

## Reunion

My father came from among cows, and blared out from a deep tunnel or hollow cave: this ground-earth, and I could hardly make him out. An ass stood not far from him, a shaggy creature milling about, walking around, then starting to run around him. I watched him, my father, squinting because of the sun's intense glare.

"Father," I suddenly called out, in my wayward greeting.

His fat wife – round as she was – seemed taken by surprise because I was here. She was seeing me, as I was seeing her, as if for the first time. From among rose bushes she drifted closer: she came, I came. My father too. Bougainvillea and sunflower in my line of vision. Her hair streaming, it seemed, in the haze of heat like a sheet of rain, as I kept looking at her. My father blinked, then instinctively waved to me.

"Father!" I hissed. His high forehead, his sparse hair standing on end almost.

"Who are you?" he asked, as if he wasn't sure it was me.

"It's me, your son," I said.

His fat wife came closer, full-blown she seemed, and she muttered almost mutely, yet it was like a hundred voices in one; and I figured she was glad to see me, the long-lost son who'd stayed away so long, like our singular, if forlorn and melancholy, village ways. "So you really come?" she asked in echo.

I nodded, and again looked at my father in the shadows with the ass moving around him now. Flies flitted, a few wasps zooming in, the dreaded *marabunta* mostly. Then the ass opened its mouth, its teeth bared, literally, and it started braying; oh, its mouth widened, illimitably, then snapped shut. Ears yet pricked up, alerted.

"You really come?" my father asked, with blinking-unblinking eyes. I nodded; and he still kept coming out of a narrow cave, his hair knotted, clothes raggedly, and he seemed wasted, though his skin was like old leather. One wasp darted again, then began hovering close by, kept whirring.

Quickly I moved sideways to avoid the wasp's bite and sting.

So did my father, but slowly. “So you really come,” he hummed.

His gum, whitish-looking; his jaws set tight. His wife’s face was oval-shaped, like the moon, come to think of it, and I looked at her, almost compelled to it. But my father: it’d been such a long time since I’d last seen him; and I often imagined him in a kind of underground cave; he literally was; but for how long?

Right then his wife smiled, as the sun’s rays came around her, almost encircling her; and her expression was open, so natural. My father’s own face was sunken, in contrast, the jawbone pulled almost into a socket. His eyes burned.

I nodded to him, then to her: like my ongoing ritual.

She nodded back, and yet smiled. My father seemed to wait his turn now, and he wanted to say something else, maybe about what had been unreal with him all these years, yet wasn’t. The bougainvillea stirred. The palm trees fluttered, all here close to us near the equator; but then it was as if we weren’t here at all, nowhere . . . really. Absolutely nowhere.

Instinctively my father’s hand reached out: he touched me on the shoulder, which I was glad for. The ass started moving again, deliberately circling us. Would it start to bray once more with its mouth opening cavernously? My father’s wife (she was simply that) muttered something inaudibly, then asked if I wanted a drink of water, it being so hot! Indeed I was thirsty, like a new sensation in me; the same in my father, too, I sensed.

I swallowed the water she handed me, in gulps, and see, it was as if I was really meeting her for the first time; and such was her amiable face, with her own particular welcoming. The cup in my hand being yet my father’s cup: I knew, she knew. Everyone else . . . whoever, knew. I swallowed again and again because of my real thirst.

She smiled, once more. Then my father made as if to sip from the cup also, his action half-hearted. But his throat was parched, I knew; and I remembered that time when I used to watch him drive his cattle along the winding road . . . home. But no more! What else would now come between us?

Maybe he would ask about my mother, where she was, how she was doing. His wife took the cup from my hand, as if taking it from my father’s hand too; and we looked at each other, talked to each other with closed mouths, teeth

clamped together; and memory unfolding, indeed being with us, deep layers of the heart, as the entire village came closer. The ass, the other animals, moving around: it wasn't hard to tell without looking. The flies, wasps, bees, hovering. The wind hurled. Shrubs, trees, the tall grasses, rustling: all being with us. Yet maybe nothing was real.

My father's wife beckoned, and immediately I began speaking, like my false words. Her words too, as she seemed to mimic me. My father forced a grin, sort of. The wind, flowers, bougainvillea, all looking at us. Wasps kept whirring.

What was going on between my father and me? Going on with us all here close to the equator? Words rounded out, sheer syllables: vowels and consonants, my sprung rhythm of another time, another place, maybe. What was I really thinking? Ten or eleven as I was, then . . . but now older.

Much older; and maybe I'd been away too long, even though I was right here, back in the village. I stood on hard ground, this caked earth. The ass's mouth opening again, widening; and it would start braying louder than ever before. Don't I know? The sun now a wide arc in the sky. Cirrus clouds drifting. Oh, how the animal brayed, as we talked: our words a mute rhythm, this song, who we were becoming.

My tongue slaked with water. The cup, indeed, being many cups in one, as the ass knew, the insects, flowers, the wind, the trees, all knew.

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So it'd be for days to come, weeks, months, even years to come, because I'd been away for so long, yet was also here...all along; nowhere else, as we continued talking and kept listening to each other: knowing and not knowing. The ground-earth, this tunnel, at a standstill. A decade going by in an instant, it seemed like, wind still blowing: everything so fleeting.

The ass's ears perked up once more for no reason at all. What would happen next?

My father kept listening, underground only, he wanted me to know.

He really listened in his instinctual way, I figured. His wife looked at us, and she wouldn't deny it.

Deny what? Everything that kept occurring, you see, in the sun's silence. Spaces everywhere coming around us, our paths narrowing. The wind's silence too, and the palm trees being at a standstill.

What would my father say next, as I looked at him.  
*What really?*

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I didn't want to imagine more, believe it or not: because of how we'd lived in a previous time, as it seemed – my father and I, and my mother too: all of us! My young brothers, also, being with us. My father's round wife started moving away, instinctively moving closer to the line of the equator: to feel the intense heat only, as we kept talking.

Distances yet with us, but seemed unreal. How could it be?

What else did I consider, as the ass came closer, yet was yards away? Would the animal suddenly bare its teeth like palisades (if you can imagine it)? The wind began gusting, as if from a fresh new source . . . here in the equator. And my mother, *Where was she?* The fullness of time, the years going by. Oh time, which I didn't want to think about anymore, but only to listen to the ass's bray, the animal's eyes swirling in its forehead: such a dizzying turnaround.

I kept listening to it, in silence.

Ah, my father's throat was no longer dry: his thirst was quenched, finally, I knew.

Water on my lips again, the cup being handed to me once more.

My father's wife smiled, her cheeks becoming wider; her ears perked up, like the ass's own, on this spot of ground.

Imagine, eh.

My father suddenly stood alert and saluted, from underground, yet being above ground: if his silhouette only. Everything being in the sun's glare, despite a presage of rain, I thought, which only the ass understood and then started running around. Running faster, like no other animal anywhere did. The sky falling down, covering the face of the earth, I felt.

And what else did I know, as my father forced more words out, yet did not speak at all. Nothing else he would say,

I would say. Only his round wife breathed in hard, as the ass did too, its teeth bared; and time would be nothing really because the sun sunk low, the moon appearing-disappearing, for good. And I simply looked away.