as dead.

The man, in a moment of powerlessness and unspeakable desperation, was about to be dissected. Only one sign of emotion – the flowing of tears – had saved him, and showed that he was alive.

Vera didn't know if her state was like being in the antechamber of death, but she instinctively knew that salvation depended on will power. Drawing inspiration from fairy tales and magic wands she knew she had to pinch or pierce her shapeless mass. But how? And with what? Her finger nails could do the trick. She had to get them to work from a distance, with guided concentration. She visualized the thumb of her right hand, and tried with all her strength to push it towards her palm. She was sure that the pinch would awaken her. She eventually managed to eliminate the separation and awoke, proud to have made it.

Now she remembered galloping horsemen in shining armor. She felt them so vividly that they appeared to have super natural powers. They must be messengers from another world. Those knights had frightened the wits out of her. Had they come to punish her for her bad deeds? Thus she started to bargain with white-bearded god, who must be the inventor of such horrific apparitions. . .

In time she learnt to face those states of 'lucid dreams' with greater courage and gave more attention to those beings she met in ethereal space. She felt that only a delicate line divided her from the rest, keeping her within her body. The distance was marked by the infinitesimal thickness of the circumference within which all things have a form. She had the precise perception of floating, of being pushed upwards by a wave and of belonging to that extreme distance where everything floated weightlessly. Recently she had resolved to observe more closely the meanders of her thoughts because she wanted to verify how much was due to her imagination and how much to her ability to capture images and thoughts belonging to another dimension.

While floating, she felt vulnerable, deprived of the bearings of logic. Her placid body breathed heavily above the ebbing and flowing in the background. She was fascinated by that dimension, even though totally unable to control its effects. Her only defenses were intermittent lucidity and clear intentions, the sole companions of her disincarnate spirit. She had often felt threatened by contact with those entities, those beings which she knew existed even before she had seen them. She couldn't say which of her organs had been so receptive as to waken her to their presence.

One night while having a lucid dream, she had the unpleasant sensation of being attacked and pushed down by one such being. She felt its weight on her chest. It wanted to suffocate her, find a weak point, a door through which to enter her, devour her from inside. Suddenly she saw it: small, grey, its round face, all nerves, with pointed animal ears and small horns. The figure had uncertain shape, almost transparent, animated by devilish ferocity and fury. Vera lay defenseless, paralyzed, at the mercy of that obsessed being trying to overcome her, to subjugate her to its will, deprive her of her identity and banish her to the world of gloom. It was a fight for life. But how? Through the power of desperation. She knew the creature was powerless as long as she resisted. Her weak point would have been a moment of doubt, hesitation, a fleeting moment of self pity, of surrender: only these could bring her down.

A medium had once told Vera that in a previous life she had been a light bearer, and that if she had not believed it she would lose. Lose what? Only now she understood. From the moment she was convinced she belonged to a host of warrior angels she found herself on top of the devil, who was now a grey wolf with yellow, florescent eyes, weak, skinny, haggard. Instead of fear she felt compassion for that lost and feeble creature. She no longer wanted to win or gain revenge by killing it: she simply asked it to go away and leave her alone. She was exhausted.

The cuckoo outside continued to sing. The sequence of steps on how to awaken, lined up in her memory, showed that all depended on her ability to go back into sleep. She had to tune into the rhythm of her breathing. This time she didn't feel the presence of anyone, or thing, in the room. She guided the timing of in-breathing and out-breathing. Trying to remember where the bedside table and lamp were, her hand groped its way to an electric wire and the switch.

She went to open the window and tried to locate where the song came from. The cuckoo must have been very close. She imagined it perched on the branch of a large beech tree nearby, with its chest puffed out like a soprano reigning over the stage of nightfall. Other than the damp air that came into the room and a feeble light from the road, there was only darkness; and she the only spectator. The obscurity reminded her of her solitude, as she went back to bed. With pleasure she stretched her contracted muscles to rediscover their elasticity. That particular looseness must have been the result of the massage she treated herself to that afternoon. The blue eyes of the masseuse came back to her, that laconic and slender English lady, Pat.

The only words she had said were “relax, let go!” Lying naked on the couch in that stark room she tried to abandon herself to the touch of those delicate hands which insisted on one precise point: the neck muscles. Pat’s cupped palms cradled the nape of Vera’s head and slowly rotated it from right to left, repeatedly, in such a way as to seem forever. “Relax, let go! Breathe normally . . . concentrate on your breathing” Pat kept saying. Vera did all she could to deactivate her awareness of the rotation. She felt the heaviness of her head and the accumulated weariness rise in a series of long yawns, one after the other. It wasn’t easy to relinquish herself to unknown hands. She convinced herself that there was nothing she should do except entrust herself to the pleasure of abandonment. She forgot the weight of her head and the thoughts of what she should or shouldn’t do. The white walls disappeared and the rattan blinds at the windows, only form of décor, stopped attracting her attention.

A treasured sight came back to her. A wide beach of white pebbles: the bay of Campi. A large inlet looking out to two green and white islands surrounded by calm, blue sea. This was a part of the Gargano headland. She saw herself facing the sea, looking out at the horizon and dreaming of distant lands. She had swum to those islets she called The Whales. That place harbored serenity and she often went back as if she could find the secret design of happiness there.

She lay down in the sun, despite the hardness of the striped, black and brown pebbles. She had often gathered them and given them names inspired by the composition in which she put them. Catalogued with names like Little Elephant, Kite, Headless Man, they all finished up in a basket to testify to the beauty of the sea.

The red brick stairs, nibbled at by the tides, led to the wooden chalet hidden among pine trees and Mediterranean bushes that were particularly thick in that area. The carob tree with its parachute shaped foliage, became laden with sweet, woody fruits in the summer. At night the chalet was alive with teams of mice that scurried along the beams of the attic and on the roof: she imagined them in happy play as above her head the noise of clanging metal alternated with quick, tiny footsteps; rattles and creaks came seeping through the silence of the night.

The last time she’d been there the magic had attracted a young couple. They were lying in the sun, almost naked, perhaps half asleep. Vera had been struck by her own marvel at the beauty of the composition their bodies formed: a living sculpture. That intertwining of limbs was an open embrace that stretched out to the sun, filling the

recess in the rocks with a sacred atmosphere. The ritual had been enacted: the harmony of that indivisible shape was the proof. The sight of it provoked a terrible spasm at her solar plexus. Vera's breath was blocked as though the space in her chest had filled with tumbling walls, crashing, plummeting down on her heart. At each breath a pang, like a pointed spike, pierced her; a tidal wave of meteorites came crashing onto a giant mollusk. Only the relief of crying could calm her. She ran far into the shady refuge of the woods . . .

Too many years had gone by. Her father had said "it doesn't matter whether this place is ours or not, the important thing is to enjoy it while we're here. This will make it ours." She seemed to see the shape of the inflatable boat again, with the word Paco painted in red on the left side, pulled up on the beach with an array of snorkel masks and flippers, and even the red net full of clams, announcing 'possession' – as her mother would have defined it.

Her memory went back to the sleeping couple and a phrase came spontaneously to mind: we are no longer here, nor will we ever be again. Nothing will be as before. Her father had died nearly twenty years before and only the memory of his melancholy expression bore witness to his adoration of that land. No one could erase the memory of his question, "Vera, are you happy?" "Doubly happy" she wanted to reply, with a trumpet-sounding YES.

James, whom she loved, and friends in common were waiting for her in the chalet Vera's father had rented out to them. This gave her the opportunity to enjoy and share the enchantment the place was blessed with. They were all similar and that likeness bound them into one idealized family, without barriers of language or limits. They loved without possessing, without the squalor of jealousy. Only the love between them made them free, it opened horizons of joy like the giddiness of flight. She had often thought of those moments as a secret, a secret talisman. There was the precise warning to not cling to the past or to possessions, be they places or people. The only thing of any real importance is the present, the ability to love life and in any case to see the cup when it's full and move on when it's empty.

In time her memories had garbled. That sea had seen James' blond hair and his escape out the window of the chalet. One night he suddenly left in one of his enigmatic moments, leaving the rest of them to wonder and discuss his reasons: a wilderness of question marks. Something must have scratched his sensitivity. But which word or gesture could have been so intolerable to need to run away? His

disappearances were unexpected and usually remained cloaked in mystery, seeing as he didn't like talking about his behavior. Vera's happiness was short lived. James had left her stage, leaving her free to imagine the design of destiny in the lines on the pebbles.

She was alone on the terrace of the chalet, looking for Vega, Cassiopea, the Great Bear and Pegasus in the sky. The smell of her father's pipe was no longer there, nor was the intimacy of silence, not even the barely audible rustling of the bushes. Just the monotonous, squeaky chirping of the crickets kept Vera from hearing the familiar sound of pebbles being dragged by the waves. She had to take her eyes off the empty cup, forget the sight of the chalet destroyed by vandals years later. Every winter gangs of vandals plundered whatever they could, as though it were some sort of sport, designed to rid them of boredom.

That time she went back with Arnold, the giant who had taken the place of James. He was mature at forty five, his chest able to absorb Vera's silent, gushing tears as he held her in his arms. Holding her close, that mountain of a man protected her from the desolation of seeing that much loved place wrecked by the icy wind which bent the carob tree and humiliated the solitary pine, pushing its mighty head to the ground. The north wind ruled unabated over the vegetation, slamming gates, doors and windows. The blue sea turned to pitch, boiling with frothy waves as they raged and crashed. Arnold wanted to take her away from that dramatic scene, he offered her his sturdy pace and broad shoulders as refuge. On the way home he told her funny stories, trying to coax a smile. His green eyes, so caring and innocent, had a calming effect on Vera. He spoke of other houses, those they would build together, in other towns: of a made to measure house they could move and adapt to any situation or location. . . .

The red brick house in Goverflinchtstrasse in Amsterdam awaited their arrival. The flower market with its orgy of colors and smells, the bicycle rides along the canals, the perfume of bakeries, the mixture of different cuisines from the oriental restaurants: everything waited to be relished. Their lives slid along the waters of the canals with the majestic, gliding swans. Arnold told her of the ducks and seagulls that lived there, she melted into a smile as he imitated their quacks. Vera had found serenity: that mountain of a man was a huge gnome with a funny duck inside him. She observed that fine gentleman with his beret, always well dressed down to his underwear - underpants, socks - everything in perfect harmony yet in contrast to his

grimaces, expressions that transformed him. His guttural voice modulated the various range of moods he assigned to the ducks: angry ducks, frightened ducks, ducks in love, ducks on ducks. Duck talk remained a secret code in their intimate moments.

Vera remembered a duck in underpants, running, pretending to be frightened by the loving folly of his lover. “If I get you I’ll pluck you! If I catch you I’ll eat you alive, my beloved duckling!” she shouted.

“One day,” said Arnold having given in to her enraptured embrace, “you will find just a mush of crushed feathers within your arms. Then you will realize how strangling your hugs are.”

The bay of Campi, in its glimmering, post card beauty had witnessed many episodes of her life. She always went back out of nostalgia. Several times she had thought of making a will – never written – in which she asked for her ashes to be dispersed at the foot of the carob, or the pine, on The Whales, the striped pebbles or in the sea of the bay, as a logical restitution of the nourishment received. Her return was in gratitude, a homage paid to old friends, the desire to know how they are, to assure herself that they were still there, miraculously alive despite some obscure plan to destroy them. She couldn’t imagine the complete plan, the fragments of images so tightly bound to the magic of that place. Now a trajectory, an arch that joined the past to the present came to light, a point of conjunction.

Pat continued to massage. Vera felt detachment from those hands as they slid over the skin of her face with light, circular movements. One last image of the bay came back. This time Vera was on the rocks which she had swum to. She had been there for several hours. The sea, in the meantime, had changed to menacing; quick, frothy waves pounded the rocks. Just the thought of having to get into such a swarm of currents, rumbling at her feet, filled her with terror. She was doubtful she could do it: would she be able to swim across the channel and return safely to the shore? She was facing a challenge that needed immediate response. She had no idea whether the wind and rough waves would calm down or rage on. She reminded herself that she had crossed that channel before, that she had always managed to overcome panic. She had to trust her resistance even though she had no real training. While she was absorbed by these thoughts something inside her surged into awareness:

something emerged from the waves and it wasn't the first time. On that same beach, had she not wanted to bring it all to an end? Hadn't she wanted to end the unbearable wait - that held her captive - with one decisive act? All she had to do was abandon herself to the gobbling whirlpools of the battling currents. With seductive voice the abyss called to her, offering the promise of liberation. She sat motionless, embracing the empty horizon, as if waiting to dissolve into nothing through some magnetic effect.

Her eyes observed every inch of the landscape as though it were the first time ever. Vera was so immersed she felt she was each wave, rolling in the white froth, each crab walking skew on the rocks. Like the one with a succulent meal in its pincers, the empty shell left lost and alone. Others came from the sea, along with pebbles, pushed by the waves, they grabbed on to the rocks and waited for the next wave to crash with its new load of arrivals and departures.

At last she breathed in as much air as she could and pushed with her feet as she dived into the sea. The undercurrents seconded her new-found enthusiasm, the frantic movements of her legs and arms.

In the white room a gust of wind knocked the rattan blinds against the windows. Pat removed her hands from Vera's body. The rain would soon come back, the monsoons made the weather permanently unsettled. Vera came back to earth, to the present, even though the gentle breaking of waves still echoed in her ears, the waves of the Bay of Campi.

Pat's eyes were particularly bright: perhaps she had traveled through cracks of flesh, through the underground labyrinth of her memory. Slowly Vera tried to get up; she felt light as a butterfly. "The head comes last" Pat whispered.

The bedside light was on, the window was open, Vera joined her hands behind the nape of her head. Feeling forced to keep watch - despite jet lag - gave way to irritation. She hadn't slept the night before, either. A dog vented his nocturnal lament with extreme tenacity. She tried to find a harmonious rhythm to the barking, a four beat rhythm on which to fall asleep. Impossible. Straight after another dog changed the beat, ruining the pattern of rhythm already given. They weren't domestic dogs. She remembered them skinny, mostly strays and scores of them. They lay curled up in the middle of the road, nimbly avoided by the rickshaw drivers who were used to the chaotic traffic of animals, people and cars. Once she asked a

rickshaw driver why the dogs chose to sleep in the middle of the road. In his hindi accented English he answered: "You know, India is a crazy place: the dogs are crazy too!"