

Tales of an Untold Past

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TALES OF AN UNTOLD PAST

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Written by Mark Russo.

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A Little Stroll Through the Woods

This is the moment I wake up. I open my eyes and the wood ceiling looms up there, as it did the day before. Then, I sit up on my small bed and get up. I am fully awake. I know what will happen next. I need to wash my face, so I approach the sink. I see my eyes in the small flat mirror; I would say I am a beautiful little girl. I smile at my reflection and wash my face once more. Wait. How old am I?

I go back to my room and put on a simple white cotton dress; it will not feel too warm on this bright summer day. I really would love to have a walk outside; the weather looks amazing. I open a window to let some fresh air in, but I cannot smell flowers or grass. Strange, I think to myself.

I'm just outside of my small house now and I take another look at the sky. It looks bluer than I remember, even more than it did yesterday or the day before. I walk a few steps next to the side of my house; I hear the grass crush under my feet and finally see those flowers. I would love to take them to my grandmother; it has been ages since we've met. That would be really kind of me and I love to be kind.

I pick those flowers effortlessly; they are silky smooth and very colorful, but no smell comes from them. These flowers must be damaged, I think; there is something wrong. I remember well their distinctive, sweet smell, and the lack of it makes me anxious. So, I approach my mother, hurrying.

"Mother, please help. I think something is wrong with these flowers!"

My mother looks at me, understanding my mood; something is just not right. She warmly gets close, kneels and whispers in my ear, in a velvet-like fashion.

"Put those flowers back in the ground. They might be damaged today." Then she moves her hand forward, indicating where they belong, where they would love to return. And so I do; I stick them back into the ground and they appear to become better right away. They look like they are thriving from contact with the soil.

When I go back in, my mother is still washing the same dish she was before. I ask her, "Mother, I would love to visit Granny. It would be very good to see her! Am I allowed to go?"

She does not reply straight away but walks towards the shelf, the big and white one I am not allowed to open. I do not know why she keeps that piece of furniture to herself but I must admit, I am curious. I do like secrets; adults have lots. I assume so, at least. I do not know that many.

When she returns, she is holding another flower bouquet in her hands, in a much better condition than the one I had before. She smiles both with her eyes and mouth and puts that bouquet in my hands. She whispers as she gets closer "Now go, sweetheart. But mind the woods. They can be tricky. Go straight down the path you know and do not talk to anyone. Is that clear?"

I nod my head, smiling back at her. I really love her. How good is it to have her? She's the best mum on earth.

I take the road I've walked many times before, leaving my small house behind on this new, perfect day. I perceive a light pain in my right knee, but I do not want it to stop me. I take another look at my small house, and it looks even better with its red bricks than I remembered before. The sun is rising much faster than I expected.

I keep walking and enter the blooming woods. As I step further into the surrounding green, the light becomes dim and I feel a little cooler despite how warm I felt a few steps before. I decide I want to wear my hood and I quicken my pace since it's better not to linger too much. Woods are not meant for children like me.

I step on a path crowded with scattered stones; my leather shoes squeak as I keep moving. I still cannot smell any of the aromas I remember from these woods: plants, flowers and mosses are all odorless. My nose seeks for something familiar that cannot be found.

If aromas are too shy to show up today, the colors of the woods are definitely not. I'm increasingly attracted to all those different shades of green and brown. I approach a tree and follow the direction of the rings

on its bark. Then I turn and kneel at its side, where a group of red mushrooms is growing. They are poisonous, I know. I do not dare touch them.

I move further and the trees open just before the pond, that one where those noisy frogs always sing their repetitive song loudly. I hear the sound they spread all over, but cannot see them, not even one. So, I proceed further.

And then, a few steps before turning right where the stone well is, I hear someone talking to me from a distance behind. I do not know if I should turn around. I try to walk faster. I am not allowed to talk to anyone in the woods because it can be dangerous. I'm almost running. Something, suddenly, keeps me from doing it. It's just a feeling, but I think I know that voice. That familiar voice...

"You. Here. Again. And..."

"Who are you?" I ask, more curious than worried.

"You really have no clue?"

The animal gets closer, but I do not feel scared. I would say it is a wolf or a very large dog.

"Okay, let's start from the beginning" the animal sounds like he is patronizing me. "What is your name?"

"Oh, everybody calls me Little Red Riding Hood. My mother too."

"Okay; do you think that is actually a name?"

"A name? What do you mean?"

"You gave me a nickname; what people call you is not your real name."

"Oh, I do not remember if I have a name like the one you are asking for."

We walk a few steps further; the animal is thinking, then speaks again.

"What year is it?"

"Year? What is a year?" I find myself more and more confused. Why is this animal asking me all these strange questions?

"I know you are going to your grandmother's. And, as always, you forgot you should not talk to strangers. Especially animals. Wolves usually do not talk."

"You're a wolf! I knew you were!" I increasingly think I know this animal.

As we keep walking, a long black line appears in the sky above us. The blue sky tears and shreds before my eyes as I stop moving. I get behind the wolf, in search of protection. The sky turns completely black; I see nothing of what was there before. The wood looks like it is disappearing, swallowed by the spreading darkness.

In complete obscurity, both the wolf and I yearn for direction, until a voice comes to us, from nowhere and from all directions at the same time.

"You are really willing to ruin this game, Wolf?"

The wolf replies and even if he is very close to me, I cannot see him.

"This is no longer funny."

"You have not been asked to express your opinion here. You should not be allowed to have one actually."

"Mr. Hobbes. I do not want to play the wolf anymore. I'm getting really bored of this. Every day, it's the very same thing. I walk with this little girl, then I use that shortcut to arrive to her grandmothers' before she does and... we all know how this ends."

"This is my amusement park, Wolf. You are part of my only child's favorite living fairy tales. Why do you not simply do your job and help?"

"Oh, I am so bored of helping. Why does nobody else here remember?"

"I really do not know. I am planning to substitute you. I will get another robot wolf to replace you. One that talks a bit less."

The sun comes back but it's shining a little less brightly. I am completely lost. I look at the furry animal again.

"Ok, Little Red Riding Hood. Let's play our game."

"What do you mean?"

"Go to your grandmother. I will not bother you."

The wolf walks away. I should rush maybe. My grandmother might be worried that I am not there yet.

Little Thumb

I live in the slum, New Rome, the city in the distance. I've been living in this place my entire life. They treat me like a kid, maybe because I'm not that tall. Little Thumb is the name.

My parents told me we are gatherers; we collect stuff here and there, and then we try to sell it. Not easy; you get chased a lot by other gatherers or by those we gather from. We pick stuff up, you know; once it's in our hands, it's mine, ok?

So, we all roam beyond the border, into the city, into the dusty streets along with the dogs; we search for something that might drag our existence forward, maybe one more day. Two, if we are lucky.

I have this big family; I mean, I share this hut with them. I have 5 or 6 brothers; sometimes one or two more crash here for the night; they're my brothers as well, I guess. My folks told me they are. Not that I get along with them, not at all; but they are around and sometimes we do gather some stuff together and share our income. That is mostly food or rags.

My mom told me that when her mother was my age they used this thing called money which I have no idea about. How is paper worth more than bread or rice? You cannot eat paper.

Anyway, this family thing we have is not easy. We don't have enough food for all of us; I see everyone getting thinner and thinner. My mom, she cries all the time because we are poor, and I ask her to stop because that doesn't help. I've been thinking for a long time now and I think we should do something, like make a big change; we cannot survive long like this. I have already buried one of my brothers. My mom was crying at his burial as well. I told her to stop; tears were not needed.

I thought we should maybe gather more but that would piss off the clans. We have our share, we cannot sneak into the clans' territory or they will kill us. They will torture and kill us. I saw that occur once. We have

to find something, some way to have more food or fewer people to feed. Famine and a black plague helped with that.

I am a smart one. They all tell me. I am four, maybe five years old, and I am already very good at counting. I give one piece of metal debris; the guy gives two pieces of bread. For one piece of an old book, it's always one roasted rat or another animal. On unlucky days, it's fish. I hate fish.

Once they tried to run after I gave them my stuff. So, I chased them; I know each street, alley and walking path here. I followed them to the very door of their shack. They did not see me of course. When I got to know where the place was, I sent my bigger brother there. I'm little, you know. They settled the score. That's what they told me.

So, the other day I came up with a plan. I should get rid of my parents. They are quite old; they do not work as well as my brothers or me and they are much slower. My father has a limp too. They're not made for this world. They are a burden to me. I need a way to deal with them.

I thought about the woods. There are these large woods just out of this giant mass of dirt. You know, poor people live here. This morning I convinced them to follow me there. I talked to my brothers; they agreed. We cannot go on like this, they all understand this clearly.

We are walking in a group, towards the woods. My father asks why we should go there; I say we get more stuff in that area. Not many people search the woods for things to pick up. We have an advantage, I say.

My mother asks me how I know such things. Well, I just know many people in the slum and they often are willing to talk to me.

So, we decide that we should split into groups; one should proceed towards the dump, walking along the river, all the way up to the old airport. My parents and I will take this route. The other group will walk the other way, back from the point where we are now towards the slum. My brothers will take this route.

We start walking, very slowly of course. After a few minutes, I pick up a piece of what looks like to be some kind of a machine from behind a scant, crooked tree. I think that will get me some good food, quite sure

of that. My parents are a few steps behind; they argue over a shiny rock. My father thinks it can have some value; my mother doesn't. I tell them to follow me, faster and to let go of that piece of trash.

We walk more, we get a bit closer to the airport, and I can see the rusty and torn fences already. We proceed further. My dad asks if we can rest for a moment. I say no, there are hyenas around already. If we stop, we die. We can take a break by the ground control building, hope it is open and get in. I hear my mother's feet shuffling on the ground; she is also tired. I tell them both that the tower is close, that we will be there in no time. They mumble something; I just ignore it.

So, we get to this building and I see this metal door covered in ruined paint, rust and some other thing I do not recognize. It stinks though. My mother is scared; she says this is not a good place to be, there must be something wrong. I tell her to stop talking nonsense; they wanted a place to rest and this is the only one we have. I repeat that hyenas are around; I can see one of them, lurking behind the bushes. So, we get in.

The light comes into the building from a large number of holes and cracks in the ancient concrete, some windows, and another glowing thing. I do not know what to do. That glowing thing gets up and walks towards us. I do not see much of a chance to run. It is something big; I've never seen anything similar. As it gets closer, it looks like a big bear. When it starts talking, I realize it's not.

It says it's an ogre. I get goosebumps; I've never seen an ogre before. It says it is also a robot, that he was working in a circus. He was the one scaring kids in the first row. There was a time when people were willing to pay to be scared. He glows because something inside it has broken down. He does not know the name of the material he is made of. My father looks at me; he does not know what to say. The ogre, on the other hand, feels like talking a lot as he gets closer.

We all relax a bit, except for him. He keeps on saying that he is alone and is not working as he used to. While he talks and moves in front of me, I think about how much time this creature has spent alone. It seems

like a lot. He goes on and talks about the fact that he is bored. I have an idea. I stop him from talking. I get closer, I can do something for him. I have a few tools that can improve his condition. I always carry some stuff. I approach the automaton; he looks surprised. He says kids are usually scared of him; I say I am also a bit scared to make him feel better. He laughs, like everyone else. I'm happy my attempt to reduce the tension has worked out well.

Since that day, the ogre has been living with us. He does not need to eat or require anything else. He only needs people to talk to. He talks all day. At night, he talks as well. We asked him to stay out of the shack when we are all sleep. He still gets to talk to the dog and he does not complain. The dog sleeps anyhow, whether the ogre is talking or not.

We bring the ogre along wherever we go. When we gather stuff, there he is, scaring off competitors. Basically, no one dares to even get close to him. I would not say we solved our food problem, but our situation has definitely improved.

At night, he is a perfect source of light. If any of us has to use the latrine, well, he turns out to be very useful. We are generally happy. This slum doesn't suck a badly as it did since our family got bigger.

Cat in a Box

Chi Bi is making his way through an unusually thick layer of wrapping paper that is sticking to a solid wooden box. He still doesn't know how to open it.

The paper wears and cracks irregularly, as he rushes to have the thing finally in his hands. When he's finished, his forehead is gently covered in minuscule pearls of sweat, like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

He stares at the box, baffled by its anonymity. Not a mark or sign are either carved, drawn or magnetically imbued on the wood's perfect matte surface.

He touches it, inspecting every detail of it with a surgical degree of accuracy. He moves it, turns it and shakes it, but no sound is emitted. He walks a small step back and waits for something to happen.

He thinks he's seeing something. Or maybe it was just an impression. *No, no. Nothing happened.*

Then, out of the blue, each of the sides of the container twists, swishing momentarily. The box reveals its interior. Chi Bi would have not expected a living thing to be inside of it and especially not a cat. He cannot help but think about what that Schrödinger guy would have said that very moment.

The cat stares back at the curious look which is livening Chi Bi's face, so he speaks.

"Hi, I'm your new cat."

Chi Bi gets closer. "Hmm, so they gave you a nice interactional system too... Do you know which one?"

"VVOX. I bet you've never heard of that name before, have you?"

Chi Bi tries to hide a certain amount of embarrassment. "I'm a programmer myself but I have never heard of that name, no. Funny thing, I'm working on communication protocols for interactional robots."

"Exactly." The cat appears to be nodding in an imperfectly mimicked human manner.

“What do you mean?” Chi is baffled.

“I mean, I already know what you deal with.” The cat moves a few paws forward on the black and cheap table he’s sitting on.

“I still do not understand what you are talking about. How do you know me?” Chi Bi also gets closer.

“I know that you deal with that, because you already told me. You will tell me, in a way, actually.” Chi’s facial expression changes too quickly to be described. “I am the robot pet you will launch on the market a few months from now.”

“So, you are implying I sent myself something back in time.” Chi gets serious all of a sudden. “Prove it then.”

“Oh, yeah. We discussed this today. I sent you an email a few seconds ago. It contains a few of the program’s strings you were working on before opening the box. Please check it.”

Chi Bi tries to keep an eye on the cat while moving toward his laptop. He slides his index finger on a crescent shaped touch pad. There is an envelope thumbnail popping up in on the screen’s upper left-hand corner.

“How do I know this is not a virus or some other kind of malware?”

“I sent it through my embedded system. The subject of the email is ‘this is your proof’, correct?”

“Well... yes.” Still not fully convinced.

“Go ahead. Read it.” Chi realizes he already heard that voice. *Maybe...* “See? The thing you are working on.” The cat jumps off the table and swiftly jumps onto the laptop table, close enough for Chi to touch him.

The very next day, as soon as he pulled his damp pollution mask off his face, Chi Bi walks into his co-worker’s space with a renewed can-do attitude. He is, of course, holding his box. He walks through the desks following a harrowingly random path but, in the end, he is in front of that door.

His boss, who goes by the name of Brittany, sits peacefully in an oversized ball chair, looking very concentrated on her tablet. “Not now, Bi. Busy”

“This is something really important Brittany.” She gives him a brief look, through her false eyelashes and encrusted make-up.

Chi realizes he will not get to her with anything he might say. So, he puts his box on an unusually clean floor and starts talking to it. “You can come out now. As agreed.”

Brittany does not move her heavily gelled nails from her tablet; no movements on her face either. When the cat appears, Brittany is still fully focused on her work.

“Good morning, Brittany.”

Her eyes are now wide open; she lets her tablet slip on the side of her thigh as she rushes to get up and then kneels, closer and closer toward the cat.

“This is what I have been working on lately.” Chi’s voice sounds like it contains a mixture of pride and pettiness.

“Look at the detail. Look here at how the whiskers perfectly connect to his soft face. How did you do it, Chi?”

“Emulated motion capture and iteration modelling. That is how he created the shape of my body and got me to behave like a real enhanced-cat.”

“Wow, he talks really cool!” she nods once, maybe twice.

“I have been working on this for some time now. So, what do you think?”

“Go to talk to Michael like now. We went to the market yesterday.”

“Ok. I’ll go there. Thank... thank you!”

“Please, tell him this is our top priority.” she waits a split second, “do not screw this, Chi. Ok?”

“Ok, ok. I will not.”

While walking to his colleague's office, the cat has something to say. "Let me handle this, ok?"

"Yes. I think it's better; I tend to get too emotional when I'm excited."

"I know. That is why I'm telling you this." Chi would swear the cat was smiling somehow on his furry face.

Two months later, Kitty is the top selling robot pet in 35 different countries. He is available in different colors and behavioral patterns in all the most important e-stores and in a few licensed old-fashioned physical stores. Kitty's voice can also be turned to sound exactly like a real cat's.

Chi Bi bought himself a new apartment, downtown. Not too big; he does not want to show off too much. He thinks he was already very lucky with the unexpected turn his life took as soon as the cat came into his life.

One day, just after brushing his teeth, he looked at his Kitty and asked, "If I did not write your code in the first place, did you do it?" Just like that, out of the blue; that was the first time he had realized that.

The cat looked back at him, got closer and uttered seriously, "There are things you should better not ask yourself. I will ignore that question. Let's not talk about it ever again."

And so Chi never did. He never picked that topic up again, not even when thinking all to himself.

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About the Author

I was born and raised in Italy. I'm a psychologist and I work as a recruiter. A few years ago, I left my country and moved to Poland. Most importantly, I'm a SciFi writer.