

Shapeshifters

A Short Story

by Nik Spitz



Shapeshifters

by Niklas Spitz

Something catches your eye starting out of the forest below. A lone figure, it appears, coming towards you now, up the winding path towards the brow of the hill where you are standing, wolf hounds at your side. Judging by the weathered gait, it appears to be a rather tall old man, leaning into his path resolutely, as though into the wind for a hundred years. There's something curious about his demeanor, and before your eyes the distance between you is covered in a space of time that is somehow unsettling. The old man stands in front of you suddenly and lifts his head from the ground for the first time, fixing you with a beguiling gaze. "Good day to you" says he in a thick accent. Middle Eastern? Hints of Eastern European perhaps? Even some guttural inflections reminiscent of Andean dialects - you can't quite make it out. You are slightly taken aback, but you ask "Good day... can I help you?" "I doubt it" chuckles the old man with a little wicked laugh in his eyes. They're tremendously dark eyes, deeply set under unkempt eyebrows fanning out maniacally. His dark skin appears furrowed by timeless exposure to the sun and his prominent cheekbones, strong nose and sensuous mouth give him the warm but wily features of a Mayan Indian perhaps. Yet his now apparent bearing and elegance evoke memories of the nomads you encountered in the Sahara many years ago. It all seems a little bizarre, but you go on "Well, look, I'm very sorry, I don't know who you are, but this is private property you know." "Not by my book my good friend" says the stranger with an air of impunity. "This is the country of no one, but God." And to your consternation, he continues to walk on past you, through the orchards towards the main house.

You hurry after him blurting out with indignation "Hey...! Just a minute, who do you think you

are?" But to your surprise, find it impossibly difficult to catch up to the old man, striding ahead indifferently. "*What the hell...?*" you think, as the old coot disappears between the apricot trees. "*And where the hell are those damned dogs now?*" You look around again and see that they have skulked off beyond the orchards towards the house. You begin to feel a little exasperated.

The next thing you know, you are slapped on the side of the head by a plump, ripe apricot and you hear a chuckle from the trees. As you look around furiously, the old man pops out grinning like an innocent devil, offering a piece of fruit deftly between his slender fingers, whilst suckling on another, saying, "Here my friend, have a fruit, they are *quite* delicious!" "What the hell do you think you're playing at?" you splutter.

"Oh come now, my little friend, why so serious? You sure you don't want one of these? They really are most excellent."

There is a timeless pause, a surreal moment and you feel as though you are in a bizarre stretched out dream. His eyebrows appear to flutter defiantly in the breeze. Then time snaps back to determinate measure, and eyes gleaming in the sunlight he says, "Far may we travel, my friend, over many distant lands, but what you seek lives in the marrow of your bone and the roots of your soul, and what you claim as your own belongs to the earth of my ancestors and your children." Then the old man winks at you. You feel the ground shifting from under your feet as you grapple for context.

All at once you remember why you came to this place and you realise you've been asleep for the last chapter of your life while being seduced by the mundane affairs of the world even as

you retreated into the hills, and you just got a wake up slap in the face. He knows you and your work and your dreams even whilst you slept. Seeking out the eccentric alchemists and shamans and the curious ancient wise men over the years, you were hoping to understand their means and purpose in shaping our societies as they do so, imperceptibly, immutably, from outside the paradigm and consciousness of the civilisations that come and go. Guiding and cajoling the aeons, these enigmatic tricksters of time eluded you too, of course.

"OK. What's his game?" You ask yourself. You feel called to task and you ready yourself even as you wipe sticky sweet apricot off your face *"W-ell, I don't know who you are, or where you've come from, but I suppose you'd better come up and have some tea. You seem intent on forcing yourself upon my afternoon anyway."* But he's already ahead of you, heading towards the patios where there is a chess table set up under the arbour. He sits down under dripping pink ruffled roses in a swift, fluid movement and moves the black king's knight to c3 without even looking at the board. You come up to the table, grab the heavy wrought iron garden chair and drag it back as you glance over the board. This isn't a reasonable move considering the intractable problem you've been studying. *"Game on!"* You reach down to move your threatened queen, distractedly calling out in full voice for Chantalle to bring tea. You sit pulling up your chair. It scrapes along the stone flags in a hesitant staccato, begrudging gravity. He's already grinning again in that mocking manner as he moves his bishop up to your king's corner at H2 and asks, *"So my friend, for what did you bring me here?"*

You're not quite sure how to respond. You try preempting the offence with a pawn. *"What are you talking about?"* you ask while grappling for orientation. *"I don't even know your name"*

and he throws his head back laughing out loud at that for just a moment, flashing white teeth and eyes and crazy eyebrows then is deadly serious in the blink of an eye.

Chantalle appears carrying a tray of tea accoutrements and sets it down on the iron table alongside the old rosewood chess board. You glance over and she's smiling brightly to herself, pretty in a summer dress and dappled sunlight and dark honey skin. As she straightens up elegantly, through your peripheral vision, you catch a glancing image of her warmed face, lofty in the clear blue sky, dappled hat brim, and a wisp of white cloud drifting ethereally on high, and she winks at the old man, turns and wanders off with the clouds from whence she came. The old man calls out "Mademoiselle, avez-vous un brindille de menthe s'il vous plaît?" you look up as she turns lightly, lips parting revealing missing teeth and bemusement and then pursing in a charmed smile. "Mais oui, bien sûr Monsieur, attendez" and on she breezes in her eternally youthful way towards the herb garden. You have an uncomfortable feeling about the teasing polite familiarity of their exchange. You turn back to this man as he places you in check without looking at the board again - just holding you in his gaze.

"Check mate, it is my friend."

"Look, what is going on here?" you demand once more.

"What is going on is the reclaiming of your power."

"What?"

You are reminded how, when you're traveling, a local person often won't understand you initially when you speak their native tongue. It's just too unexpected. You heard what he just said, but deny it in your mind.

"I think you heard," he says, narrowing the vast black holes of his eyes, feigning suspicion.

“Yes, yes, I heard you, but I don’t know what you are talking about do I?” you retort impatiently.

“Do you not?”

“Who the hell are you?”

“I am your Father” he smiles radiantly.

“No you are not god damn it! Who are you?” you demand.

“I am indeed your progenitor and your destiny,” he says chuckling away merrily. He’s playing with you and you feel angry, frustrated and humiliated “I’ve had enough!” you say.

“Well perhaps you had better leave,” he says, laughing like a howling dervish, that gleam still in his eyes. You feel a confused recalcitrant respect for this supposedly mature person and don’t know how to react. You even consider overpowering him physically, but that just wouldn’t be fitting (and deeper in your subconscious, the question of whether you’d actually be able is denied). You are at a bit of a loss, like a frustrated, powerless child (and somewhere deep inside again, you feel an old hurt). You resist permitting rising anger to take further hold sensing a temper tantrum isn’t furthering your cause. In your helplessness, you consider threatening to call the police, though resorting to patriarchal “authority” when feeling challenged betrays intellectual and emotional immaturity to you - an inability to rise to a challenge in communication; at least when no public threat is present. Chantalle returns humming to herself nonchalantly, places a little dish of mint leaves by the tea tray and turns again. There is no apparent public threat.

“Where are Amadeus and Winston?” you ask her abruptly.

“I ahvent seen zhem” she says in her sing song manner.

You get up and walk off imperiously towards the dog's den, through the orange trees, rejecting their glorious fragrance. You walk around the east side of the house, frowning, past the lush greenhouses, even rejecting the ebullient bird song, not even curious that they're so liberally fluttering about in the bushes in spite of the bird of prey circling above. A hawk. A pair of hawks?

And there are the dogs, curled wolfishly on their beds and they raise their heads lazily and bark at you with a sort of defiant disdain.

"Come on you two, what's going on here?" you say impatiently. There's another curt bark and a muffled growl that trails off into a whimpery whine. "I said come on" you say sternly and all you get is a recalcitrant gruffle. This is just not normal.

You're thinking it's really not turning out to be your day when Nietzsche prances through your mind saying, *"The stupidity of moral indignation, is the unfailing sign in a philosopher that his philosophical sense of humour has left him."* You take a deep breath. You feel a tremulous shift in perspective and a little wave of levity rises in you. "OK," you think, surrendering. "OK."

The delirious scent of orange blossom reaches you now, intoxicates you as ever with the sweet earthy perfume of paradise. You walk on. As you come back around through the magnolia trees, you stop in your tracks. Chantalle and the old man are sitting together drinking tea, chatting away in French like a perfectly graceful couple of old birds at a garden party, and the hawks are sitting on either side of them up in the arbour, just above their

shoulders, cocking their heads and winking hawkishly. You take a deep breath, collect yourself, let go, and take another deep breath.

“Come, my friend, come and join us, have some tea”

“*What the hell,*” you think, abandoning any last resistance. “That’s very kind of you, whoever you are”.

“You can call me Sulleiman.” At that, the hawks squawk and hop from one branch to another and Chantalle giggles far too sweetly for her years.

He reminds you of those elusive ones you sought in your research, as you travelled through far flung cities, somehow spotting them by their quirky busy-ness as they scurried about in their bizarre, important work on the periphery of things. Amidst the bustling, pungent, maze-like shaded alleys of the ancient souks in Fez; disappearing in and out of murky shadows on the damp back streets of London; or scurrying across the deserted, otherworldly ruins of Hampi in the heartland of India. Yet they’d always slip away, like time as you’d try to clutch it, not wanting the essence of life or their work to get away from you.

And yet here you sit, in front of this one. Here you sit, retreated into the hills and the waning years of your life, writing your story impotently, even as the empire that birthed you falls blindly, imperceptibly by most, though as surely as every empire that ever existed. Thus you sought meaning on the periphery of things, observing the consumptive dis-ease of western civilisation, gathering yourself for what you instinctively knew was your time.

Here you sit in this garden paradise you created far away, your devoted housekeeper and companion Chantalle sitting on one side and on the other, this strange old character blown in from the west, as yet unknown, though somehow strangely familiar, infuriating and charming all at once. You feel the sturdy support of the chair beneath you. You feel your mental roots sink deep down into the earth. You feel supported by the immense power of this celestial body you have traversed, and the abundance bestowed upon you. You feel the fragrant living soil, lovingly cultivated by you and penetrated by your roots. And as you follow them down with your mind to their branching, you feel connection with the trees around you. You feel the pulsing living network embracing the globe through the medium of the soil that feeds you. You feel peace.

Something large lands in the branches above your head and you look up. It is a great owl, in the broad daylight, head rotated 180 degrees, peering down at you blankly. It blinks at you. You take another deep breath. You hear Sulleiman say "Are you ready my old friend" You look up smiling and say "Yes. Yes, I am ready"

You hear a whimper from behind the house as you turn your head looking back over lush orchards and greenhouses, evergreen magnolias and Damask roses, and the winged shadows cast over three empty garden chairs, as you fly off together into the dying light of the west.