

LILY LAMBRELLI

TALES OF WISDOM FOR TIMES OF CRISIS AND OTHER TRIBULATIONS

INTRODUCTION

*In fairy tales there are no wounds that cannot be healed*

*Claude Levi-Strauss*

We are living in times of crisis, a many-headed monster of a crisis. We see things crumbling beneath our feet, and as for the challenges that await us, we do not know when they will arrive or what form they will take. Ours is a time of transition, when the old is sinking and the new has yet to surface. And we have to choose whether the whirlpool Charybdis will suck us down or whether we will cling like Odysseus to the branches of the wild fig tree and hang in mid-air until she spews up the wreckage of our old world for us to cling to and be carried to a new one.

Small wonder then that all of us tread cautiously. Yet this hesitation is not connected with times of crisis only but with every kind of growing up ( where we relinquish the privileges granted to the weak and embrace responsibilities that can range from the delightful to the scarcely bearable) and with every personal loss which leads to real displacement. We have all of us had experience of deaths, illnesses, separations, unexpected difficulties and grief in all its forms, experiences that have forced us to distance ourselves from people and situations and weighed us down sorrows with the power to either imprison or to free us. All of us at some stage find ourselves, both literally and metaphorically, at a turning point between childhood and maturity, between dependence and self-reliance, between subjugation and freedom and between ignorance of our own nature and self-knowledge.

These transitions, which above all concern children ( since whether they want to or not they will have to struggle with that monster called adulthood), are the subject of many popular folk tales. In this little book that you are holding, I offer my own versions of eleven of my favourite tales of wisdom, tales that in the language of parable and following the accepted rules of stories of their kind (the ones that guarantee the reader will cry out, “lies, lies!” in protest) in fact offer guidance for overcoming crises, for passing from adolescence into adulthood, for distinguishing between the essential and the unimportant and for enjoying life to the full. They come from the oral tradition of distant places and peoples less touched by formal education than ourselves (Africa, Asia, native American tribes). They were first recounted long, long ago by unknown tribal wise men in the course of initiation rites and teaching which was not concerned with the transmission of information but with the enlargement of the soul.

These little stories embody the philosophical thoughts of illiterate men whose medium of communication was the spoken word, men who were ignorant by our standards. This primitive philosophy slowly took the form of tales which spread by word of mouth and travelled far and wide in the mouths of tellers as varied as minstrels, companies of merchants transporting goods on horseback or by camel, pedlars, travellers and seamen till they had gone all around the world. Today they travel more frequently inside the covers of books, and sometimes through the internet (diamonds hard to spot among a mass of useful information

and sheer rubbish and, too, as always, through the human voice. Nine of the eleven tales reached me by word of mouth and from among the collections of my teacher Henri Gougaud; one -"Turkish Delight with Pistachio"- from the mouth of Catherine Zarcat; and one -"The Two Wolves" - was told me by Tatiana Frangoulia.

These eleven tales of wisdom are intended to give strength, courage and peace of mind to all those who find their world collapsing around them. In all its forms, the folk tale essentially tells of familiar situations overturned, above all in childhood. These upsets and disruptions, made up of little deaths and continual rebirths, all lead by gradual shifts to a higher level of self-awareness. And the most important steps on the journey to knowledge of ourselves and of the world around us cannot be taken in an instant, simply by pressing a button as it were: they demand confidence in life and powers of endurance. And it is of this confidence and this endurance that the tales in this little collection speak: lightly, freely and without a trace of sermonizing.

So let our tales begin!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	11
The Good Question <i>First of all the Question</i> .....	15
The Wedding Tale <i>Above All the Relationship</i> .....	19
The Voice of the Sands <i>Death: A Little Piece of Life</i> .....	23
A Misfortune and a Blessing <i>Everything Comes Round</i> .....	27
Crutches <i>In Praise of Freedom</i> .....	31
Two Lady Mice <i>If Needs Must, Try it Alone</i> .....	37
Turkish Delight, Pistachio Flavoured <i>Life Goes on with its Ups and Downs</i> .....	41
Selim's Walking Stick <i>We Can Manage Without Supports</i> .....	53
The Wisdom of the World <i>It is the Ephemeral that is Most Precious</i> .....	59
The Two Wolves	

*Who Feeds the Light and the darkness?*.....63

Footprints

*Are we Ever Truly Alone?*.....65

## THE TWO WOLVES

The old lady was telling the boy a story:

'Listen! Always remember that inside everyone of us there are two wolves locked in combat. One is fed with light: with acceptance, bravery, forgiveness, joy and truth. The other is fed with darkness: with rejection, meanness, thirst for vengeance, bitterness and lies.

Daybreak finds them at each other's throats. When the sun is at its zenith they are fighting still; and when the sun sinks low, dusk deepens and the western sky turns purple they have not given up their struggle. All seven stars of the Pleiades rise into the heavens and still they go on fighting. The morning star harnesses his horses and still they...'

The old lady fell silent. And the boy asked her, 'Grandma, how does this story end?'

And she replied, 'This story ends with each new day. And with each new day it starts again. It goes on endlessly.'

'But you haven't told me which wolf wins!' the boy protested.

The old lady laughed and gave the boy a hug. Then she looked him in the eyes and said, 'That depends on you. You're the one who must decide. Haven't you guessed? Every new day it is the wolf you feed that wins.'

## FOOTPRINTS

There was once a man who walked and walked and walked. He crossed the desert of his life until he reached a boundless ocean. And when he felt ready to enter that dark water he turned to look back on all that he had lived through and bid it a last farewell. And in the sand of the desert he saw the footprints of his life. He counted them one by one and all were there: the places where he had stumbled, the difficult moments, the happy skipping steps, the points where he had turned aside – everything sweet and bitter he had lived through. He smiled to see it all.

And just as he was on the point of turning back towards the ocean's depths, he hesitated. It seemed as though he could see something running parallel with his own footprints. Then he looked again more carefully and made out another set of footmarks exactly next to his and realized he had not walked alone. Someone had been always at his side. He was puzzled, for he could not remember anyone keeping him such close and faithful company.

Lifting his eyes up to the heavens, he asked himself who his companion might have been along life's way. And as he did, a voice was heard that came from everywhere yet nowhere, and it told him: 'It was I, your father and the whole world's father.'

The man who had been walking was flooded with a joy that welled from some deep, primordial source within his soul as he remembered how, in the moment of his birth, the father of all living things had promised never to desert him.

Happy now, he looked once more at the endless double line of footprints. But then he suddenly noticed that on certain days of his life only one line of footprints could be seen. He looked back on those days. Indeed, how could they ever be forgotten? They were the most

terrible of days, the darkest, bitterest, most hopeless; days when he felt that nowhere was there mercy or forgiveness, neither on earth nor in the heavens. Then the man who had been walking felt himself betrayed, defeated, and resentfully complained, 'You, who say you are my father and promised at my birth to never leave my side, where were you in my days of misery, when I writhed in agony because I could not bear the crushing weight of my existence?'

And the voice that came from everywhere yet nowhere answered, 'My son, my dear one, in your days of misery when, all hope lost, you could not bear the weight of your existence, the only footprints in the sand were mine, for I held you in my arms.'