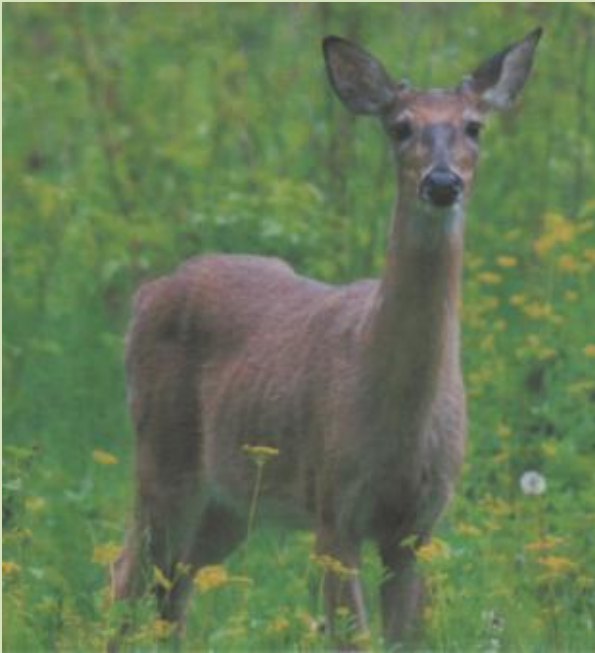


On the Wrong Side



The woodland stream was unusually noisy, its waters boiled out of the mist creeping through moisture laden grasses. Millions of raindrops free-falling through the night were now crammed together in a mad rush back to the sea. The gentlest of breezes lifted leaves, playfully shaking droplets into mini waterfalls, making them ready for the rising sun to dry and nourish them. A deer, grazing at the edge of the wood lifted her nose to scent the newness of the day. Her ears twitched to the sound of a voice, not unfamiliar but rarely heard this side of the water.

I can't get back. The bleating voice had the unmistakable inflexions of an ageing ewe and now the mist unveiled her. *What are you doing here?* The deer asked politely. *You don't often come this side of the water. Is there no grass in your pasture? How did you cross? You must have been here all night!*

There's enough grass there, the ewe replied. *But I fancied the look of what's over here. It was so inviting and the waters were so low last evening waded across. But then when the wind and rain came in such a storm I sheltered among the trees. I didn't get any sleep though - the woods are full of strange noises. Now it's morning. I can hear the flock calling and I've found the river again, but it's too full and flowing too fast for me to get across. The water is right over the banks.* She bleated loudly bringing a chorus of response from the other side. *There's no sense to this weather. There's either too much water or not enough.*



I don't know about that, replied the deer who was not only gentle but very fair-minded. *Most days when I come here the water levels seem just right. There's always water in the pools. The stream will fall again. The grass will still be there. It may not suit you, but the water is very necessary and much appreciated. I can hear the larch tree roots sucking up moisture. The acorns on this oak are giggling-drunk. There are difficult times but it always gets sorted out in the end.*

The ewe preferred not to enter into an argument, however amiable. *I do really know that. But why does all the rain come together. And when I'm on the wrong side.*

You chose to come over. The deer was kind but lacking in sympathy. *What's wrong about this side? You seem to be enjoying the grass and isn't that why you crossed the river?*

But nobody told me I wouldn't be able to get back! What's wrong is that my lot are all over there and that's where I belong!

Can't you swim? the deer asked.

In this coat? No way! Last year a nephew of mine - a nephew six times removed -drowned in a torrent like this. Why, I ask. He wasn't doing any harm. He was just happily nibbling grass when he lost his footing. Why? We talk about these things in the meadow sometimes. Deep down in our wool we know there is One great Spirit who made the world and has it all in her care, but why does she let these terrible things happen? And it's not just the river. When I do go back the field will be soggy wet and we'll all be at risk of foot-rot. or I'll break a leg in one of the muddy hollows.. Why doesn't she arrange it so there's always just enough water - just enough of everything. Then we'd all be content.

The deer moved back towards the trees but the ewe, still in conversational mode even through a mouthful of wet grass, called to her - *What about you. Don't you get frightened in the dark pine woods with all that rustling and those weird calls? Don't you ask these questions? Don't you think it's all unfair?*

The deer lifting her head gracefully, looked around her before replying. *Yes, I do ask the questions, and No, I don't have an answer for you.* Always cautiously on the move she took a few steps closer to the wood. *But sometimes - on a quiet evening when the sun paints sparkling rainbows on the ferns and the breeze laughs in the tall grass, I feel the One - a presence - a sense of peace and good - like birdsong without words or tune - the sound of the One - and just for a moment I feel safe. I feel sure she or he's here - and I don't need answers.*

While she spoke, the deer became almost invisible among the trees. She turned for one last word. *By the way, you could always use the bridge. It's just a little way down stream. You can see it from here!*

Of course, in the human world, people know where to find the bridge.