

In the Womb of the World



Autumn in Summer. One of those misplaced afternoons when trees look uncomfortable in their bright green suits and dresses. Huge water drops hung precariously from the lips of laurel leaves, gathering impetus from the moisture laden atmosphere. I had walked this route through the woods on just a few occasions and today had been tempted to follow a narrow grassy path running away between lofty pines. The way disappeared through heavy wet elders enticing this new adventurer to explore. I had not noticed the path before, yet today there were strange, impulsive powers at work. The path meandered among the trees. Skirting ancient roots, it rose and fell before climbing so high I could see mist-laden treetops beyond me. A blackbird rattled a warning note again and again. Then its call was silenced as a lone robin arrived and stayed, hopping in front of me, turning its head as if to say, *'come on, come on.'* I followed. The un-trodden path began to descend now into dank deeper woods among thick vegetation which in Spring would shine with many varied and vibrant colours. I considered turning back but felt even more now that strange compulsion which must grip explorers, mountaineers and deep-sea divers - the urge to go on, to know what lies beyond the present moment.

I was curious because the path was descending steeply now, taking me well below the level of the place where I had first walked. Still it continued to wind down and down, escaping the daylight more and more until at last it disappeared against a huge block of granite into which an oak tree root had penetrated. The tip of the oak was bent over as though pointing around the rock. It waved with no help from vagrant winds. I was even more curious. Following the beckoning

branch I discovered another rock beyond this one. The two rocks made a majestic entrance and between them a new path descended even lower. The entrance was curtained by huge tangled tresses of creeper-bound ivy lit by rays of light dappling through distant treetops and kept verdant by pools of water either side of the path. Thousands of lichens had attached to the curtain and the rocks, creating a beautiful decorative pattern of sparkling greys and greens. I had to follow. It was dark at first but I could see my way as my eyes adjusted. Light shining between the rocks behind me now beamed like a torch, illuminating the way until I turned a corner into what can only be described as a tunnel. This was strangely dry except for gentle running streams either side of the path, glistening in the darkness. I paused. The streams were flowing out behind me - uphill! They fed the pools I had noticed by the rocks, nourishing the greenery. The path was now paved but damp and I had to be careful to guard against slipping. I descended still further into darkness which for some reason I realised, was not dark! I could see my way clearly. I thought I should pinch myself to see if I was dreaming but then thought how would I know the pinch was not just part of the dream?! I continued. Down and down. Was this some old mine shaft? There was no sign of mine workings. The walls were smooth and soft as though decorated with sheets of moss, sparkling somehow in the non-light. Was this a burrow? If it was then it was the home of some very large creature! I am surprised now that I was so unafraid, but I was already feeling a strange welcome warmth as though I was a guest in the right place at the right moment.

It was then that I felt the first tremor. It followed that warm wafting welcome. It was the first of many soft, almost musical rumbles I have felt, feel now and maybe, I hope will go on feeling for as long as I live. It was followed by further intermittent rumbles and tremors which were somehow comforting, disturbing, enticing, satisfying, challenging, all at the same time. I turned a corner in the tunnel and for the first time, felt a glimmer of panic sweep over me and away behind me. I could hear movement. I could feel a breath like a gentle wafting of a summer breeze which held all the perfume of a flower meadow after first dew. Someone - or something - was coming towards me.

In that darkness which was not dark I saw a contrasting grey form. I regret now that I first thought of it as a gigantic slug, sliding towards me. Its huge grey round body - if it really had one - seemed to fill the tunnel. My temporary fears were soon abated when I saw the smile. For a moment I wondered if a slug smiled when it was about to eat a lettuce leaf, or even another creature, but this smile was genuine. It was for me, not for itself. The smile was all I could see. I tried to peer beyond it to discover what sort of body was behind the face. The creature was just face! Face, but wholly human. It was the sort of face a small child would draw. A round circle, with two enormous eyes and a smiley mouth turned up at the ends. There was a raised mound between the eyes like a human nose with just one nostril. The mouth was made to smile I thought, but I was to learn how it could also turn down with sadness under the weight of tears. Speech was not necessary. The creature did not say much. There was just a small lips movement and instantly I heard words in my mind. I think the creature probably spoke a language that every being on earth and in universes beyond could mind-read. Even more than that its thoughts were right through my whole being.

The creature's smile spread as its eyes fully opened. The eyelids blinked - or was it winked at me. I felt at ease. So much so that I could return the smile and look into those gigantic eyes. It was my turn to blink. The creature's eyes were like round screens in which pictures flashed - constantly changing and from time to time pausing. Obviously the creature wanted me to see. It took a few moments to realise the pictures represented visuals of thoughts which had been in my mind recently - in magazines I had read; from news bulletins I had watched. I could only concentrate on one eye at a time. I chose the right one. It flashed through many scenes, stopping briefly at ones I recognised. They were all tragic pictures of human horrors.

Huge, staring, unseeing eyes of starving children, their faces covered in flies rising from the barren dusty fields beyond the frightened family group. Then men and women running along desolate streets between mounds of rubble which hours before had been their homes. Now it was families throwing away sodden lifetime possessions from their flooded homes. A homeless young man bundled in a wet mattress-filled shop doorway; a child sold into a life of

depravity; a teenager running from a writhing form, the knife in his hand still dripping his victim's blood

Seeing such scenes individually in magazines and on the news was hard enough, but to see them paraded in this way was unbearable. Fortunately the eye misted over. I could see no more because the screen was clouded. Tears were flowing, channelling down the creature's nose shape to fall from the lip of its partially down-turned mouth. My gaze was turned to the right eye. Many more pictures. Those which slowed for me to see were so different. Pictures again which I had paused over recently, but happier ones.

A maternity ward where a radiant mother cradled the new life she had brought into the world. Then a church, the choir still singing as a happy crowd cast their confetti over a beautiful young couple with a whole life before them. An army nurse, still smiling through her weariness, comforting her stricken patients temporarily resident in an underground shelter; a party of schoolchildren, wearing yellow safety gloves too big for them, picking litter and plastic waste from the beach in hope of saving their future environment; a church standing above floodwater, full of generously donated supplies for the flood victims of their village; a farmer in South Sudan, on his knees, giving thanks for the gift of oxen and plough to change the life of his whole community

Now this eye too clouded, moistened and began to run with tears, but surely happy weeping. The creature's mouth was smiling again. The tears collected in a pool before running from the corner of its lips. I have never felt such an overwhelming experience of joy and pain melded by an immeasurable love. It suddenly became clear to me. The tremors and rumbles which reverberated through the ground - through my being - were tremors of love's joy - rumbles of love's pain. A silence followed. A silence I could feel. I can only describe it as being in the womb of the world, snug, secure, restful. It felt like standing under a blanket of stars as a single atom in a vast universe. The tears had meaning too. They fell to the ground either side of the creature, making little rivulets which grew into streams. They were the streams either side of the path which I had noticed at the entrance, their moisture reviving that beautiful curtain of vegetation which had first excited and invited me.

The creature turned, worm like in the tunnel. Its eyes closed leaving a perpetual, pained smile. I heard *'farewell'*. The message ran through me as the creature withdrew quickly into the dark non-darkness. I saw no more. Immediately I was embraced by wings, softer than feathers, lighter than gossamer cobwebs, holding me in the most tender embrace. I was rising at speed, my senses dulled, until I found my previous consciousness. I was standing on the woodland path where I had begun the day. Dazed I slowly looked around. The world was still damp with dripping leaves. Now the sun had broken through and every leafy tear held a miniature rainbow.

Many time since I have walked for hours through those same woods. I have never again found the track which led down into more than human deeps, but I have often paused to feel the earth tremor; to hear a distant rumble; to feel cold and warm throughout and wanted to pray about all the evil and beautiful things in the world - even throughout many strange universes.

I have never told my story. Who would believe me? If people did believe they would surely destroy my dreams! They would search the woods. They would uproot trees and excavate every rocky area. Perhaps they would find the deep tunnel and the amazing creature, but then they would want to capture it, destroy it, dissect it, analyze it, debate it and be divided in their opinions. I am sure they would build a great glass shrine around the rocky tunnel entrance inside which would be a visitor centre and a gift shop where the tourist could buy little bottles of 'creature tears' - three for the price of two!

And me? I will be left with tremors and rumbles reminding me of the most beautiful expressions of love at the depths of everything, and hope that others have been and will be drawn by the same magnetic love to follow their creature of the deep - finding their own way into the foundations of a real world.