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Agnes and the Forbidden Mountain

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To Greta, Marián And Janek,
who inspired me to write this story
Thanks to Their inconspicuous,
yet unique gifts

1

The forest never ever sleeps. Only townsfolk, with their honking horns, muttering engines, squealing brakes, yapping phone calls, and all that bellowing and bawling might think so. Well, they couldn't be more wrong! Close your eyes and listen while the forest serenades you with its marvellous melodies.

A thick forest covers the remote island of Baulu. Actually, it's a virgin forest. And not just because it's old, really old, but because it has a life all of its own. No new trees are ever planted there and the big ones are never chopped down. People only hunt animals if they have to. Nobody tells the forest what it should look like. The virgin forest on the island of Baulu has been growing the best it can for thousands and thousands of years now. And it can really grow!

Parrots sit on branches and screech at one another. Black-and-yellow toucans nibble on the sweet berries dangling from the branches. They gulp them down as fast as they can so they don't have to share.

Monkeys play in the tree tops. A baby monkey scuttles onto his mother's back. He clings on tightly as she gently makes her way to safety at the top of the tree.

A chorus of frogs croaking can be heard for miles and miles. From time to time, an animal not yet known to man howls long and loud. Leaves rustle in the wind, letting the dew drops slide down as if on a water chute. A bubbling stream cascades down the mountains in the middle of the island and ends in the swashing sea.

Although it's never quiet, the songs of the forest can easily lull you to sleep.

All of a sudden, a loud yell cuts through the usual sounds of the forest: "You gotta catch me first, you sloth!" The girl skipped through a thick bush, shot up the rope ladder to the top of a huge tree, her messy fair hair flying behind her. She wore a belt strapped across one shoulder with a leather bag dangling from it. Two hairy grey ears peeked out of the leather bag.

The small mammal on her back clung on as if its dear life depended on it. It was only the familiar sunny scent of the girl's skin that soothed it. Otherwise, it would have jumped out of its bag much sooner. If there was one thing this little creature hated, it was fast and pointless jumping around.

The girl kept sprinting, not even thinking about what was in her bag. She clenched a banana leaf pouch, packed with ripe red berries. It was the berries that were her prize! The girl glided over the tree branches as if they were solid ground. She would stop

now and then and gently lean back against the bark of the trees. Not to keep her balance but to help her jump further.

The boy chasing her was having a much harder time. He was about the same age but taller. He was stronger, so he could climb ladders quicker than her, but it was harder for him to keep his balance on the thin branches.

The girl dashed over a bridge made from thick woody vines, panting for breath, scaring a bundle of small birds and rudely interrupting their lazing around. Confused and twittering, they shot into the sky in a flock shaped like a huge beautiful butterfly. The branches around her were now getting less and less when suddenly, there was nothing left to step on. A huge dark hole appeared in the forest in front of her. There was nothing else around except for a couple of branches overhead. Although they were not very high, she felt dizzy, and her head started spinning as she grabbed onto one. Breathing long and hard, she pulled herself together and began making her way across the branches over the hole. No looking down! She forced her bright green eyes to look up, grasping the branch tightly. Then another one. And the next one. Phew! Finally, she got one foot onto a solid branch. That was tough.

Next, she had to jump over a group of tall and sturdy poles, which the people of her tribe had put there so they could practice

their agility. After all that swinging around on branches, this would be a piece of cake. She was always much better at jumping than swinging with her arms. Now she could hear panting somewhere behind her. She looked over her shoulder. He was easily climbing the same spot where she had been struggling before. What now? One wrong move and he would catch her. She had to go faster.

A narrow slide hollowed out of a tree trunk appeared in front of her. She had seen the children from her village sliding down it many times. It was narrow, but she could still fit in! Whoosh! What a ride! She whooped as she swished down the long hollowed-out trunk in complete darkness.

The slide finished at a small pool filled with water from a waterfall. The people of her tribe would come down here to cool off on hot days. The shadows from the trees meant it was not as hot as on the beach by the lagoon. The rain had lasted all night and had cooled the temperature down and there was no way that you could call it hot. If there was any other way, she wouldn't choose to jump into the cold water. Especially not when wearing her favourite brown vest and red skirt. Anyhow, there was no time left for what-ifs now. The girl pinched her nose in mid-flight, closed her eyes and dropped into the pool with a loud splash.

All her pursuer could see from above was a huge splash of water, which spattered all around the girl. He knew he wouldn't fit in the

slide. He gave a loud sigh, turned around, put his arms around the hollow trunk and slid down the outside, koala bear style.

In the meantime, another koala bear, a real one, was still having a hard time. If the girl who carried it in her bag didn't want a bath today, neither did her little furry friend Bobo. And she didn't have the slightest intention of doing so. Koalas living in the wild are known to be good swimmers, although Bobo was no wild koala. No, absolutely not! Bobo was a highly cultured koala, who cared deeply about her looks whatever the circumstances. And any ridiculous paw splashing in the water just didn't fit in. That is why Bobo had never even tried swimming. Oh my, wouldn't it come in handy right now though! Bobo was struggling to keep her head above water, but how could she still look elegant when drowning?

The girl still hadn't noticed that the poor koala had slipped out of her bag when they hit the surface. She was too busy hiding behind a bush hoping that she wouldn't be found. Turning her head, she saw her little friend's flapping paws splashing in the ruffled water.

"Agnes!", cried Bobo, frantically fighting for her dear life. *"Heeeelp! Get me ooout!"*

In a heartbeat, Agnes forgot all about being quiet and sitting still so as not to get caught. She sprinted out of the bush and without a second thought, jumped headfirst into the pool for

the second time. With three quick strokes, she reached Bobo, caught her with her left arm under her front paws and using only her right arm swam back to safety. She threw herself on her back, Bobo lying next to her. Bobo was gasping and spitting out water but judging by her cursing, she was going to be just fine. "You frightened me to death!" Agnes said with her eyes closed, her chest rapidly moving up and down as she tried to catch her breath. Before she could say another word, she felt a shadow fall over her, even though her eyes were still closed. She opened them slowly and saw him standing over her. He was grinning and holding the banana leaf pouch in his hand. "So, what did you call me? A sloth?"

"Kari! By all koalas' bums, don't you dare laugh at me! I almost died! You should be helping me instead of laughing at me!"

"And I think you deserve to be thrown into the pool again for calling me a sloth and stealing the berries. But because it's you, I'll let you off this time," countered Kari with a smile as he offered her his hand to help her up.

"I don't believe you. You must have cheated."

"I didn't cheat! I promise. I didn't use my gift."

"If you say so."

"See. You have to believe me now," said Kari, whose real name was Gabriel. But he didn't like that name, so everyone just called him Kari. Nobody could remember when or how he got his

nickname. He was quite tall for his age and his shoulders had grown broader over the last year. Like the other boys from the village, he never wore anything from the waist up. Although his skin was tanned, it was always full of mosquito bites. Those pesky mosquitos never did sleep. He had thick black hair, which he curled into a small ponytail on the top of his head to keep it from falling into his dark keen eyes.

Kari was Agnes' best friend. They had been friends for so long that even their mothers said they had been together "since forever". It was difficult to say how these two ever found something in common. He was tall and lately had become muscular. She was petite, almost skinny. His hair was black and straight, whereas hers was dirty blonde, wavy and always tangled. This was nothing compared to how their personalities differed.

She was thoughtful, he was playful. She always saw the dark side of everything, he never stopped believing in wonders. She would bug him with her cutting comments, he would generously let her get away with it and just smile in return. Who knows, maybe their differences brought them together because they completed each other wonderfully. The world needs its balance.

Agnes caught his hand angrily. He helped her back on her feet and gave her the banana-leaf pouch back. "Here you are," said Kari gently, "you deserve it. *I don't know any girl who can climb trees better than you.*"

“Thanks,” Agnes took the package with a guilty frown.

“So, shall we meet before sundown in the den?”

“Before sundown in the den,” agreed Kari with a broad smile then vanished into the thick bushes.

2

The peaceful Magrey tribe had been living in the virgin forest on the island of Baulu for thousands of years. They lived most of their lives at the tops of the trees. Like the other mammals from the virgin forest, they would rather spend most of their time high up where they could hide from predators' eyes. Only sometimes did they climb down to get water from the pool under the waterfall or to spend some time on the beach, where it is easy to spot any danger from far and wide.

The Magreys had adjusted to the high life of the forest surprisingly well. Their wooden huts were neatly and solidly built on the branches of the trees. Skilfully braided swings and hammocks hung in the shadows of the leaves covering the whole village, making it the perfect place for the villagers to rest on hot days. Rope bridges and ladders were scattered among the huts, connecting the people, who enjoyed their time working and chatting with neighbours.

From an early age, every Magrey was trained to move freely among the branches. You could often see toddlers, still unsteady on their feet but already moving confidently forward, under the watchful eye of their parents sitting nearby. It is fascinating to see what children are capable of if you just let them try.

That was why the whole village was built so children could play. The Magreys always said that childhood is the most magical and valuable time of life, which should be used to discover the inner and the outer world. The virgin forest was a great place for playing just by being itself. The Magreys made it better by making swings, monkey bars, slides, ropeways and tunnels where the children could practice their agility.

You could see the playful nature of the Magreys by how they loved to show off their huts and the whole village. You could stumble upon beautiful curtains braided with rainbow pebbles. Dream catchers swung among the trees, which the Magreys made using wonderful, bright and beautiful feathers. They used seashells to make chimes, which made soothing sounds and scared away the birds and other animals that liked to steal food from their huts.

The Magreys loved to make themselves beautiful. They would paint winding patterns on their bodies with red-brown clay. They made jewellery from wood, seashells and pebbles that decorated their ear lobes, necks, wrists, upper arms, even ankles. The women and girls liked to braid their hair into thick strong plaits with bird feathers. The Magreys strongly believed in the connection between the soul and the body. It wasn't because they were vain that they took so much care of themselves. They thought it the best way of spending time together. Mothers combed through

the long hair of their daughters. Girls braided headdresses from flowers for one another. The boys and the men painted their faces, arms, backs and legs with patterns to please the good spirits and protect the village from any natural disasters. And then there was the other thing, which by far took up most of their time. The constant nit picking! Nits and mosquitos were two friends that you couldn't get rid of, even on this peaceful island.

Every Magrey was brought up to live in harmony with the outer world. Respect for nature was their religion. Respect for the people of the tribe was a natural thing. Respect for oneself was a must. The Magreys lived on an island where it was impossible not to be happy. Well... almost.

3

"Kari, I'm so unhappy about this," Agnes sighed in despair when she met her best friend in their den. The den was the super-secret shelter of Agnes and Kari. They had discovered it together four years ago by accident. They were playing and they ended up way higher in the forest than any other villagers would dare to go, where the branches were too thin or too thick. Agnes was chasing after Kari in one of their never-ending petty chases. They had already forgotten why they had been fighting that day. Kari claimed that Agnes had boasted she can run faster than him and he wanted to prove her wrong. Agnes disagreed with him and was convinced that she was chasing Kari because he had hidden a toad in her bed. Who knows what the real story was? Old fights tend to be forgotten and time can shape all memories so that we only remember the nice ones. Or the important ones.

The important thing was that they had found the den. A roomy hollow in a colossal old tree just appeared in front of them. Kari saw it first, froze in surprise and stared in awe. Agnes had almost caught up with him and was about to jump on his back and mischievously bite his neck when she saw the hollow too. As if in a dream, they both climbed inside. There was enough room

for both of them. They had to duck when going inside, but once there, they could stand up just fine. They were both seven at that time.

Now only Agnes can stand up in the den and has to watch out that she doesn't bump her head in the places where the ceiling is lower. Kari is not so lucky. He has to climb in on all fours. To stand up inside is impossible. When he wants to go inside the den, which had seemed so big four years ago, he has to fold his legs like a magician showing children how can he pack himself into a suitcase.

They had made the den really beautiful over the years by collecting everything that the adults overlooked or showed no interest in. To Agnes and Kari, this stuff was treasure. You could find a pebble in the shape of a heart or a flying bird, or a stone, which with a bit of imagination, looked like a sleeping gecko. There was a bow, made from a bendy branch and a string. There were arrows where Kari had carved the tips. Abandoned snail shells and leaves of different shapes and colours hung on the walls instead of pictures. A collection of birds' feathers threaded on strings, hanging from the ceiling in half-moons, made the den feel cosy.

The floor of the den was padded with fine moss. Agnes and Kari also made two moss cushions so they didn't scratch their backs on the rough walls. Kari had scooped out two wooden

bowls so they could enjoy the fruits of the forest. There were small figures that Kari had carved. They used to play with them when they were small, but now they stood in the nooks in the walls.

Agnes had braided curtains from leaves, which cleverly hid the entrance to the den so that no unwanted visitors could find it. The den was special because of how they had made it look and was the only place in the village where they could talk and share their most secret secrets without being disturbed.

One of the best things in life is to have someone to share all your thoughts with. Sometimes, we have everything in our head but we don't know what we really think until we tell someone.

For the past four years, a lot had been said in the den between the two of them. If every thought or feeling said out loud in the den would be as big as a sugar cube, the den would be full of sugar up to the ceiling. "Kari, it just makes me so sad," Agnes said taking a long breath. "And I am really, really scared."

4

"Agnes, come on," Kari tried to cheer Agnes up. "You've still got a year. *It's not that much, but...*"

"I know! But what if I don't discover my gift? What happens then?"

"Well... don't think about that now. That almost never happens," Kari soothed her. *"Well, sometimes, it happens. Uncle Elias didn't discover his gift, but he wasn't you."*

"Exactly!" Agnes wouldn't let her panic go. "Almost never. But what if it happens to me? I don't want to become a Shadow."

"Don't worry. You won't become a Shadow. Just look at yourself!" Kari encouraged her. *"Apart from that, if you become a Shadow then I have no idea what that would do to me. I care for you so much, I can't imagine only existing next to you and not being able to talk to you."*

Agnes took one of the carved-out figures and started playing with it, her mind elsewhere. Kari felt a little nervous that she might drop it, but he kept his mouth shut. To his relief, Agnes finally put the figure back in its place.

"That's nice of you to say. But when I look at myself, all I see is an impossible girl who can do a bit of everything but nothing special."

"Then you have to look differently, Agnes. You are special. *I can see it.*"

"That's not enough. I need to be so special that I can serve the whole tribe. Tomorrow is another Full Moon Celebration and I have nothing to show."

"But you don't have to! It is not the last celebration. There's still a dozen of them to go until your twelfth birthday."

Now Bobo was sniffing around the den, beyond bored. She was hoping to find some eucalyptus leaves, even if Agnes had told her not to eat them as she would get fat. Pff! What a cheek! Bobo couldn't resist the temptation. She loved only three things in life. Eucalyptus, sleep and Agnes. In that order. She was a koala indeed.

"That's easy for you to say, Kari!" blurted Agnes. "You've already had your Full Moon Celebration. I would also be calm if I were you."

"You cannot think like that. I'm only trying to calm you down. *If you feed your fear any more, you will get stuck.*"

Agnes glowered at him as if he had stamped on her foot. Kari turned his eyes away and grabbed a handful of nuts from a bowl and popped them in his mouth one by one.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said at last. "I just know that you'll find your gift and it will be hard for me to understand. What's the problem? *You know I'm your biggest fan, you do know*

that, don't you? All I wanted to say is that I still like you with or without your gift."

Agnes' frown slowly melted. She reached for her friend and hugged him. Kari was right. She had to pull herself together, she still had a year left after all. If she kept worrying about it, if she was scared of the future, then nothing good would come of it.

An angry Bobo gave up her eucalyptus hunt and hid in the bag on Agnes' back. She snuggled down and fell asleep straight away.

Agnes and Kari sat hugging in the middle of their most secret place on Earth. They breathed slowly and deeply together. They counted each breath in a whisper. One. Two. Three. Until the rhythms of their breathing came together.

Finally, Agnes lifted her head from Kari's shoulder. "Shall we go for a swim?" Her voice sounded soft again.

5

There is one more thing that you still don't know about the Magreys. Everyone in the tribe has a gift. For some, their gift appears before their mother stops breastfeeding. Others must wait longer for it to appear.

What was both good and not so good was that everybody had a different gift. This meant that the whole tribe became a natural puzzle, where every piece was a part. Everyone had to keep together and could not be replaced. The big task for each person in the tribe was to be exactly who they were. This was so the puzzle could stay neatly together. The troublesome part was, sometimes, it took some time to figure out the gift and put all its small pieces together.

When the gift appeared, it was always something that the rest of the world would think strange. Apart from the island of Baulu of course, where the Magreys didn't see it that way. It was no big deal for them. It was a blessing that was good for the whole village. They wanted to be useful and make each other happy. They needed to have a purpose and be satisfied. They only used their gifts when they had to, and it would never cross their minds to boast about their skills.

Each new gift was a reason for a big celebration in the village. When the night came, and the moon was full, the Magreys would throw a big party called the Full Moon Celebration. Those who had discovered their gift, and could use it safely, would perform it for the rest of the villagers during this ceremony. After this secret ritual was over, they could use their gift whenever they thought it necessary or when they were asked for a favour.

Kari was lucky. He had discovered his gift very early. He first noticed it when he was sitting on the beach. It was a sunny day and everyone from the village was tired from the hot weather and lying around. Kari was watching the calm water flickering on the surface of the lagoon because there was nothing else to do. It was just too hot to do anything else.

To make time go by faster, he started practising counting, which he had only recently learned. As there was nothing else around to count, he started counting his breaths. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three.

Out of nowhere, a dolphin cut through the still water and leapt high into the air. This was nothing unusual. There were loads of dolphins living in the bay on the island of Baulu. But this particular dolphin seemed a bit odd to Kari. When it shot out of the water, it hung in the air for simply ages and then very slowly dropped back into the lagoon splattering drops of water everywhere. Kari could see every single drop of water. They reminded

him of small shiny pearls and as he was still a small boy, he found it quite funny. A thought struck him that maybe he could collect the water pearls.

When he was laying in his hammock before he went to sleep that night, he told his papa that he wanted to go back to the lagoon and make a string of pearls for mama. Papa realised something was up. Water usually breaks up so quickly that nobody notices it. He asked Kari what exactly had happened with the dolphin, what he had been thinking about and what he had been doing at the time. Every little detail could be important in discovering his small son's gift.

At first, Kari didn't realise how precious his gift was. This happened over days and months. All he needed to do was to calm down, deepen his breathing and start counting every breath. One. Two. Three. As soon as he finished counting, whatever he focused on would slow right down for a couple of seconds. He could see every tiny detail that no one else could ever see.

When he was six years old, he could control his gift completely and the time came for him to perform it during the Full Moon Celebration. It was a bright night, lit by the full moon when Kari stood in front of his tribe. He was so nervous that night. He held two seashells in his hand. On the shaman's command, he threw the first seashell into the air. The seashell dropped down with a thud.

“Mama, what’s so magical about that?” said one of the children, pulling on her sleeve.

“Just you wait,” his mama patted her son’s head. “You must be patient.”

Kari pressed both his palms against his chest. He closed his eyes and whispered: “One.” He breathed in through his nose, then breathed out through his mouth. “Two.” He breathed in. He breathed out. “Three”. He breathed in. He breathed out.

Kari opened his eyes and with all his strength – as much as a small boy could be strong – threw a second seashell high into the air. The seashell stopped in mid-air, and to the amazement of the watching villagers, very gently began to drop. This time the seashell looked like it was falling through a thick liquid, which was slowing its fall. Although the first seashell had landed almost straight after Kari threw it in the air, the second shell was still slowly falling for what felt like the longest ever couple of seconds.

After that, the people from the tribe often visited Kari. At first, it was just for trivial things like helping them find a lost bracelet in their hut. The six-year-old Kari would simply stand in the middle of the hut, breathe in and out three times and in a flash would find the lost object.

Later, they would ask for his help with more difficult things. They took Kari on hunts whenever they could not find many animals or there were not enough to feed the whole tribe. Kari

would use his deep breathing to find the animal in its hiding place and could even slow its escape. Those couple of long seconds usually gave the hunters enough time to aim their arrows and hit their prey.

Agnes had a feeling that Kari used his gift when they were playing chase. He had promised that he would never use it as it wouldn't be fair to her. But Agnes never really trusted him with this. If he wasn't lying, it would mean he was faster than her. And Agnes would never admit to this.

Kari discovered another effect of his gift one year later. He found that besides objects, he could slow the minds of the people who were worried or confused. When they breathed together, he could breathe their problems away so they made better decisions than when their hot heads were full of galloping thoughts.

Kari wasn't anything special among his tribe. Every Magrey inherited a special gift at birth. But there was a catch. The gift had to be performed during a Full Moon Ceremony before they reached their twelfth birthday.

Agnes would be eleven tomorrow.

6

Kari and Agnes walked out of the forest, the delicate white sand stroking their bare feet. The Magreys did not wear anything on their feet. That's because it was always warm and shoes were no good when climbing up trees.

The children's eyes fixed on the lagoon. Although they had seen it at least a thousand times before, they never grew tired of the view. Small waves danced across the surface on the scorching summer day. The water was crystal clear, and they could see the coloured fish that usually stayed in huge shoals far away from the shore. Agnes never understood how they could be so perfectly synchronised. A whole shoal could change its direction in a blink of an eye.

Bobo was still fast asleep on Agnes' back. "How can she sleep through something as fantastic as swimming?" she muttered. Agnes gently removed the bag from her back and rested it in a dip in the sand under the shadow of a palm tree.

The cool water tempted both children to do what everyone else in their shoes would do. Kari gave Agnes a cheeky wink and,

side by side, they ran towards the sparkling blue-green water. The lagoon slowed their fast strides as the water loudly splashed droplets far and wide.

When the water reached over their knees and they could not run anymore, they dived into the water head first. Kari was the first to emerge from the water and start swimming, shaking his head like a rain-drenched puppy. He swam the crawl quickly to the middle of the lagoon. Agnes' head bobbed up from the water a few seconds later. She grimaced as tried to pull her wet hair from her face. She knew she would never beat Kari at swimming. He was always a faster swimmer than she was. This didn't bother her at all. She loved the water so much that she would forgive anyone anything, as long as she could dive and swim and jump in the waves.

"Do you think they will come today?" shouted Agnes to Kari, but he didn't hear her. His head kept disappearing under the water and he would only bob up to take a deep breath. Agnes was treading water and looking around impatiently. If they would show up today, that would be fantastic!

And then, as her wish came true, a smooth grey blur emerged in the distance. Then another one, just behind the first one. What an elegant shape! Yes! It's them! They're here! Cosmo and Luna, the pair of dolphins who loved the lagoon and always came back.

They did this so often that the people living on the island had already given them names. The dolphins were so used to playing with humans that anytime they saw a Magrey dive into the water, they would shoot towards them desperate to play.

And today was no different. Luna was making perfect circles around Agnes and Cosmo was cheekily poking Kari with his nose, urging him to play with him. The dolphins didn't have to try hard with these children. Agnes and Kari both held on tight to the backs of the dolphins as they flew across the lagoon. There are some things in life that you can never get enough of. Agnes could not understand why the adults didn't swim with the dolphins as the children did. How could they miss out on so much fun? If that was being an adult then I refuse to become one, thought Agnes. She pressed herself against Luna's smooth skin and took a deep breath so she could stay under water for as long as her dolphin friend. Kari was playing with Cosmo on the other side of the lagoon. He climbed on his back and tried using him like a surfboard. In a flash, Cosmo changed direction. Kari didn't expect the sudden pull, lost his balance and toppled into the water with an almighty splash. Agnes was laughing hard in the distance while Luna was also poking fun at Kari's mishap. She poked her head out of the water and made that clicking dolphin sound, the one which always reminded Agnes of laughing.

While Kari was splashing around in the water, Cosmo headed towards him to help. They met with Luna and Agnes in the middle of the lagoon. The children were holding onto the dolphins' backs and bouncing around in the water. Dolphins will play for their whole life compared to people. They never refuse an offer. Whenever Agnes met Luna, the dolphin always seemed happy, even though she was already an adult. How come her mama was always so worried? thought Agnes. No other animal on Earth gets as anxious as humans. If she would be completely honest with herself, she was no better either. She was only ten years old, almost eleven! And she couldn't stop worrying about something that was going to happen in a year's time. And who knows? Maybe this whole thing would sort itself even earlier and without her help.

Agnes decided that the adults from her tribe only had themselves to blame. And she was not an adult, and she had no intention of becoming one. Luna poked her head up from the water. Agnes pressed herself against Luna's smooth body, took a deep breath and dived below the surface.

The world was alright again. Agnes was swimming with Luna and nothing else mattered.

7

Leila sighed. She couldn't wait any longer. The tribal meeting should have begun a while ago and if not everyone was there then that was their fault. She couldn't be responsible for each and every villager.

Although Leila had been the chief of the tribe for five years, she still felt that it shouldn't be her. Ian should have been the chief of the Magrey tribe. It was him who should have been speaking to the people. He would have known how to please, encourage, motivate and soothe. But he was not here. For more than five years, Leila had had to live without him and carry the weight of the position on her shoulders because Ian was dead. Leila stood up, raised her arms to her shoulders and began to softly caress the air around her in circles. She was using her wrists and elegantly moving her body. From a distance, it looked as if she was rolling balls of wool in her hands. At first, nobody noticed her. The Magreys standing around her were chatting, fully absorbed in their small talk. But the longer Leila danced and caressed the air around her, the more attention she got from the villagers. The

chitter-chatter died down as one face after another turned towards her. It wasn't long before Leila had everyone's attention. The Magreys were peacefully looking at her, fully focused, smiles on their faces. This was Leila's gift.

When Leila found out as a child that her gift was to gain people's attention and calm their minds, she wasn't very excited at all. "Such a stupid gift," she would tell herself. "Why can't I do something more exciting like my friends? Talk to birds for starters? Or change water from salty to fresh?"

Now, thirty years later, she was more than grateful. As the chief of the tribe, she had used her gift many times. And she was particularly thankful for her gift when Ian died, as it stopped her from falling into a well of self-pity.

The crowd gathered around Leila fell silent. She could speak at last. "My fellow villagers," she addressed her tribe. "As you know, tomorrow night the moon will be in its full phase. Another Full Moon Celebration is ahead of us. I would like to announce that this Full Moon Celebration is going to be special." A whisper ran through the crowd and the people began impatiently arguing about what it was that could be so special.

Leila raised her arms once again and this time it took just a few waves of the hands to calm the tribe down. In the silence, Leila continued: "During tomorrow's Full Moon Celebration, three

young Magreys will show us their gifts." Whistles and applause could be heard from around the crowd because it had been a very long time since three gifts were performed during one celebration.

"I expect you to take care of all your duties tomorrow during the day and to take part in the preparations for the celebration so that we can give our full attention to our three comrades, who – as I hope – will become full members of our tribe."

The Magreys standing around nodded their heads in agreement. They knew what their duties were and who was in charge of this and that. And even better, preparing a Full Moon Celebration was more fun than any work.

"Apart from that," Leila continued, "tomorrow is my daughter's birthday. And even though she is not here with us today, I hope that..."

"I'm here! I'm here now!" yelled the panting girl, forcing her way through the crowd towards her mother.

"Agnes!" Leila cried out and glared at her suspiciously. Her daughter was soaked through from head to toe. Her wet hair was glued to her face and water dripped from her clothes. "I'm glad you could find us. *But you are late, and as the daughter of the chief of the tribe, you should know better.*"

"I know I'm late and I'm sorry Mama. But I was swimming with Luna and forgot all about the time and..."

"Well," Leila stopped the stream of words flying out of her daughter's mouth. "But next time, please pay more attention to the time. By the way, I was just talking about you. Tomorrow is going to be an important day for you as well. *Even though you haven't discovered your gift yet.*"

Agnes should have been smiling. It was her birthday tomorrow and the celebration was sure to be wonderful. Even so, the smile froze on her face.

8

The vast majority of the Magreys usually discovered their gift without trying. They would notice they are capable of something extraordinary, something nobody else could do. The Magreys did not have schools. Well, at least not as we know them.

There was not a single school building on the island of Baulu. There was no point in it. The Magreys needed to live and survive in the woods. They needed to know how to find and prepare food. They needed to know all the herbs and the effects they have on the human body. They needed to learn how to move safely in the virgin forest. They needed to know how to build a hut. They needed to make simple objects to use in their everyday lives. They needed to know basic maths and writing, to note valuable information and events. And of course, they needed to know how to treat each other with love.

Even though the virgin forest made things difficult, their lives were very simple. It didn't make sense for a young Magrey to go to school for a full day and then return to their tribe in the evening. They lived with the adults, watched them work and learnt how their daily chores were done. Even the youngest

children, who could barely walk, could help with any work they wanted to learn.

It was nothing unusual to see a three-year-old child balancing on the branches carrying fruit almost bigger than themselves. Two-year-old children tried to cut objects with sharp knives, while their parents watched from nearby so they could jump in at the first sign of danger.

Since they used to spend every day together and the children were a close part of the life of the whole tribe, it was the adults who would usually discover a child's gift. And what was by far the most important thing about discovering their gift? It was the amount of time that the young Magreys were allowed to get to know themselves and explore their abilities.

Every day, from dawn to dusk, they had countless opportunities to focus on an activity. They could grow up as they pleased. More than anything else, they could spend their time with the most important person in their lives, with that one person that we all forget about from time to time. With themselves. And with their thoughts.

Although most of the Magreys would discover their gift quickly, some didn't. Very occasionally, a young Magrey would not discover their gift despite all the time they had to themselves and the support of the whole tribe.

This only happened rarely. One reason was that these Magreys did not want to use their gift to help the tribe. So, even though they knew their gift, they refused to present it at the Full Moon Celebration.

Sometimes a young boy or girl didn't want to develop their gift and would decide to do something else. This happened because at first, some of the gifts might not appear as interesting as others. Some young Magreys thought they were the chosen ones so there was no way someone like them could possess such ordinary gifts. They believed that they should live the life of somebody else instead.

But what happened to a Magrey who hadn't shared their gift with the other members of the tribe by their twelfth birthday?

9

When Agnes was small, it didn't strike her as strange at all. But as she grew older, she couldn't help but notice the strange beings that lived in the village. The Magreys called them the Shadows and they also lived on the island. They lived in the same huts and ate the same food. But they were not like the Magreys at all. Their bodies were almost see-through. The Shadows looked like all their joy and desire to live had left them long ago. They trudged sadly through the virgin forest village in silence. The Magreys didn't speak to them. They knew it was useless. The Shadows were stuck in their own world and never had a happy life.

You couldn't say that the Shadows were idle. On the contrary, they spent most of the day working but they never had anything to show for it. It seemed as if they were only working for the sake of it rather than creating something useful.

You couldn't talk to the Shadows. You couldn't touch them either. If you tried, your hand would go right through them. They wouldn't even notice. The Shadows were an everyday part of the Magreys' life, but at the same time, they lived in a parallel world with different rules.

The Shadows were not real people although they were mortal. When they left the world, it was not because they were old or sick. They could not hurt themselves. The Shadows died at the moment that they realised that being in this world didn't make any sense. As soon as they reached this point of awakening, in the second when they stopped the wheels of their mindless existence, they simply melted away.

Agnes wouldn't admit it to anyone in the world, but she was afraid of the Shadows. Something was frightening about their eternal silent presence and never-ending working. Their eyes were empty, there was no life in them. When you looked through their see-through bodies, you would see straight into the eyes of the deepest nothing. Agnes knew that the Shadows couldn't hurt her, but still, she never got used to them being around so she avoided them whenever she could.

But you could not hide from the Shadows. They always found Agnes, no matter how often she tried to not cross their path. And when the Shadows appeared nearby, her throat became uncomfortably dry. She always looked at their forlorn existence and lately had thought more and more about how it might feel to become a Shadow. She would like to push this thought far away.

Agnes had a year to find her gift. If she failed, she would become one of them.

10

The whole village was on its feet from the early morning. Today, the moon would be full and that was a sacred moment for the Magreys. Instead of their usual tasks, they began to prepare the Full Moon Celebration.

The first thing was the decorating part. The Celebration always took place on the beach, which bordered the virgin forest from one side and the lagoon from the other. The men from the village knocked twelve poles into the sand in a circle that was large enough to fit in all the people from the village.

They spread out and tied ropes between the poles to make a huge net like a spider's web. The younger boys hung bird feathers, seashell chains, leaf fans and flower wreaths on the ropes. These formed a cosy roof so the starlit sky could shine over the heads of the villagers during the ceremony.

In the middle of the poles was a great fireplace. The Magreys had been collecting the wood for this sacred fire for the previous couple of days. Not that the virgin forest ever lacks wood but the constant humidity even soaked the fallen branches of the trees. This meant they had to let the wood dry on the beach so that it would burn beautifully.

The children from the tribe braided flower wreaths, which all the villagers would hang from their necks in the evening. The women mainly prepared food. The virgin forest was always full of delicious treasures that the Magreys turned into delicious food. They even baked flatbreads in their little ovens. Even the younger girls helped with the cooking. They chopped the forest fruits into cubes, which they pinned on small wooden sticks in colourful mixtures. When the whole feast was ready, and the bowls were resting comfortably on banana leaves, the view could take your breath away.

The afternoon hours were the time they made themselves beautiful. Not just the traditional red clay but ochre yellow, white and black were mixed for this special occasion.

Kari was painting an elaborate pattern on Agnes' back. It looked like a shining sun with twisted rays running from the centre in all directions. Bobo had to leave her favourite spot so made herself comfortable on Agnes' lap so she could continue sleeping.

"If I could, I wouldn't celebrate my birthday today at all," sighed Agnes angrily.

"Nonsense," said Kari. "Birthdays happen only once a year. You can't miss it."

"Whatever. What I want doesn't matter anyhow. The daughter of the chief of the tribe cannot dare not go to her birthday celebration. Mama would kill me."

"You are too hard on her. Leila is wonderful," Kari defended the chief of the tribe. "And if I am sure about something, she would not kill you, no matter what you do. *You should be glad she is your mama. Her patience with you is never-ending, given all that monkey business you sometimes get up to.*"

"I know," Agnes snorted.

"Do you have your present ready?" asked Kari.

Agnes slapped her forehead and let her hand slide down her face. She had completely forgotten about it. According to an old Magrey tradition, the children were to give a present to their parents to show their gratitude for bringing them into this world. Agnes' father was no longer alive, so she only needed a present for her mother. She still had a little time left before it got dark.

"Are you done yet?" barked Agnes much too impatiently.

"Yep, almost." Kari finished the painting with a couple of strokes and let her go. "And don't touch it, the colour hasn't dried yet", he said in the direction of her vanishing back. But Agnes didn't hear him. While the other people from the tribe were finishing their preparation for the Full Moon Celebration, she had to find a present for her mother. She hoped she could find something in time.

When darkness took over the village, everything was set and ready down to the tiniest detail and the Full Moon Ceremony could begin.