

The wind

As always in the morning, Samida climbed up the hill and questioned the wind. It was a gift he had had since his childhood and had extraordinarily honed over the years. He had never asked himself why. The elderly of the village claimed that he had been born near the den of a linx from which he had stolen its secrets. He had never believed that story. He only knew that he was what he was, and that was all. Anyway, he was the only one among the Orang Aslis¹ to whom the Great Spirit had given the gift: the ability to understand the wind. When he stood upwind he could sense a man in the distance or the fleeting smell of a predator blurring in the thick tropical forest. He felt the fresh breath of the rain or the suffocating darts of the sun in advance: the messenger of the wind, worshipped as a shaman.

At first, there had been only occasional perceptions but later on, with the passing of time, his ability had developed to such a great extent that he distinguished scents, as well as a wild animal, from far away. On several occasions, he had saved the tribe by predicting the overflowing of the river or an unexpected attack from enemies. For this reason, when he was only twenty, he could afford not to work as the village fully attended to his needs. The only thing he was asked was to climb up to the hilltop and ques-

¹ Natives of West Malaysia (literally meaning "inhabitants of the forest").

tion the breeze.

On that day the river Tahan looked swollen and its surface was pestered by swarms of resentful insects. The natives were grappling with their nasty mouths always ready to snap their jaws. The air was thick with a heavy shroud which, along with hard rain, was pricking their eyes with brackish drops.

After the storm had subsided, the forest gave off scented notes that a warm wind gently spread all around. Samida perceived something, an essence that he had never smelt before. It was difficult to understand and so, once in the village, he said nothing about it, for nobody would have helped him.

It was very strange indeed. A new scent, yet familiar, a mix of fragrances disturbed by a pungent stink of sweat. Irritated, he tried to concentrate. He could distinguish the jasmine, the delicate notes of frangipane, the sharp streak of sandal, but yet those scents seemed altogether different to him. A grimace crossed his face and, disappointed, he went on climbing. The wind grew stronger, dispersing a shroud of olphatic calls through the thick, lush forest.

The native quickened his pace to the hilltop. Up there the trees rivalled the hill embracing it with soft foliage in a morse-like grip.

The river looked like a muddy snake sneakily slithering its way across bare clearings. The man's eyes followed it and, right out of the blue, he spotted something that filled him with wonder. Long, sinuous boats were noisily darting across the water without any oars at work. The current seemed to be giving in to their sailing, rippling quietly to a gentle halt.

Samida stood still staring at them while birds were soaring high into the sky. Seeing the boats approaching the tribe, he then dashed quickly down the hill, scratching himself on the branches.

A thick smoke, slowly fading in the air, surrounded that strange vision.

Scared, he followed their trails and, later, saw them border the village and soon disappear behind the inlets. With his heart throbbing, he ran faster till the huts drew nearer. Life was flowing quietly there and nothing appeared to have changed.

«Hey, Thanì» he burst out panting for breath. «Did you see them too?»

«See what?»

«The boats on the river.»

«Which boats?»

«The noisy ones with no oars.»

«Boats with no oars?!»

«...followed by trails of smoke.»

«Are you making a fool of me?» said the woman resentfully.

«So, are you telling me you saw nothing?»

«Yes» insisted the woman nodding.

«Silly woman!» Samida murmured, darting away.

Utterly disappointed, he went round enquiring but wherever he went he was always given the same answer. Was it possible that such an event had gone unnoticed? Confused, he kept on enquiring, rubbing his wounds.

«Did they hurt you?» the old shaman burst out suddenly.

«Yes, they did. Those branches are very sharp» answered the native, wincing in pain.

«I didn't mean those ones» he went on, pointing at the wounds.

«I meant the bewitched boats.»

«So you saw them too?»

«No, I didn't» the shaman replied sharply, «but I had a strange vision in a trance.»

«Can you describe it?» urged the boy anxiously.

«I saw you flee from fair-skinned men at the helm of smoky boats.»

A hint of nervousness spread on the boy's face.

«What do you think it means?»

«You did see something that is yet to come» replied the shaman in a serious tone of voice. «It's for you to find the answer.»

The native watched him going away while a stream of questions flooded his thoughts. Disheartened, he retraced his steps back to the river and scanned its stream carefully. Who were those men? and what did those words mean?

That night he did not go back to his hut. Instead, he climbed up to the hilltop again. It was a quiet night and the clouds combed the moon's reddish hair. Samida sat down on a ridge listening to the whispers of the river. Slowly, his eyelids surrendered to the treacherous lure of sleep to which he drifted off unawares. After a while, a glaring vision blurred his mind and, once again, he saw the boats. They were moored off the river bank and plenty of strangers were now getting off slowly. Suddenly, the village was invaded by yelling crowds of people parting in different directions. He could clearly hear the shaman explaining to them how to make a blowpipe, and their sneering laughs at the totem of the Great Spirit. He bewilderingly watched those little, terrifying flashes coming out from eerie objects tied about their necks, and a feeling of deep anxiety shook his body. He found himself - dressed in clothes that he had never worn before - walking among small houses neatly arranged along the river banks, and, all of a sudden, he stopped and startled. In no time, the dream shifted, catapulted into a new perspective. Those strangers were after his forest, his people, the true essence of his identity. Bewildered, he started running through the undergrowth, getting where light was dimmer. The clang coming from the boats was

buzzing unrelentlessly through the air, crushing the last moments of serenity. Hunted and with his eyes filled with darkness, he kept on going till he felt himself falling into space. The ravine opened suddenly while some flashes fiercely riddled his pupils. He let out a ghastly cry and, at the height of his fear, he woke up.

Timidly, dawn broke in the distance lighting up the fading memories of night. With his blood flowing fiercely, Samida watched the dawn heaving itself above the horizon, and when light outlined the first shapes, everything dawned on him. Sooner or later, those men would be coming, changing things forever. It was a choice of fate which he would not be able to shun. That day, with a few brave friends of his, he would leave the tribe to go where he had never been before.

With the breeze brushing his forehead, he jumped to his feet. He felt the wind could help him and, slowly, he climbed down the path, ready to face the challenge. Nobody was going to rob him of his own identity.