

Tessa Randau: The Forest, Four Questions, Life – and I

(OT: Der Wald, Vier Fragen, das Leben und Ich)

Sample Translation by Sarah Pybus

The encounter

I’ve often racked my brains, trying to figure out what led me there that day. Was it the sun? After such a long absence, it shone so intensely that it seemed as though summer had returned, making me feel that anything was possible. Or was it the moment, two days before, when I came to on our dining room floor, wailing, surrounded by thousands of breadcrumbs and specks of carrot puree? Maybe it was the tightness I felt in my chest as I rushed out of work, exhausted, to drive to my children’s school and nursery? I vaguely remember calling our babysitter and asking her to pick up the kids. I pretended to have another important meeting. ‘I might be home late’, I added. Then I drove away with no idea of where I was headed.

Sometime later – quite a while after parking the car – I walked a narrow path lined with towering deciduous trees. A canopy of russet leaves rustled above my head. The ochre rays of the afternoon sun fell obliquely through the leaves, bathing my surroundings in a warm light. And there it was, my clearing. The gnarled old oak, where once I had painstakingly carved my initials into its thick trunk, spread its mighty branches as though in welcome. A gentle breeze sent its yellow leaves dancing to the ground. Beneath the tree, weather-beaten but still in one piece, was the old bench. Nothing had changed. A little piece of earth seemingly displaced from time. It felt like coming home.

I sat down and stroked the rough, lichen-covered wood, enjoying its warmth. Why had it been so long since my last visit? How could this place have disappeared from my life for so many years? I found myself overcome by a sudden, profound sadness, and my eyes filled with tears. What was wrong with me? Why had even the most trivial matters started to upset me? Why was I constantly on edge and far too quick to anger? Just that morning, I had torn a strip off my new colleague for accidentally sending me two incorrect numbers. Normally I would never make such a big deal out of something so minor.

I sighed as I watched the sun graze the horizon. I was probably just sleep-deprived. My little one’s coughing had woken me practically every hour the previous night. And I’d had far too little sleep the

nights before that as well; I'd lain awake, brooding, running through my new work project in my mind.

'When I get home, I'm going to drop everything and go to bed straight after the kids', I decided. Even the thought of sleep made me feel a little better.

'And I desperately need some time out', I suddenly thought. I wistfully pictured the spacious seating area in our lounge, which mainly served as a bouncy castle these days. It would be so nice to sit in peace and read a thriller without being disturbed. Or to relax in the sauna, enveloped in revitalizing steam. Or to go for a meal with my friend Heike, enjoy two or three glasses of wine, good conversation and forget all my worries. I missed it so much.

I sighed. Once again, I became painfully aware of just how much I missed my best friends. Melli, Gisi, Heike and I had been inseparable since the fifth grade, but our lives had taken very different paths. These days I had to travel halfway across the country to see Melli, and Gisi had ended up living in America. And despite living in the same city, Heike and I saw each other far too rarely. We'd last got together three months ago, for her birthday. We hardly even spoke on the phone.

'No more self-pity!' I told myself, erasing the tracks of my tears with the back of my hand. Then I fished my phone out of my handbag, which was next to me on the bench, and typed 'Hi Heike, miss you! Fancy a girls' night? I'd love to see you.' I added a laughing emoji and felt my face light up. I sent the message, leant back and closed my eyes.

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[...]

I reached the old bench half an hour later. My limbs felt heavy, as though I'd been carrying a great burden all day long. I sat down and looked up. The last rays of the afternoon sun were still strong enough to lend a golden shimmer to the crown of the ancient oak. Slowly, I allowed myself to sink against the backrest and closed my eyes. I felt the wind gently stroke my arms and listened to the birds chirping in the treetops. Gradually my body became lighter and my eyelids heavier. I felt as though the sounds of the forest were carrying me away.

‘It’s a lovely spot, isn’t it?’ an unfamiliar voice suddenly asked. The shock brought me back to the present and I opened my eyes. Next to me sat an old woman with white hair and a friendly smile. Where had she come from? I hadn’t heard a thing.

‘Don’t let me disturb you’, she said. ‘I sometimes sit here when I need to reflect.’

For a moment, I felt the urge to get up. I hadn’t come here for company. Quite the opposite. But maybe the old woman would leave when she realised I wasn’t interested in chatting. I pointedly closed my eyes and listened to a bird scratching in the thicket.

‘You’re searching for something’, she said, breaking the silence again. It was more of an observation than a question.

I would have liked to reply ‘yes, for peace and quiet’, but I bit my tongue and opened my eyes again.

‘What gives you that idea?’ I asked instead, looking at her from the side. Her white hair was scraped back into a bun. She wore a simple, white, ankle-length linen dress, and beneath it her body was slender and wiry.

‘Just a feeling’, she replied.

I closed my eyes again. I was tired. So very tired.

A few minutes later, I heard her voice again. ‘I’ve loved this place since I was a child...’ I’d hoped the stranger would disappear as quietly as she’d arrived. Rather than answering, I murmured quietly.

‘...as an adult, I’ve come here every so often when I didn’t know what else to do.’

‘And then?’ I opened my eyes and looked at her. I’ve often wondered what impelled me to ask that question at that moment. And what course my life would have taken if I hadn’t.

The old woman bent down and picked up a leaf that had just fallen to the ground.

‘There was a time when I felt like a leaf in the wind. As though I were spinning helplessly through the air, with no idea of how to regain control.’

I got goose bumps. She had perfectly described the way I was feeling.

She continued. ‘From the outside, everything seemed fine: I had two young children, a loving husband and an interesting job.’ She paused and gazed into the distance, as though searching for something on the horizon. ‘But inside me things were very different. I was so tired, so empty.’

Everything felt like an effort – even the wonderful things. I didn’t know what I needed to change. And that scared me. Do you know what I mean?’ she asked after a brief pause, and looked at me.

This total stranger could have been talking about me and my life. But I wasn’t prepared to confide in her when I didn’t really understand these things myself.

‘So what changed?’ I asked, trying to evade her question by asking another.

‘Well, you know, I gave it a lot of thought and tried a couple of things. And then I learned about the questions of life.’

‘The questions of life?’

‘At first, they appear to be nothing more than four simple questions’, the old woman said. ‘But they have the power to change your whole life.’ Her eyes sparkled as though she’d just presented me with a precious gift.

‘What a revelation’, I thought mockingly. The old woman was probably lonely and looking for people to talk to. And she’d come up with this nonsense to keep the conversation going as long as possible. Deciding it would be better to put a stop to it now, I stood up.

‘I tell you what’, she said as she realized I intended to leave. ‘I’ll tell you the first question. Then you can decide for yourself whether there’s anything to it.’

[...]

The rainbow won’t wait

The whole way, I felt that something was about to happen. Perhaps it was the mist, which swallowed not only the bushes and trees, but even the sounds around me, making the forest feel truly unreal. Over the last few days, I had returned to the forest three times and waited for the old woman, but to no avail. I desperately hoped that she would come today.

When I finally reached the clearing, I barely recognised it. The old oak, just a few bare branches shimmering through the dense white mist, seemed huge, eerie and ghostly. It was one of those autumn days when the darkness never truly seems to fade. I tugged the zip even higher on my down jacket and looked around. I couldn’t see anyone.

‘Hello’, I called, ‘are you there?’ No answer. I wandered around; all I could see was mist.

‘Hello’, I called again, louder this time. A faint echo was all I received in response.

I felt disappointment course through me. Had I come here in vain, yet again?

Suddenly I heard a crunch close by and the old woman emerged from the mist.

‘Nice to see you’, she said, giving me what was now a very familiar smile.

‘Where have you been the last few days? I missed you’, I blurted.

‘Oh, is everything alright?’ she asked with a concerned look. Then she gestured to the bench. ‘Should we sit or walk a while?’ Was it the pale light of the mist that made her look so tired and pallid?

‘I’d prefer to sit’, I said, taking a seat. ‘I’m exhausted, and to be honest I don’t feel all that great. But what about you?’ I added. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Ach, we’re not getting any younger’, she said, smiling again. ‘But nothing’s as bad as it seems...’

Her expression turned serious again. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘I’, I started, before taking another deep breath. ‘I’ve been thinking a lot about the third question. Now I know what I don’t need. And I know what I’m longing for. But no matter how I look at it, there isn’t enough time.’ I felt my heart turn heavy. ‘Where do I find the time?’

‘I’d really like to help’, the old woman said, her eyes glistening sadly. ‘But you’re the only one who can find the answer.’

‘But how? I can’t shake the feeling that I’d have to throw my whole life into disarray. But’, I gulped, ‘that terrifies me.’ I pulled a tissue out of my jacket pocket and blew my nose. I felt like a child who’s been led gently by the hand along a rocky path, only to be abandoned before a huge mountain.

‘I understand your concerns. Sometimes it’s easy to change things, but it takes a lot of courage.’

‘I’ve built so much. I can’t just leave it all behind’, I said, hearing my voice shake.

The old woman frowned as though weighing up several options. ‘Would you like to know the last question of life?’ she asked.

‘Yes, of course! What is it?’

‘Well,’ she said hesitantly, tilting her head, ‘before I tell you, you should know that this question is different to the others.’

‘How?’

‘This question can change everything.’

‘But that’s exactly what I want!’

A smile flitted across her face before it returned to its serious expression. ‘Ready?’

I took a deep breath. ‘Yes, I’m ready.’

She moved closer and took my hand. Then she looked deep into my eyes.

‘The last question is: Would I want to continue living like this if I knew I was going to die in a year?’

A shiver ran down my spine.

‘Close your eyes’, she told me before I could contemplate the final question.

‘Why should I?’ I asked in frustration.

‘Because I’d like to take your mind on a little journey.’

I did as she asked.

‘Now, I want you to picture a rainbow.’

It took a while for an image to form in my mind’s eye. Then I saw a vast field with ears of corn swaying in the wind. Above it was a perfect rainbow, every spectral colour gleaming auspiciously.

‘What do you see?’ I heard the old woman ask next to me.

‘Beautiful colours.’

‘Anything else?’

I saw a dense, grey layer of cloud with fat raindrops falling to the ground. In the middle of the clouds was a tiny gap, punctuated by gleaming sunshine.

‘It’s raining and sunny at the same time.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘I feel fortunate. And happy.’

‘Why?’

‘Because a rainbow is something special. A fleeting, precious moment.’

Even with my eyes closed, I knew that she was smiling.

‘There’s a Chinese proverb that says “the work will wait while you show the child the rainbow, but the rainbow won’t wait while you do the work”.’

Suddenly the rainbow disappeared from my mind’s eye. In its place, I saw scenes from my life on fast forward: I saw myself in the office, at important meetings, in supermarkets, in the laundry room, on the living room floor with my children. A thin, pale woman with a narrow, joyless mouth who looked like a hunted animal. A woman with vacant eyes.

And then came the pain, powerful as a hurricane. It knocked me off balance, pressed down on me, tore at me. Shook the sadness, fear and anger out of me. I cried like a little girl. I sobbed, my whole body shaking. Eventually the hurricane waned and my tears subsided. I gradually grew calmer, felt the wind on my wet cheeks, heard the last remaining leaves rustling above my head. I sat like that for quite some time. When I finally opened my eyes, I was alone.