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TIME COMES TO A STANDSTILL

It all took place in the distant past roughly 100 million years ago. No-one knows the precise date but that does not matter. When it comes to events that happened so long ago that it is impossible to conceive of their remoteness in time, it ceases to be relevant whether they took place eons ago or relatively recently.

When we look up at the stars, we don't consider the fact that their light has taken millions of years to reach us. As far as we are concerned, the stars simply exist in the here and now. It is the same with events of the past, even those lost in the depths of millennia. In the moment that they are recalled, either in memory or in storytelling, it is as if they were here right now.

Although, in truth, they are not fully here right now. So how far do the depths of millennia stretch? The earth and the sea extend downwards, and the sky stretches upwards but in what direction does time go? And where does it come from?

Space is quite straightforward. It approaches from up ahead and ends up behind us. When it comes to time, things are just as straightforward, at least until you start to really think about it: what has already happened is gone

and what is yet to happen is yet to arrive. But where did what happened yesterday go, and where does what will happen tomorrow come from?

As soon as you start trying to understand the nature of time, things get much more complicated. When you stop to think about it, if you cannot say where yesterday went and where tomorrow will come from, you have to conclude that yesterday and tomorrow might not exist after all and contemplate the possibility that only today exists — the present.

So, if yesterday no longer exists and tomorrow has not yet come into being, time cannot be anything at all as it doesn't go anywhere and it doesn't come from anywhere. Are we to assume then that time is simply an abstract notion or might not be a physical phenomenon after all?

Future time is an ephemeral concept. The past, however, must be real not least because archaeological excavations testify to its existence. Yet shards of pottery and human remains are really just another obsolete present. When we talk about the past, we are usually referring to a series of events and in this regard, the question is, where are those events now? Where are they stored?

However unlikely it sounds; you can actually see the past. The starry sky is visual proof of that. We see the stars light up, shine and burn out in the present moment, however long ago those events took place. When it comes to the stars, we can see what happened on Earth millions of years ago, so, should we assume that the past is preserved in rays of light and nothing more?

Mysteries such as these are best left to the philosophers. Some things in life are not meant to be explained. They are better recounted in stories... And so, once, something mysterious happened. Time froze and the world came to a standstill.

Until this particular moment, everything had carried on as normal: one royal dynasty replaced another, one civilization followed another and the statues of forgotten gods became riddled with cracks and veiled in layers of sand... Things came and went but nothing ever stood still.

Although, who knows? Maybe this was not the first occasion that time came to a standstill and the Universe assumed a state of limbo. After all, if time was set in motion for a reason, then maybe there is a reason for its coming to a standstill. And the pause itself could have lasted for a single moment and it could just as easily have lasted for an eternity because without movement, there can be no time.

So, in that limitless moment of non-existence, when nothing was supposed to happen, strangely, there was one place where something did happen.

* * *

Priestess Ifut was trailing the boundless blue desert talking to herself. An eccentric figure, it was impossible to tell which country or era she belonged to or even how old she was. She could have been twenty, but she could just as well have been forty. She was dressed in an ankle-length, dark-blue, black velvet dress with a neck collar studded in diamonds. On her left hand, she wore a ring inlaid with a crystal with the same dark-blue sheen. Her

face was covered in scarlet ritual paint, her cheeks bones dotted with white spots. She had green eyes and black hair cut into a bob. What else could one say about her? For all the harshness of her appearance, she was beautiful.

How she was able to move through frozen reality was a mystery. Indeed, it was a mystery to the priestess herself, as she had not the faintest idea where she was, nor could she remember how she had ended up there.

“Oh, Gods, rulers of the world! Take me home!” Itfut’s protest was expressed more in capricious indignation than a helpless wail. “Where are my servants, my subjects? If you don’t show yourselves right now, I’ll order you to have everyone beheaded!”

These words were probably spoken for effect as the priestess did not have the reputation of a cruel or blood-thirsty ruler.

“Right, if this is some sick joke everyone will suffer for it! And believe me, suffer they will!” Itfut was exhausted but she still had the spirit to behave like a capricious princess, at least in some circumstances! One had to admit, the priestess had a brave heart. Anyone else finding themselves in her shoes would already have become hysterical or fallen into trance, not least because the landscape was frighteningly surreal. Everywhere, the same, monotonous, blue waves of sand stretched as far as the horizon. There was not the slightest whiff of a breeze in the air. It was neither hot nor cold. The sky that held no sun glowed with a yellow shimmer and in contrast the sand was blue.

“Okay, okay, get with it, thinking — what is this, a nightmarish horror or a horrible nightmare?” Itfut had the habit of repeating herself.

“This kind of thing shouldn’t be happening to me. I’m the one who creates the nightmares and the horrors that make everyone else tremble! This is your last warning! If I’m not returned to my temple this instant, I’ll get angry, and you know how terrifying that can be!” Itfut fell to her knees in despair. “Oh no, I think I’m going to cry.”

Then it suddenly came to the priestess that she could barely remember who she was or where she was from. Vague fragments of memory were tangled in her mind. She recalled that she was a High Priestess and ruler... she had a temple, ministers, a Teacher but she could not recall the details. She could not even remember her name.

“Oh! Gods, who am I?”

No sooner had she spoken than a whisper appeared in the emptiness flicking from one direction to another like an unsettled wind:

“Itfut, Itfut! Priestess Itfut! Priestess, priestess!”

“Strange, that is kind of like my name, and at the same time, it isn’t...” the priestess muttered while looking around for the source of the voice. “Who’s there?”

“Threshold, Threshold!” the whisper responded.

“Threshold of what?”

“Time, time!”

“Where are you? Show yourself!”

But the whisper faded just as suddenly as it had appeared and did not respond.

“Right...” sighed Itfut, not waiting for a reply. “This must be a bad dream. Either I’m about to wake up, or I’m going mad. Either way, I can’t take this anymore.”

Then, she suddenly remembered something her Teacher had taught her: to return to reality from a dream you have to be consciously aware of who you are, who you really are.

“That’s not me,” the priestess declared. “This is me!” But the priestess’s incantation did not help. Nothing happened. ‘So, who am I? What will happen if I never remember myself fully?’ thought the priestess. ‘Even the name the whisper spoke somehow did not quite feel like it was her real name. And what did that mean, it did not quite feel real?’

“So, what are we going to do, Itfut?” the priestess asked herself. “Ok, my name is Itfut, my name is Itfut. What next? There is no point in walking any further. There’s just sand and nothing but sand as far as the eye can see. Hang on a minute. What else did the Teacher say?”

The fresh memory gave the priestess a glimpse of hope. ‘Wake up in the dream and you can take control of the dream. To do this you have to look very carefully at all that surrounds you and then ask yourself whether everything is as it should be, or whether something is wrong, and if so, what exactly. Learn to see your reality.’

“No, everything is wrong with me and my surroundings. Everything is wrong! And what is there to see here except

sand? And, by the way, why is it blue?” Ifut sat down and began pouring sand from one hand to the other.

“Sand, this is not sand. Sand is sand!” she said trying to see the unusual essence in ordinary things as her Teacher taught her to. “What is unusual about it aside from the color? It consists of grains and pours like sand.”

In that moment, the sand in front of the priestess began to rise up like smoke turning into a huge vortex and charging up into the sky. The priestess screamed at the terrifying spectacle and tried to run away but it was futile. Wherever she ran, the sandy spiral appeared in front of her. The shoes Ifut was wearing were not meant for running in and she stumbled and fell.

The priestess was almost on the verge of great despair, but she pulled herself together again and managed to calm herself a little, telling herself that the whirlwind was not doing her any harm at least.

“Okay, okay. I’m really scared now; I couldn’t be any more scared. So, if things can’t get any worse, then that’s good — they’re about to get better. But I’ve seriously had enough of all this. My fear is now separate from me, and I am separate from it. I don’t want to be with it anymore. I’m going and leaving my fear in my shoes. They’re no good here anyway. Away, away, get away from me!” The priestess kicked off her shoes and flung them straight into the whirlwind.

“That’s it. I’ve gone and I’ve left my fear here!”

The shoes disappeared into the whirlwind which twisted even more powerfully now with an increasing roar.

'This is bad,' thought Itfut. 'I need to take more effective measures otherwise this is not going to end well.'

"Right, Itfut, Itfut, priestess, priestess, you need to see this damn reality, work out what it is, or this is the end. This isn't just sand and that isn't just any old whirlwind. What is it? Think, quickly, quickly now, hurry, hurry!"

And then it dawned on her.

"It's a sand-timer!" she exclaimed. "It's a sand-timer! I see you, devilish reality!"

In that moment, the whirlwind stopped twisting, the roar was replaced with a glassy chime, and the gigantic funnel came crashing to the ground. The sand acquired a natural yellow color, and the sky shone blue again. The sun was the one thing still absent from the sky.