

There once was a boy who was very frightened. He was of small build even for a boy, had very dark hair and very light skin. His eyebrows were as thick and dark as his hair and he had a way of opening his mouth more to one side than the other while speaking or laughing that gave his face the appearance of being asymmetrical, which is actually wasn't.

The boy however hadn't laughed for quite a while at the point where this story begins. His father had disappeared some time ago – or, “centuries” as his mother put it, because for her, every day had felt like a year ever since. She had also said once that every day felt “like a big mountain to climb” but when she looked back at it in the evening, everything had become flat again.

To the boy however, another strange phenomena had begun occurring since his father had left. There were days that were normal and full of hues and light, but there were also days when everything looked almost like in a 50ies Black and White movie. There simply was no color to be seen. Roses looked dark gray, daisies were of a light gray, the sky – according to weather, either gray or black. Inside the house it became so unbearably dark even at noontime that he made it a custom to spend his Black and White days in the woods.

He had found a clearing with a little submergence in the middle where he lay and stared up to the gray sky, trying to catch any ray of light that might appear. It was, for being in a Black and White surrounding, the most cozy place he could find without actually staying in bed and sleeping through the day. On one of these color-lacking days, he started thinking; simply because there was nothing else to do. He thought, why don't I make use of my dark days to look for my father? Who knows how many centuries and mountains he has been through and climbed already, so I better hurry. No use to wait until I'm grown up, by then it might be too late.

He thought: But where do I start? When I misplace something, I start the search at the spot where I last saw it. But when and where did I see my father last? He simply couldn't remember. He went home, entered the dark house and asked his mum who sat by the window. Mum, – when did I see my father last? he said. His mother slowly turned her head, then she reached for his arm and pulled him near. She had her lips in his ruffled hair when she whispered: On the day he went. He DID say goodbye, don't you remember that?

No, he didn't. As a matter of fact, the day was erased from his mind, like a missing pearl from a necklace. He went back to his clearing where the sun had decided to make an appearance at least for the last half hour of the day. The trees seemed to reach up and bathe their leaves in the evening light and the boy in his little nook did the same in pointing his face towards it. It felt warm and he even began to see some shades of pink and purple shimmering through his eyelids. Then, with a bang, he suddenly remembered. He remembered his father's face as he looked up at him, (why up?), with a smile that held so much love that his cheeks had formed dimples to hold it. And he said: Here it is, son, here it is.

Whatever did he mean? And why did his mother say he had said goodbye when he actually had said “here it is”? Puzzled, the boy opened his eyes again and the sun had almost disappeared and with it the colors were gone as well. However, there was a slight hue of pink and purple still touching the leaves around him, or maybe it stemmed from his own eyes. While he looked at it, a bird which had been hiding in the leaves, appeared on a twig, raised its beak and sent a few flute-like sounds in direction of the leaving sun. Then it looked down at the boy with its little head cocked to one side and the next second, it was flying off.

The boy got up, trying to catch a glimpse of the purplish feathers as the bird flew off to the next

tree, then the next. Then it was gone.

He went back home and asked his mum: Even if it was centuries ago, do you remember the time of year when Dad went away? Autumn, she said. – Like now? She nodded. Like now.

They went on living their life and for a while, the Black and White days had quite disappeared. But nevertheless, the boy began worrying. His maths weren't worth mentioning but what if his mother wouldn't be able to master the task of living through centuries within the stretch of a few months and climbing a mountain every single day? Would she still be there to see him grow up? And again, he thought, better hurry and find him. Just the last night, he had thought he'd dreamed of the bird, but it had lost its colors. In the midst of a perfectly normal, color-filled dream, the bird he saw was simply gray. So it couldn't have been the same bird, right? But with his nervousness increasing, he decided not to wait for the next Black and White day to resume his search for his father. And he felt that the bird might have an inkling of what to do and where to look. That's the way things are with children, they still believe in the wisdom of animals, much more so than adults. And what other source did he actually have to rely on?

On his next day off school, he decided to visit his nook in the wood again, even though the light was dwindling already. It had, however, been a normal, colorful day and he thought he would have enough light for an hour or so. So he went trotting down the little path that had been formed through his feet alone and arrived at the clearing just before the sun was setting. With his hands in his pockets, he looked around, trying to imitate the small melody he had heard from the bird, a rather short scale of only three or four sounds which hadn't left his ear ever since. He repeated the line a few times and then smiled at his own senseless behavior. Suddenly, he felt so drenched and tired that he decided to take a nap.

Rolling up on the earth he fell asleep immediately and woke with a start after only ten minutes or so from what felt like a very deep sleep, trying to remember where he was. He sat up and his eyes caught something on the rim of the hollow where he had slept. A purplish feather had been caught between some twigs and he retrieved it gently as it was small like a down feather. He blew on it and then took it up to his lips to feel its softness. Carefully tucking it away, he suddenly felt that he should have been home a long time ago. The sun had disappeared and he hurried through the rustling woods, taking his energy from the earth path, right through his soles and all the way up to his heart, gaining more and more speed. When he finally reached the house, it lay in complete darkness. Usually, his mother would have been home at this time and he looked around confusedly. Had she gone out to look for him because he didn't immediately return after school? Ever since his father had gone, they had developed a strong sense of the whereabouts of the other but in this case, he felt completely lost. It just seemed as if she had gone for good.

Ridiculous, thought the boy – I am turning coo-coo now, well, great. But also his reasoning got him nowhere. He sat down on the ground without even considering to enter the dark house and felt his strength leaving him – the very strength he had felt so vividly just minutes ago when the forest had offered its powerful energy, filling his lungs for the run home. He looked up at their house. Not a large house by any measure but displaying a lot of personality through nooks and crannies, some colorful stained glass windows and white wooden ledges with the paint slightly peeling off. This was his home, where he had been born and spent his life until now, formerly with both his parents, for the past year with just his mother and an old couple who came by every other day, to look after the garden and the house. The old woman had a green thumb and the man was a wonderful cleaner and handy man who could fix almost anything.

Sitting in the dusk and staring at his house, the boy suddenly heard a sequence of flute sounds; it was the bird's melody he had heard when he first caught sight of it. It was slightly different than he

remembered and went up in the end, instead of down. He looked around but the shadows were growing and he couldn't see the little animal anywhere. Then at last he glimpsed it, sitting on an ornamental iron spire forming the top of a turret. Again, its little head was cocked, eying him curiously. The boy's gaze went down to the window below the turret and he saw that it wasn't fully closed. He knew that his mother would have never left the house without shutting all the windows because of the sudden strong gusts of wind occurring at this time of year and he quickly got up on his feet and went in, climbing the stairs two at a time. It is the fact with the ones of short build that they are excellent jumpers. He went up various flights of stairs in no time and quickly reached the attic room, where he found his mother.

She was sitting completely still and her gaze was profoundly absent, which explained why he couldn't possibly have sensed her location earlier. It seemed that she had been sitting there for a while, probably for hours and hadn't observed that the sun had gone down. She had something in her hand which he softly pried from her fingers to look at. It was a Black and White photograph of his parents from a long time ago, possibly taken before he was born. The bird, as he had detected on entering the room, was now on the windowsill. With its head cocked to look at him, it remained sitting there quietly. Mum? The boy said. A sharp intake of breath announced that his mother became aware of her surroundings, then of him, sitting opposite her on the floor. Mum? he repeated. – Son, she said eventually. Nothing else, just the one word. He reached out to help her up and they went down to the kitchen where he prepared the only meal he knew how to make: fried eggs.

Silently, they sat together eating the eggs at the massive wooden table set in the center of their big country kitchen. Mum? said the boy again after a long time, I think it is time. – To do what? she asked. To bring him back, said the boy. His mother nodded slowly. Yes, you do that. And if you don't mind, I am going to bed now. She got up, softly put her hand on the crown of his head in passing and left the room.

The Black and White days had disappeared but the bird became a frequent visitor over the next week. The boy got up every morning and marched into the woods, with the bird either following him closely or leading the way. It seemed to exist on almost nothing but the boy made sure to bring not only sandwiches but also a little bag of seeds for their outings. They felt more like travels than outings because the boy kept up a swift speed and even though he returned to the house each night, his circles became larger and larger. Today I was in – bridge he would say. Or, today I got as far as – hurst. Each day, he reached villages that were further and further away, until one day he realized he would have trouble returning home before sundown. He wrote a note, but as strong as the little bird seemed, the boy wasn't sure if he could count on it as a messenger. A passing cyclist became the solution, as he was heading towards the direction of the house and promised to stop by and give his mother the note.

This would be the very first time in the boy's life that he would spend a night alone and away from his home. He wasn't at all sure if this was a good idea but decided it was the only way to get ahead with his search. It was getting rather chilly and he turned and knocked on the door of a farmhouse he had passed by earlier. A friendly old lady let him into the house, accompanied by a large dog that seemed to be the only other inhabitant. She didn't look surprised at all to find a boy knocking on her door in the early evening asking for shelter and showed him up the crackly stairs to a small room overlooking the front yard. After giving him a large bowl of what appeared to be a strong broth and some bread, she excused herself and left him alone. He consumed both soup and bread and carefully placed a few seeds on the outer window sill. Then, the boy fell on top of the bed and sleep came over him like a warm cloth. The next day, sunlight came streaming in and after making his bed, the boy descended the stairs to find the house empty.

A plate with some sandwiches and a pear was placed at the center of the kitchen table. Sitting down,

he cut the pear in half and ate it together with one of the sandwiches for breakfast. Thinking of his mum possibly doing the same at their own home right now, he summarized: OK, I have now walked as far as I could on foot through the woods and the bird has never left my side. I have made circles wider and wider around the house. I think, if my father would have done the same I would have found a trace of him by now. So what next? Am I wrong in assuming I can actually find him? While sitting in the sun filled kitchen, he felt the weariness in his bones. Then he heard the bird singing outside. He got up, grabbed his little knapsack and rummaged around in it. He couldn't find anything to say thank you but the small purple down feather, so he placed it carefully on the plate, weighing it down with a little pearl he had found earlier, on the floor of the attic room.

Stepping outside, he found the bird merrily fluttering from tree to tree and as he started following it, he realized that they were heading homeward. It took them the whole day, but in the evening they finally reached his mother's house.

From afar, he saw someone sitting on the steps, a tall figure, possibly the handyman taking his cigarette break. As he walked on, the figure seemed to lose its contours in the changing light. He distinctly saw him lifting his arm once in a while dragging on what seemed to be a pipe or cigarette, but the nearer he got, the more the figure faded. Nevertheless, the boy felt a warm wave of recognition surge through his heart as he walked on and realized that a feeling of calm had entered him earlier during the day that he hadn't perceived in a very long time. He wasn't even hungry anymore and kept up his rhythmical step, getting closer and closer to home.