



TALES OF A VOYAGE

LOST

It seemed like any other day of his long journey.

B awoke on February 4, 2014, in a beautiful room facing out over the vineyards of Hawke's Bay. His host had already gone to work, and he was alone. He meditated for twenty minutes. He had started this practice with a yogi who had hosted him during his time in Hawaii, but without his guidance the meditation sessions were much shorter and less profound.

As he had every morning since the month of September, when he was still in New York, he prepared muesli for breakfast. He had thought to keep at least one part of his daily menu the same to make up for the wide variety of foods that he would try in the following months. With time, that choice had become a rite that gave a regular start to his days.

As he ate, he reread the guidebook's directions for the trail he intended to take. The evening before, he had discussed it with his host, a teacher full of kindness and hospitality who had hosted him for some days in response to his request on Couchsurfing. It was an easy walk to the peak of a hill with a beautiful view of the Omahald Valley.

The drive was short enough. He stopped in Hastings to get sandwiches and a bottle of water, then he headed inland. The road wasn't busy, a difficulty for him. Without seeing other cars, he risked forgetting to drive on the left, something he had struggled with since arriving in New Zealand.

He parked the car on the side of the road near the trailhead, which he found with some difficulty. The bush was much thicker than he had expected, but the path was easily visible and he began to follow it. The heat of the bright day had already dried the ground, which until the day before had been soaked with rain. The rays of the sun illuminated the forest and intensified the varied colors of the plants and shrubs which he made his way through. The walk was enjoyable. At the end of the trail, the vegetation opened onto rocky terrain that rose gently towards a pass looking out over the next valley.

B reached the top as the sun reached its zenith. He breathed in the fresh air for a long time and savored the view of the valley. He opened the knapsack with the sandwiches. While he ate, absorbed in the panorama, he thought about those that he had seen during his travels. He remembered a forest in Oregon. There the trees are very tall and the underbrush is open; here the shrubs smother the taller plants and hinder their growth. The two forests, in different hemispheres, are at almost the same latitude and are both near the Pacific Ocean, but they are otherwise so different.

B didn't pause long, wanting to be home before too late in the afternoon. He descended along a rocky outcropping that pushed into the forest, but before entering it, he sat down and looked at the sky, the outcropping, the plants. He listened to the sound of the

wind that had just risen up. He was happy to have reached the antipodes—almost—of his own home and to leave a trace of his presence in such a remote place. Unconsciously he made gestures and was moved by emotions that in some way interacted with the forest. He returned to his walk, thinking he was following the same path he had taken on the way out, but after ten minutes he realized it had vanished. He turned back. He thought he had found the path this time and followed it, but after five minutes this one disappeared as well. He again turned back the way he had come.

He made many attempts before realizing he was lost. He looked at his watch; it was two in the afternoon. He checked his cell phone, but he had no service. He consulted his iPad, which he had brought with him to take pictures. At home he had studied the path on the Google satellite map and, luckily, taken a screenshot of it. Looking at it, he figured out where he was. He had passed a stream, and he just had to follow it to reach the road where he had left his car. He had a compass, and he had observed the position of the sun on his trip out. He had sufficient information to head in the right direction and more than five hours of light available.

He didn't feel lost any more.

He decided to give up on his search for the trail and head towards the road, crossing through the bush. He didn't know that the mild winters typical of this region allow the plants, seasonal elsewhere, to become perennial shrubs. A tangle of branches thickened the underbrush, making it difficult to get through without adequate leg protection. He advanced slowly, but the thick bush scratched his hands and face and left wounds on his legs.

At five in the evening, after a tiring walk that had forced him to take long breaks, he reached the peak of the hill, from which he saw the road. He looked at his cell phone—he had service! He

called his host and informed him of what had happened. He suggested calling emergency services, but **B**, judging the road to be two kilometers away, proudly refused to ask for help. Encouraged, he began to make his way again, but the bush was particularly thick in that area, and **B** was forced to make many detours to circumvent the most impenetrable spots.

After two hours, he was still in the forest and had no idea how far he was from the road. Exhausted and aching from the wounds to his legs and hands, he looked again at his cell phone, hoping in vain to call for help: there was no service in the valley.

He realized that he would have to spend the night in the forest, and he was not by any means prepared. When he had left the house, he had thought to take a short walk in the hottest hours of the day. He wore a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He had with him in his knapsack a now half-empty bottle of water, his iPad without a connection, a small manually rechargeable flashlight, and a compass. Nothing else. It was summer, but the night would be cold and windy.

He remembered a scene from the film *Dersu Uzala* and began to collect leaves to protect himself from the cold. He worked for almost an hour, making a big pile of leaves under a pine tree, the needles of which were the base of his bed. He lay down and covered himself with the leaves.

It wasn't yet dark; he glanced around and saw, a little ways off, a little bird watching him, and then worn out, he nodded off.

The wind woke him; many leaves had flown away, and he was cold. He got up, gathered the leaves again, covered himself, using branches to protect his vegetal blanket from the wind, and stretched out again. He had slept a little more than an hour and,

refreshed by the rest, his mind had regained clarity.

His sleepless night in the woods had begun.

At first he was taken by a great rage towards himself. His thoughts crossed through the forest as if they were screams. *How did I get myself into such trouble?! How could I be so careless? On the walk out I should have noticed that the path wasn't always well marked and flagged the unclear points, or else turned back. I should have called emergency services when I could have; now my host will be worried about me.* These reproaches shook him as if they had come from his father. He stirred, moving the leaves and exposing himself to the wind. He got up, collected the leaves, and again organized his shelter. He had to stay still to avoid uncovering himself.

On his back in the bed, he look above him at the branches of the pine tree that covered a large part of the sky above him. The tall shrubs around him closed off the horizon. Nevertheless, small portions of the sky were visible where the lower branches of the pine ended. It was a cloudy and starless sky, but night hadn't completely fallen; a weak gleam filtered through the clouds and **B's** eyes, by now accustomed to the dark, began to recognize different colors in the leaves and pine needles waving in the wind. To keep calm, he thought about his long journey. He looked back on the five weeks passed in New York and the week in Washington DC. He recalled the stay in South Carolina with his teacher friends and the tour of their schools. He recollected the cities that he had passed through on his long journey towards Oregon: St. Louis, Louisville, Kansas City, Cheyenne, Salt Like City, Boise, Bend. He recalled, in the dark of the forest, the Thanksgiving lunch with friends in Oregon. The three-week stay in Hawaii. Christmas and New Year's spent on Kiritimati. The

week in the Fiji Islands, the three weeks in Australia. He had been in New Zealand for a week. His voyage had lasted for more than four months, enjoyably, without any particular difficulties, and now? His thoughts again crossed through the forest. *How did I get myself into such trouble...?* He stirred again, uncovering himself. He got up again, remade his bed, and lay down again. To keep himself calm he needed to stop thinking about his adventure.

Billions upon billions of stars in the universe, billions upon billions of atoms in the body.

The mantra, personally developed in the Hawaiian meditation sessions, arose in his mind, and repeating it calmed him.

Billions upon billions of atoms in the body, billions upon billions of stars in the universe.

Then, the mantra abandoned, his thoughts wandered to the history of the universe. The inflation of elementary particles that took place thirteen million years ago, an instant after the Big Bang. The hydrogen and helium atoms that formed after three hundred thousand years, the appearance of the first stars of helium and nitrogen after a billion years. The stars that aggregated in galaxies, the explosion of supernovas, the formation of more complex atoms through nucleosynthesis, the aggregation of atoms in interstellar clouds with the formation of new stars and planets. The formation of the Earth, four billion years ago. The movement of the tectonic plates...The first life forms...The forests...The dinosaurs...The impact of the meteorite...The development of mammals...The appearance of humans in Africa, the migration of man all the way to Australia sixty thousand years ago. The formation of agricultural communities and urban aggregations only five thousand years ago. The invention of an efficient steam engine in 1765, the industrial revolution, the anthropization of

most of the Earth. The development, now, of a communication and transportation network that had allowed **B** his long journey up to the forest in which he was spending the night.

The meditation on the history of the universe made **B** smile over his situation. To live in symbiosis with the forests had been, until not long ago, the daily experience of his species.

B opened his eyes and looked at the portion of sky visible to him. It was now nighttime. The clouds were black, but the foliage moving in the wind gave infinite variety to the grays, which he contemplated for some time. It was a dance of subtle shades, at times soft and light, at others abrupt and wild. To his gaze the dance took on more and more color and meaning: his presence was in some way sensed by the forest, by the whole forest, with senses different from his own.

He felt as if he were surrounded by life forms that were in some way aware of his presence. This feeling unsettled him deeply. He closed his eyes and appealed to reason to resist the frame of mind that his scientific training labeled "animism."

His thoughts turned to the history of the earth and the forest in which he found himself: an ecosystem that had appeared four hundred million years ago was harboring a man whose species had appeared only two hundred thousand years ago. The enormous steps in the development of knowledge and in the exploitation of the Earth's resources had led many members of the human species to consider the forests to be inert objects, even though they had lived in symbiosis for hundreds of thousand of years.

The forest systems developed, in the roots and in the branches, networks of chemical relationships that allowed evolutionary

adaptions over hundreds of millions of years. In two hundred thousand years of life with the forests, the human species had learned to read and understand, for its own survival, some signs of the biological and evolutionary experience of the forests. That night **B** was living the honor of recovering fragments of a lost perception.

With this new awareness, he opened his eyes again. The clouds were lighter; with the dawn, the movement of the leaves blended on a brighter palette of grays. For a moment, the pine needles above him were a silvery white. The whole forest took on varied shades of green.

B dozed off, feeling protected.

Distant voices woke him. A team of volunteers was already searching for him. When his host hadn't seen him come home, he had notified the nearest police station, and emergency services volunteers had begun to search for him even before daybreak. **B** shouted to attract the attention of the team, which soon reached him, fed him, gave him a thermal jacket, and guided him out of the woods with sure strides, proceeding in single file, all the way to the local police station. **B**, dazed and relieved, thanked his rescuers, apologizing to them for his carelessness. He called his thoughtful host, and they agreed upon a dinner to celebrate the escaped danger with friends. Then, feeling a different person, he climbed into his car to head home.

Before leaving, **A** regarded the woods for a long time.