

THE FOREST

Blind was walking waist-deep in the coarse weeds. His sneakers squelched. He'd managed to take on water somewhere. His heels clung to the wet rubber, and he was thinking of taking off the shoes and continuing barefoot. He decided against it: the grass could cut, there were thorns in it, and also disgusting slugs that, once squashed, were almost impossible to wash off. There were other things too, something resembling soggy cotton balls, and something else, like clumps of tangled hair, and all of that inhabited the noxious grass, ate it, crawled in it, intoxicated by its vapors, gave birth, and died, turning into muck. It was all grass, if you stopped to think about it, all flesh was as grass and nothing more.

Blind took a dainty snail's shell off a tendril that slashed at his hand. The snails clung to the tops of the weeds and knocked against each other, sounding like hollow walnuts. He slipped the shell in his pocket. He knew the pocket was going to be empty when he returned, but he still took something with him every time, out of habit.

He threw back his head. The moon washed out his face. The Forest was very close now. Blind quickened his step, even though he knew he shouldn't; the Forest did not like the impatient and could draw back from them. It had happened before: he'd search for it and not be able to find, feel it nearby and not be able to enter. The Forest was moody and fickle. Many roads led to it, but all of them were long and winding. You could go through the swamp or through the noxious meadow. Once he'd ended up in it by crossing an abandoned dump strewn with busted tires, rusting iron, and broken glass; there he gashed his hand on a piece of sharp metal and lost his favorite rope bracelet. That time the Forest grabbed him of its own accord, picked him up in its tree-trunk arms and pulled him inside, into the stuffy thickets of its damp heart.

The Forest was beautiful. It was shaggy and mysterious, and concealed deep burrows and the strange denizens of those burrows. It never knew the sun and never let the wind through, it was inhabited by the dogheads and the whistlers, giant blackcap mushrooms and bloodsucking flowers grew in it. Somewhere, Blind was never quite sure where, exactly, there was the lake and the river feeding it, maybe even more than one. The road to the Forest began in the hallway, at the doors of the dorms behind which boys snored and whispered, on the moaning rickety floorboards, right behind the indignantly squeaking rats scurrying to avoid him in the dark.

Blind was ready to enter it now. The noxious meadow ended. He lingered, inhaling the scent of the wet leaves, and then heard the footsteps. The Forest vanished in an instant and took the smells with it. The footsteps

drew closer, it was obvious now that the walker limped. He also reeked of nail polish and mint gum. Blind smiled and stepped forward.

“Hey! Who’s there?” Vulture whispered, shrinking away.

A match flared.

“Oh. It’s you...”

“You have frightened my Forest, Gimpyleg,” Blind said lightly, but the voice betrayed his disappointment.

“My sincere apologies!” Vulture sounded genuinely upset. “But there is someone coming through right behind. Heavyweight, too. Why don’t we clear the way?”

“All right.”

They stepped closer to the wall. Vulture leaned on it gingerly, trying not to get the stains on himself. Blind pressed against it from head to toe. Somewhere in the vicinity of the Crossroads, a door slammed. Moonlight pierced the corridor. Then the sound of footsteps and breathing. Something heavy was treading the path. It was pushing through, moaning and huffing, the debris from the tops of the trees cascading over its back. The steam curling from its nostrils brushed their faces, making them press even harder into the wall. The beast stopped, inhaled nervously, trembled, and thundered off, noisily breaking the trunks along the way and leaving a blackened trail of trampled earth in its wake. Blind turned to Vulture.

“That was your Elephant.”

“Come off it, Blind! Elephant is a wimp, he would never go out by himself in the night. Even in the middle of the day he is scared of being alone.”

“Still, it was him. Go see for yourself if you want.”

“I don’t. If you say it was him, then it was. Which is very strange. And not a good sign. Would you like to go and have a smoke now?”

Vulture pulled open the door to one of the disused classrooms. They entered, closed the door behind them, and sat down on the floor. They lit up and made themselves comfortable. Then lay down, propped on their elbows. The smells of the meadow returned. Time rushed past. Gray House lurked within its own mute walls.

“Do you remember, Blind... You were talking about this wheel once. The huge ancient wheel, with so much stuff clinging to it that it’s not entirely clear it is a wheel anymore, and it turns. Very slowly, but still it turns. One could get run over, while the other is carried up high. Remember? You said then that it was possible to predict its motion by the squeaking noise, long before it actually completes the turn. Listen to the squeaking and tell.”

“I remember. It was just silly talk.”

“That’s as it may be. But do you hear the squeaking now?”

“No. It is not turning in my direction, if it’s turning at all.”

Vulture coughed. Or laughed.

“Just as I thought. An odd fellow. I wonder what it was that he wanted.”

“Past tense already?”

“So it would appear. He is not one of the old ones, and that’s all there’s to it. Take us, for example. We know things, even if we don’t exactly know what it is we know. He doesn’t.”

“I think the words are getting the better of you.”

“As does everything lately. It’s a weird old thing, the world. And you are saying that it was Elephant rambling past just then, like a rhino with a screw loose. What am I supposed to make of it? You know I’m scared of things like that. Harmless little Elephant goes out at night sniffing, for some reason... Now what do I do? I’m upset, you see. I guess I’d better check on him.”

“Of course. Go.”

The door squeaked. Blind traced Vulture’s progress, turning his head as if he really could see, then closed his eyes and sank into a cozy slumber. And the Forest returned. It overtook him, breathing into his ears, tucking him into its moss and dried leaves, hiding him and rocking him to sleep with the soft lullabies of the whistlers. It liked Blind. It smiled at him. Blind knew that. He could sense a smile from a distance. The burning ones, the sticky and sharp-toothed ones, the soft and cuddly ones. Their fleeting nature tormented him, that and his inability to subject them to the probing of his fingers and ears. A smile couldn’t be caught, grasped, examined in minute detail, it couldn’t be replicated. Smiles fled, they could only be guessed at. Once, when he was still little, he heard Elk asking him to smile. He could not understand what was required of him then.

“A smile, my boy, a smile,” Elk said. “The best of the human features. Until you learn to smile you’re not quite human yet.”

“Show me,” Blind requested.

Elk bent down to him and let Blind’s fingers probe his face. Blind encountered the wet teeth and jerked his hand.

“It’s scary,” he said. “Can I please not do that?”

Elk sighed resignedly.

A lot of time had passed since then, and Blind had learned to smile, but he knew that a smile did not make him more appealing, like it did others. He stumbled upon the wide-mouthed faces on the tactile pictures in his books, found them on toys, but none of those were something that made itself visible in the voice. Only listening to the smiling voices did he finally understand. A smile meant a light switching on inside. Not for everyone, but for many it did. He knew now what Alice must have felt when the Cheshire Cat’s toothy, sarcastic smile was floating in the air in front of her. That was how the Forest smiled. From above, in a boundless mocking grin.

Blind rose and staggered forward, stumbling against tree roots. His foot dropped into someone’s burrow. A whistler startled and went silent. Blind bent forward, felt in the grass and grasped it—a tiny one, covered in peach

fuzz and smelling of a young cub. He cradled it against his cheek. The whistler was breathing softly, its heart ticking in his fingers. A worried whistle issued from about ten paces ahead. The baby in his hand squeaked in response. Blind laughed and placed it on the ground. The grass rustled. The baby rushed to its mother, squeaking along the way, and soon their joined whistling faded in the distance. Before continuing on, Blind sniffed at his hand to better remember the baby's scent. An adult whistler smelled differently.

He couldn't feel his legs. They became alien and bent in all the wrong directions, as if made of rubber. That irked him. He soon grew tired of snatching them out of holes and avoiding mud and puddles and decided to sit down. His legs folded the wrong way again. It also seemed that there were more than two of them now. He was probably turning into something, but the transformation wasn't complete yet. He heard the laughter of the dogheads. They were still far off, running, giggling, bumping against each other. Blind shot up and tottered away on all six of his legs. Long and articulated, the stray leaves clung to them, but they made for an easy gait. He hid in the nearest hole and waited in silence. The dogheads thundered past. The disgusting guffaws faded. Blind peeked out cautiously. Something hooted in the canopy and dropped a cloud of rotted wood on him. He shook himself off and counted the legs again. This time there were two. The night was stifling. Blind pulled off his sweater and threw it away. Then took off the waterlogged sneakers, tied their laces together, and dropped them into the hole.

He touched the gnarly trunks as he went by, his ears pricked. Slender, silent, invisible against the trees, he was a part of the Forest, its offshoot, a changeling. The Forest was walking alongside him, swaying its treetops far above, dropping its dew on the warped floorboards.

Blind stopped at the clearing. The gigantic moon drenched him in silver. He crouched, feeling the light bathing him, feeling his fur stand on end, electrified by this light. He pinned back his ears, closed his eyes, and howled.

A lingering, mournful sound enveloped the forest. It was full of sorrow, but also of Blind's joy, of the closeness of the moon, of the night's own life. It didn't last long, and then Blind bolted into the thickets to sniff at the mossy trunks and dance on the wet leaves and roll around on the ground. He was boisterous, scaring off the small creatures, covering his fur in debris, leaving wolflike prints in the puddles. He ran after a stupid mouse and chased it into someone else's burrow. He peeked into a tree hollow and got hissed at. He excavated an underground lair and ate its owner, a fat, juicy one, spat out the fur, and moved on. The moon was hidden by the trees now, but he felt it as vividly as he'd feel someone standing behind the door or hiding in the bushes—it was that close, and the trees could not hinder it.

He leapt over the brook without getting his paws wet, ran back and forth along the shore, found a puddle and gulped it all in, tadpoles included.

A frog, miraculously spared, cursed him piercingly in its language and scampered off to find another hiding place. He stretched on the wet sand, his sharp-eared head on top of the folded paws, listening to the Forest noises and to the grumbling in his stomach, then leapt up and bounded farther along the path, since he didn't like to spend too much time near the water.

He soon was within an earshot of the dogheads' howls again, but decided not to hide this time. Instead he howled back in defiance, but they did not accept his challenge and were soon gone, quarreling among themselves. He followed their trail for a while. He would have caught them had he wanted to, but it was a game, not a real hunt, and he liked running games more than chasing games. He suddenly switched direction, as if he'd thought of something he had to go and see about, and from then on ran purposefully, with his nose to the ground, paws moving fast. His tail, up in the air and full of thorns, broadcast his concentration to the world.

Then the Forest ended. Vanished just as instantly as it had appeared. Blind wasn't upset, and he didn't think of going to search for it again. He stopped. Exactly on the edge dividing the darkness and the light rectangle on the floorboards, the yellow glow cast by the opened door. Behind the door, shaggy shadows darted over the tiles and talked in muffled voices. On Saturdays and Sundays the teachers' bathroom was poker territory. The only player in his pack was Noble.

Blind was motionless, and the flame of the candles played in his wide-open eyes. He stood there for a long time. Then he lit a cigarette and moved on. He crossed the strip of light, not hiding anymore, went past the open door to the bathroom, the moonlit clearing of the Crossroads, the door to the staff room, the canteen. The stairs smelled of cigarette butts, he stepped on one of them, still warm, and slowed down.

Down the stairs. Another long, empty corridor, and at the very end of it—more stairs and the door to the basement. He swayed, and his feet slid on the steps. He steadied himself against the wall. Picked the lock with a piece of wire and entered.

The basement was dusty and stuffy. Blind sat on the concrete floor facing the door, buried his chin in his knees, and froze. His armpits flowed down into his jeans. The cigarette clung to his lips. A ringing in his ears. Three little bells and one cricket. He rolled over to the wall, rose up to his knees, and ran his fingers along the scratchy brick surface. Feeling for the emptiness behind one of them. At first he had needed to count steps from the corner to find the right one, but now he knew instantly. Blind carefully removed the brick. In the opening there was a bundle wrapped in newspapers. He shook the dust off his fingers and inserted both of his hands into

the hiding place. The old paper rustled. He extracted the parcel, put it on the floor, and unwrapped it.

There were two knives inside. Blind liked to touch them. Sometimes he would cry when doing it. At one time the parcel had also contained a monkey skull on a chain, but he had given it to Sphinx, so now there were only the knives.

One was a gift. It had been given to him so long ago that he didn't remember exactly when it happened, and remembered only that it had always been a secret—first so that no one would take it from him, and then just to keep it away from prying eyes. The knife was beautiful. The blade thin as a thorn and sharp on both sides. No one had told Blind it was beautiful, he just knew it. He'd never questioned the seniors of his childhood, and so one of them giving a child a toy like this did not appear strange to him at all.

The other knife was the one they'd used to kill Elk. It was neither beautiful nor particularly handy. A regular kitchen knife marred with rust. He always shuddered when he touched it, but at the same time his pain was dulled by the strange feeling of the impossibility of what had actually happened. This pitiful piece of iron in his hand couldn't have killed Elk. A mouse never would gnaw down a mountain, a mosquito bite never would harm a lion, a sliver of steel never would destroy his god. So he kept the knife and visited it regularly, touching it to refill himself with unbelief again and again. To imagine that Elk wasn't dead, that he'd vanished, disappeared, cast off the House that had betrayed him.

It was time to go back. Blind stuffed his knife in the pocket, wrapped the other one in the paper again, and lowered it into the hiding place. The brick slotted back into position. *My sweater*, Blind remembered. *I need to pick it up*. He went out, clicked the padlock shut, and mounted the stairs. The stairway to the second floor he took at a run. He was almost out of time. The night was fading away. The Forest was quickly devouring it. The hallway, the doors, the silence. The first sounds of morning were on the cusp of bursting in, and then he would be invisible no more. It was an unpleasant thought, and it made Blind hurry up.