



Chapter XIII - 9

*What shall I do with this absurdity
O heart, O troubled heart this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?
Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back
And had the livelong summer day to spend.
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.*

The Tower – W. B. Yeats

“This is... no, no way, I can’t believe this is true. For all this time I’ve been giving my best, trying to solve this drama... trying to be the hero... and I was nothing but blind. Nothing more than a background actor on someone else’s story.

His relatives had organized everything: the perfect day during the parade, the perfect place in an abandoned dock, the perfect escape on a boat. No one would notice them, and they would have been already far, if not for the most unpredictable issue... If only U knew what he did! If only his mother knew what they did.

Does she know what they did, indeed? Apparently she does, since she warned her son long time ago, but what’s her role in this story? Is she involved in their traffics, or is she just a witness?

Well, she can’t be really involved, otherwise she would have escaped with them... so she must be innocent, for sure... or, at least, she must be clean for the police. But, in any case, what is all this story about?

How I wish I could ask him directly... ‘Hey U, come here, can you...’ but yeah, there’s no way he can give me a hint. He didn’t realize anything... anything! He only wants to play and have fun: how can I blame him?

I cannot. So, what should I do now? Bring him back to those people, and let them take care of the situation? In the best case, they will deliver them to the police and leave him to his mother and grandmother. Is this what I want?

Well... if this story is true, and they were chasing them, then he must return to his place and get back to a normal life as soon as possible. His fellow citizens will know what to do for him, I just have to make it happen. But is this the best scenario? Rather, shouldn’t I first try to find his father, see his intentions and then decide? Hmm... yeah, but what if he threatens me, or lies... who knows what can happen if he’s really a criminal. Damn... I have the power to do both, and no clue on the truth...

But in the end... who am I, to choose what is right and what is wrong? If I help him find his father, and he’s ill-intentioned, for everyone I’ll be the one who helped a criminal escape... and risk

my life too. Instead, if I bring him back to that gang of performers, I can put him (and myself) in the hands of an entire band of criminals. God, this is... what the hell should I do? In five minutes we'll be at the lighthouse and I've got no idea. To whom should I trust: one probable criminal, or many probable rescuers? What's more likely to be true now, and what risk should I take?

If his relatives broke the law, this must have happened long ago, since the atmosphere there was already tense. Instead, if it were those brigands who broke the law... well, this reasoning goes nowhere, too unlikely to be true for so many reasons: that man called him by name, and they could not be there by chance. There must be a reason to enter a forest to rob people.

By the way, now I see why I didn't find his rucksack: that giant man was carrying it - so kind and loutish at the same time - and it remained at the camp... It's so weird how he offered his help, and a minute later he pushed him down with no hesitation... to protect him from his grandfather? He would have done no harm, he only wanted to warn us to run away. And he did it, actually, in a way or another. Anyway, at least his bag was empty and he finished all his water. I can't imagine what would happen without... wait...

... why was his bag empty? I remember he... ah... the book.

The book. How could I overlook that?

It was there, right in front of me all the time, and I didn't see it. That's why they were chased after: they stole it, and now they were fleeing. Oh no, I had to see it from the first moment, it was so clear to...

Wait... if they had stolen it today, or yesterday, then why did they receive visits from officers in the past weeks? Can these two things be not related, just a coincidence? Could be, after all. As I told him, there are so many reasons why people could visit them... even officers... and a child cannot tell the difference.

Unless... unless they had stolen the book long time ago, maybe days or weeks, and they hid it all the time. Yes! Oh, yes. He said that he saw it for the first time a few weeks ago, and then he didn't see it anymore. They hid it, for sure. Someone must have suspected something, people started bruite about it, then police made inspections... and, maybe, eventually also his mother

understood it. Maybe that's when she stopped trusting his own dears, and warned her son, and her nerves collapsed. Is that really possible, only for a theft? Well... her dears were involved, they lied to her, and possibly no one trusted them anymore.

So, the two men were fleeing, carrying their loot and a bag of lies. But why did they also bring U? They knew he would be a burden, and of course her mother would have never allowed it. Did they want to bring him away from her? Did they want to start a new life somewhere else, far away from here? I can't really picture this scene, where his family is full of lies and sorrow, and a lovely child doesn't realize anything.

But those people... those people knew about the book. For sure they knew it, that's why they were chasing them up to the... Oh god... his bag! That man did not offer to carry it to help... That man knew about the book, and knew that Ujana was carrying it, that's why the first thing he did... was asking about the bag. Ah, that happened in front of me and I didn't understand it. And now, now that he's opened it... they'll be furious...

OK, so now we need to find a way to survive the night, and tomorrow we will ask for help. But how? There's only that tower, we'll be there in a minute, and it can be a trap if we spend the night there. Or they can intercept us before: who knows what's waiting for us down there at the beach... They don't want only the book, they also want his father, and we are the... no wait, why? How do they know that *we* have the book if they didn't find him? Maybe *he* had the book, and they... Damn!

They knew exactly what they were looking for, I'm sure they expected to find the book in the rucksack... but there's only one way this could happen... Only if they'd taken his father too, before we met them. They interrogated them, beat them, tortured them, and eventually realized that their child had it. That's horrible, I can't even think about...

No, wait. If they did it, why would he ask U how to find him? They knew already that he was... oh no, I see now, it was not that man who did it, it was *U* who asked first about his father! That giant simply pretended to keep him quiet! That's so mean, what a... and he fooled us both!

Did he, actually? To me, he was acting like a peer, with all those looks and greetings. He was not surprised at all to see me with him... how can this be? Who told him? Did he see us before? And why didn't they attack me? I could be an accomplice, after all. Well, maybe because they're not evil? Were they good chasing them for the loot, or are they brigands? Damn, I don't remember anymore, I'm completely lost... I only know that... that...

... that his father was captured, so this useless tower will be empty, and that his grandfather said they were going to kill him, which is not at all a good sign in their defense. Also, the way he treated the boy... No, I can't trust them, it would be crazy. I must protect him and ask the help of other people tomorrow. This is the only way to be sure that we don't fall in any trap. And if this damned phone started working, we would be all...

... I just need to make a phone call" – you make up your mind, as the trail opens up onto a large cliff, dominated by the awe-inspiring lighthouse looming up as a dark Lantern.

7

You take a few seconds to catch your breath, contemplating the view of the stony tower above. Finally, you see the lighthouse in all its splendor: an impressive construction built of masonry, with three massive sections of decreasing width and as many orders of merlons. The tower, more than fifty meters high, was erected on the edge of a huge rock at almost the same height, and it was standing out against the other rocks and trees in the surroundings. The structure was elegant and solid, despite it being placed on a small basement almost as large as its base. The body of the lighthouse had only few small windows, probably for safety reasons and additional stability. On top of the tower, you spot the large room hosting the light source, now turned off, enclosed between huge windows. Down below, on the base, a large entrance was facing the valley from the promontory, reachable by a beaten path connected to your trail. A robust, wooden fence marked the path along the water, vanishing behind the overgrown

vegetation. In front of you, the trail ended on a large clearance, with the lighthouse just a couple of minutes ahead, and this new path on the sides. The area in the immediate vicinity looked bare and abandoned, only revived by a bright moonlight from the sky. Surprisingly, Ujana enjoys the spectacle in silence with you, with a naive smile that reassured you for a moment. Behind you, only the dark interior of the woods, with neither lights nor neighs.

“Are you... are you all right, U?” – you whisper.

“Yes” – he replies with enthusiasm – “but this place scares me. It’s not as I remember it during the day. It’s... so creepy now.”

“True, it is, but we got here at last. Do you see anyone?”

“No... anyone, and it’s all dark... there’s no one there.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, there’s no one here” – you repeat, to let him face the truth – “He must have left and called the police.”

“I see...” – he lowers his look – “I’m sorry, all these efforts for nothing...”

“No U, it was not useless. We saw” – you refrain at the very last moment to mention his grandfather – “the lighthouse, and now we are sure that he’s not here. We had to try, there was no other way, so no regrets.”

“...”

“So, what shall we do now?” – you ask with a feeble voice to involve him, although you had already made up your mind.

“I don’t know... What shall we do?”

“What would *you* do?”

“I don’t know, I said. If we sleep inside, maybe those people will come and we are in trap. But if we don’t, I don’t know where else we can go. I’m scared to spend the night outside.”

“OK” – you take the lead – “then let’s do this way: we try to enter the lighthouse, with the hope that it’s open, and we look for a phone to make a call. If we find it, we’re safe and someone will come to save us, otherwise we decide again. We can still close the door from inside and no one will enter.”

“Ah, that’s true, I didn’t think about it!” – shouts Ujana – “Of course we can, and we’ll be safe inside for the whole night!”

“Shh...” – you whisper, bringing the index finger close to your lips – “shh... yes, exactly! It’s a simple idea but I didn’t think about it before. Did you?”

“No, I didn’t. I only thought it would be a trap, but of course they cannot enter if we shut the door!”

“Yes, it can solve everything” – you murmur – “but there are two big problems: one is that, probably, the door will be closed. I don’t know what to do in that case.”

“And the second?”

“The second is that we should leave the woods and reach the lighthouse without light. It’s not difficult, that strip of land seems pretty flat and clear, but we must pay attention not to fall.”

“Why don’t you want to use the lamp anymore?” – he asks with disappointment and surprise – “Is it finished already?”

“Finished? No, it works but we need to cross this clearance and we’ll be visible from far. We must hide as much as possible.”

“Oh, you’re right, true. How can you...?”

“... it’s nothing special, let’s just go before they see us, OK?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

Leaving the dark depths of the wood was such a relief, after all that time, that being exposed and running towards the shadowed tower did not mind you at all. As you run as fast as possible, you keep an eye on the child, to ensure that he does not stop behind, and an eye on the ground, to choose the safest itinerary between the rocks. Under your feet, the path developed on a grassy ground, every now and then tiled with enormous stones, likely unearthed and polished by the constructors. The run proceeded across a multitude of small rock spikes, bushes and shrubs. After a few meters, the clearance flowed into a beaten path, which was part of the urbanized area: the soft, natural ground rapidly left space for a small stony road, and a solid wooden fence separated you from the ocean under the cliff.

The strip of land becomes narrower and narrower, much more than it seemed from the boundary of the wood, but the run

felt even safer as you forced your way into the shadowed site until the entrance. You lift your look to the gigantic tower above you: an ancient and suggestive wonder, perfectly preserved in its original appearance. You had seen only a few sites like this one in your life, where the history was not yet devoured by the greedy thirst for profit. Here, you still feel the soul of the lighthouse as it had to permeate the area hundreds of years ago, when it was established and maintained. You feel the soul of the past keepers, who lived their lives here with their families, for generations and generations. You see the vessels approaching these shores, guided by its light as a real beacon in the night. You hear the voice of the merchants, paying their taxes to go ashore and unload goods from unknown territories. You touch the stones, blackened by decades of torches and rain-washed and turned black again, in a silent whirligig on the weather-beaten ramparts. You taste the salt of the maritime winds, and imagine the scents of the dried erica and juniper wood that were once used for the signal fire. Behind you, the impatient look of the child, the dark profile of the treetops at night... and a disturbing glare on the closest hill.

“Shall we try?” – asks Ujana, eager for the outcome.

Without saying a word, you climb the steps and approach the door, fortified with metal plates. You grab the heavy handle, take a deep breath and pull it with determination. Closed. No sign of yielding. Ujana looks at you with growing despair.

2

“Try again, try again!”

“I cannot, I’m sorry... it’s closed” – you murmur sadly, while discreetly glimpsing that glare on the hills.

“But there must be a way to enter, come on” – yells Ujana – “why would one keep it closed! People build overnight shelters for farmers and hunters, and they keep *this one* closed?”

“Apparently, they do it...”

“Look, maybe there’s a key somewhere, maybe it’s only closed for the animals... maybe we just need to pull stronger?”

“I don’t think we...”

“... maybe we need to push the door, instead of pulling it?”

“I’ve tried both already. Thanks for the intuition...”

“What if we use your lamp to see if there is a sign?”

“Yes, we could...” – you admit with some hesitation – “but let’s be quick, OK?”

You pull the flashlight out of your pocket and turn it on, illuminating the door and the surrounding patio. Suddenly, the feeble cone of light, which so poorly illuminated the trail in the woods, explodes like a gigantic beacon in the darkness. For your greatest surprise, on the left side of the door, in a tiny recess in the wall, you both spot it immediately: a large, old-fashioned key, secured to a hook by a little metal chain. You throw an embarrassed and happy look at Ujana, seize the key and insert it into the door lock, which easily opens in front of you.

The view of the interior leaves you both astonished. An ample location, fully decorated with wooden furnishings, illuminated only by faint oil lamps at the corners. Furniture and tools perfectly reproduced the typical objects of the ancient times, beautifully arranged in a evocative atmosphere. Among them, you notice a large, heavy table at the center of the room, with four chairs, metal plates and papers. Behind, at the corner opposite to the entrance, an impressive bookcase full of scrolls, papers, bulky tomes and mechanical instruments. On the other side, leaning towards another bookcase, a colorful coat of arms, several mantels and a pile of grappling hooks. In front of you, a few meters ahead, a stony staircase led to the upper floor, in sharp contrast with the wooden craftsmanship of the hall.

Timidly, you step into the room, leaving the doorway behind your shoulders. Your eyes become rapidly used to the darkness, to the trembling light of the oil lamps and to the strong smell of wood and burned fuel. Unexpectedly, you find no switches in the room, suggesting that the site was probably preserved in its

original condition. Perfect for commemorations, indeed. That's why, you realize, the door was open and lights still vibrant.

"Have you ever been inside, U?" – you ask, in awe.

"No... no, I've never seen this place before" – he murmurs – "it's creepy."

"Somehow, yes, but how fascinating. Look: they've even decorated it for today. By the way, why didn't you enter before?"

"I don't know" – he says, shrugging his shoulders – "I don't think it was possible at that time. I remember that the road was surveilled by a guard, and the tower by the keeper."

"The lighthouse keeper?" – you turn to him, staggered.

"Yes, of course. He's lived here with his family for many years, taking care of the illumination."

"He lived... here?"

"Of course," – replies the child, amused by the silly question – "where else?"

"I... I didn't know... so, why didn't you..."

"Because there are rumors, in town" – he interrupts you – "that they had to leave, due to some recent, unfortunate political events. I don't know what happened exactly, but it was not safe anymore for them."

"I see... that's why there's no one now."

"Probably."

"Probably. What a pity, we could have asked for help. Also, I don't see any phone, nor light switches. This place is incredible" – you whisper – "it's sad we cannot enjoy it in this moment."

"I'm sorry that it's not as you expected, but maybe we can find something useful... or just a bed for the night."

"Yes, I agree... we should spend it here and wait for the morning" – you comment, as you come closer to the staircase and peer into the flight – "Then, we return to our place from the main road and everything will be all right."

"Cool! Would you like an apple?"

"An apple?"

"There's a chest, on the shelf."

"Oh no, thanks."

“OK, I wait for you here then?”

“Yes, please. Close the door and wait for me here.”

With these words, you grab one of the oil lamps and climb the steps of the dark staircase. A feeble moonlight spreads out from the tiny openings on the wall, and a foul air mixed with burned fuel welcomes you from the upper floor. There, you see a bare, narrow corridor with three ways out: the staircase to second level, a first solid door, clearly opening out onto the sheltered walkway, and a second wooden door, most likely for a room. Besides them, nothing else draws your attention in that abandoned place, only perturbed by the creaking boards building up the floor. Nothing, until a dull sound from the building startles you. You remain still and hold your breath, attempting not to make the boards creak, and then you hear it again: a low, dull sound from behind the wall. “Is anyone knocking at the main door?” – you wonder – “I hope he would run to inform me, in that case.” Silence, then again, once more. This time stronger than ever, clearly from inside.

“Is there anyone here?” – you shout – “We come in peace; I apologize for the intrusion.”

You hear no answer to your call, but another dull knock from behind the door. You hold the oil lamp tight, take courage and slightly push the wooden door, only enough to peer inside. There, crouched in a dark corner, you find a young man tied to a bed, gagged and scared to death.

