

The color of water

She bowed to smell the flowers decorating a large tree. Despite the arrogance of its taunting pink petals, its faint perfume failed to compete against the other fragrances of the forest. From the heavy, dry scent of the ground full of moss and fallen leaves to the reassuring smell of old oaks, the air was saturated by the nature's presence. The sun had just fallen and Valeria decided she still had time to find a better floral present for her friend. More selfishly, she was not in a hurry to get back home and told herself that a bit of perfectionism had never killed anybody. However, such self justification would have been more convincing if, immediately after raising her head, she had not start running after a deer which just appeared in her field of view. Her long legs and cheerful gait were giving her a fast pace, although it was no match for the animal's decades of practice and widely superior anatomy. She stopped her pursuit with a radiant smile and, while she was catching her breath, looked around her.

The trees were younger and more separated from each other. Furthermore, the tweeting of the birds sounded more distant, giving the place an aura of peace and coziness. She noticed a trail on the ground, as if many animals had walked in the same direction. Following it and pushing away some bushes, she arrived in front of a large body of water. Thanks to the last rays of light, she could see ripples on its surface. She assumed she had disturbed the residents of the forest which were drinking there prior to her arrival. Not that she cared though, especially after remarking a human shape along the shore, a few hundred meters away from her. It was too massive to be one of the girl from the village. A crazy hope shook her: maybe a man escaped and got lost in the forest. But in that case, how could he be standing by the lake with no reaction from the water? She was too excited to think about such questions right now. She rather felt like in one of those fairy tales where an honest girl stumble upon a handsome aqua man, marry him and live happily ever after.

She ran toward him as fast as she could, waving her hands and shouting joyful greetings at him. The man did not seem to pay attention and when she reached him, she realized why. It was nothing more than a wooden sculpture. Had she been less upset, she would have admired the craft of the artist in the choice of material to make the scarce clothing, in the fine details of the face and in the feeling of power and tenderness that emanated from this masterpiece. Instead Valeria was furious to have been fooled like this. She took consolation at the thought that at least there was no witness in that remote place. Thus, when she heard the clapping of door and saw a lady going toward her from a little cabin hidden in the trees, she did not welcome her with her sweetest words:

“What the hell is wrong with you, you creepy moron? Do you find amusing to lure strangers to your big toy and hurt their feelings while peeping in delight from your barn? Aren’t you too old for such immature prank?”

“I deeply apologize, please be sure there is no malice in my work and that I didn’t mean to harm you in any way. I am part-artist, part-sociologist and with this work, I want to illustrate and understand the role that men play in our collective psyche. In fact if you have time, I would be grateful if you could answer a questionnaire about your feelings and expectations regarding love, procreation and related matters.”

“Ah! You’ve got a nerve. Let me tell you something, said Valeria, pointing her finger to the head of the women. It will rain a lot tomorrow so I better go to sleep and get ready for work. As for you, you should stop daydreaming about men, get back to the village and start doing a useful job there as well.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned back from where she came. Fortunately, she managed to find back and gather the pink camellia despite the darkness. Going straight to her room, she was trembling with anger, first directed toward that crazy sociologist, but even more toward herself: how could she let her emotions drive her so foolishly?

The smell of eggs frying in a subtle blend of pepper and paprika woke her up. She opened her half empty drawer and picked the trousers at the top of the pile, as they looked convenient enough for a day of work. A few seconds of reflection convinced her that a blue top with a large sparkling butterfly would highlight her slender body while giving her sufficient freedom of movement. The most difficult part was as always the choice of shoes. First because the second drawer was full of them. Second because her decision should let her face any situation the day may bring. They had to be solid, to stand for hours in a field; closed, to keep her feet dry, but also comfortable, to walk in the streets at night time; relaxed and graceful, to surprise her friends with an impromptu dance; sophisticated, to impress them—but not too much, to assure the world she was a down-to-earth person—, and even intriguing, fruity, and picturesque to make her feel good. In other words, she had to pick the right shoes for the 9228th day of her life, and she loved that.

Upon leaving her room, she took a look in the mirror hanging on the door. She was not a teenager anymore but her face was still chubby, which sometimes made her look more glad than she was. This was reinforced by her frequent smiles, which revealed two rows of pearly teeth occupying her mouth with obvious joy and slight anarchy. In contrast, her eyes appeared more classic and graced with a kind of aristocratic superiority, as if they were well aware that their deep shade of dark blue was unmatched in a dozen kilometers around. As her examination moved away from this pleasant face of hers, she sighted softly at the view of her hair. Not that she would complain about its light blond color, evocative of a morning summer sun over a wild beach. But she had since long lost hope to comb them in any meaningful way. She got used to its free spirit that could be curly one day and smooth the next. Hopefully people will pay more attention to her shiny butterfly than her messy mane she told herself while walking down the stairs to the kitchen.

Her mom had just finished cooking but was still humming a cheerful tune that Valeria had heard a thousand time when she was a child. Both women

smiled at each other as they sat opposite sides of the table and started eating.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in last night, said her mom, absorbed at the sight of her plate and only glancing at her daughter once in a while. I was going one more time through the exams of one of my students. I think I told you already about Christina..."

"Yes mom, I know everything there is to know about the *amazing* Christina."

Valeria could not believe her sarcasm went unnoticed yet her mom continued without hesitation:

"She is rather bright indeed, you should see how many philosophers she can cite in a single paragraph! In addition, her family is willing to send her to university. If we work hard enough this semester, I'm optimistic about her application. Of course, if she gets accepted, she will need a tutor, so I may finally move to the capital to help her."

"Finally", echoed Valeria, nodding in support and watching her mom's eyes filled with stars.

She deemed it too cruel to remind her they were having this conversation every year. There was a seemingly endless supply of brilliant students attending her mom's school. Yet all of them either get discouraged by the selectivity of the university admission process or failed the entrance exam. Like her mom thirty years ago.

Looking around the kitchen, she could not see any empty bottle on the floor. She deduced that this Christina was still making enough progress to keep her teacher in that hopeful, sober phase. Which in turn meant Valeria could enjoy a little longer the vision of her mom at the prime of her elegance. Her body was thin and dry as she was getting close to her fiftieth birthday. But it was more than counter balanced by her impeccable taste in clothing. Even for breakfast she was wearing a strict red dress, slightly worn out but fitting her divinely. Completing this outfit were measured and efficient gestures, a composed tone of voice and a severe chignon of silver hair. Knowing from experience the wreck she would turn to in a few months, Valeria got lost in the contemplation of this beautiful lady. To such an extent that her mom felt compelled to abandon her own daydreaming and asked her daughter how she was.

"I gathered flowers in Stern woods. They will make a nice gift for Amelia. The dog she got as a child died last week. He was so cute, we all loved him, but for her he was family, and his death has taken its toll. Two days ago she forgot the keys of the storage room at work and I had to go to her place to bring them back. Plus her mood is swinging all the time. One minute she wants us all to sing campfire songs and the next, she cries as if there was no tomorrow. Not only can't she do any useful work but it's starting to sap the team moral. I know a mere bouquet won't solve the problem, but if we show her our support, I hope she will gradually get over it. Otherwise, we will have to replace her, and this will involve time consuming interviews."

Not to mention I'm lonely enough that I can't afford to lose a friend in that way, thought Valeria while sipping the hot tea her mom brought while she was talking. She wanted to tell her about the incident with the man sculpture in the woods. It was pointless though, because she was not paying attention. Valeria could see it from the way she was twisting her hands while gazing through the window, dreaming about academic success. A more striking evidence was the

yellow shade of the aura surrounding her head. Valeria had noticed its color since the beginning and it meant that nothing she could say would interest her.

For a long time, Valeria thought everyone could see those auras, just like everyone could speak and hear. And with the years, she understood how their colors were guiding her at interpreting people's moods and desires. However, it did not make her life easier. One day at a shop, she warned her mom what a bad idea it was to buy a toy there, since the merchant was lying to them. Asked to explain herself by an embarrassed mother, all she could say was that the seller looked too green to be honest. No one was convinced of course, and once they got home, Valeria realized she had been given a unique gift. Being well versed in children stories, she knew that great powers come with great responsibilities. Thus she conceived a plan as ambitious and innocent as a child could do: she would become the ultimate peacekeeper, solving conflicts thanks to her uncanny mind reading ability.

Her own mother being so dubious, she first exposed her project to her teacher at school. This teacher was a compassionate lady, always patient with children and quite used to their unpredictable ideas. But this one deserved a prize for its originality and impracticalness. Therefore, it never came to her mind that it could be true. Instead, she spent a great deal of time trying to assess whether Valeria was being molested by her family or by her schoolmates. Although it was well intended, being dumbed down like that was also frustrating, and the disappointed pupil decided to try a different approach. She would practice her skill for a few years, and then make a spectacular demonstration in front of a committee of experts.

She grabbed a notebook and, with unusual resoluteness for such a young child, started recording colors and states of mind from as many people as possible over several months. This involved asking a lot of personal and precise questions, meaning that along precious data, she gained the reputation of a tireless listener, full of empathy. She also noticed that most of her fellow human beings were going through common emotional turmoils. This helped her put her own problems into perspective and gave her an emotional stability that later proved much useful in her line of work. The villagers became aware of her precocious wisdom and would often visit her to ask for advice, even on matters usually not devoted to teenagers.

Her fame grew until it reached the ears of two high-ranked administrative officers of the regional capital, who decided to pay her a visit out of curiosity. Valeria seized that opportunity to exhibit her abilities and bring them to the next level. She sat for three hours with the two women and painted them the most terrifyingly detailed psychological portrait of themselves they could have ever imagined. Asking them to focus on various emotions of their choice, the young prodigy identified them with astonishing precision. At the end of the session, measuring their satisfaction did not require any special trick, as both ladies were giving triumphant smiles to each other. Already envisioning a future of assisting her country by negotiating with terrorists or bringing back social peace through informed dialog, Valeria was also delighted. At least until the officials announced her they were from a secret intelligence unit, and that she could joined them after a few extra tests in a secure laboratory. She would

then have the privilege to serve the state by interrogating its worst enemies kept in jails all over the territory.

It was so far from her noble aspirations that she urged them to leave immediately and forget about her existence. In her rage, she otherwise threaten to reveal all the dirty secrets she just learned about them. They complied without resistance, but from that day on, she understood that what she once considered a gift was more of a curse. Either people would not believe she could see auras, or they would try to use her skill with no regard for her own motivations. Following this realization, she stopped taking notes and asking questions. She also closed herself to others and, although she was still polite and helpful, refused to give advice anymore. Soon villagers forgot about her past behavior and everything returned to normal, except for Valeria having lost her childhood illusions.

The sound of fat raindrops crashing into the window interrupted her recollection of such bitter memories. It meant she was already late to work. After kissing her unresponsive mom goodbye, she left home without her jacket. The dark clouds were occluding the pale morning light and the horizon was blurred by the rain falling in tight-knit squadrons. No wind was dissipating its smell, which was more rough and aggressive than the one of a first gentle spring rain. Yet Valeria was observing the deluge with an amused smile. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and let her mind wander, first right above her head but soon rising into the sky like a daredevil bird. An outside observer would not have seen anything, yet Valeria fancied imagining her spirit as a trail of colored steam zigzagging through the air.

Soon she got in touch with the water. As usual, she started by a time of silent observation. The droplets were falling with an excitement proportional to the number of boring days spent packed in a cloud and moved aimlessly around the continent. Some of them were racing to reach the ground, while others took more freedom with gravity to execute complex ballets before landing on their final destination.

Valeria was also the recipient of unspoken messages which she assumed were intended to be humorous yet were too alien to make much sense to her. She often wondered whether those kinds of communication were sent from individual units of liquid, or if it was only an illusion maintained by the rain as a whole to ease interactions. Up to this day, this was still a heavily debated point. On one side stood unifiers, asserting that all the water in the world shared a single consciousness. On the other side, individualists were telling stories of tiny quantity of liquid forming special bonds and visiting them regularly over the years. Although that topic provided countless entertaining discussions, in practice the point was moot. What really mattered was the possibility to successfully influence the behavior of water at a mesoscopic scale to serve human purposes.

Which was what Valeria undertook. It was not unlike convincing someone to do you a favour. She started by projecting general feelings of happiness and calm to draw positive attention on herself. Then she shared her joy at being covered in water: when taking a relaxing shower after a tough day of work, running under the rain in a torrid summer field, or swimming in a crystal-clear lake illuminated by the raising sun. However, she nuanced her judgement by

explaining how uncomfortable it was to spend the day in wet clothes, and that when the temperature was low like today, it could even make her sick. A major difficulty was that concepts such as sickness had no direct equivalent for the rain. One could try to find analogies, like being polluted by a nefarious external entity. Yet it was more effective to transcribe everything into basic emotions, for instance the frustration of being bed-ridden. This was demanding at first, and required a leap of faith, since it was not clear whether water could apprehend notions like frustration or pain. But while no one could explain why, it was sensible to human emotions, provided they were presented in a quiet, logical order, without sudden variations. Indeed, Valeria could feel the water agreeing with her and, once she started walking, the droplets were avoiding her, although many were playfully going as close as possible to her skin.

I promised that actual events will happen in what is to follow ;)