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The Scream

by

Dag Rossman

It was a crisp autumn day in 1892 when my life was transformed forever. Two friends and I had just finished a companionable supper together and decided to take a leisurely stroll along a path overlooking the Oslofjord. After a time, I began to feel unexpectedly tired and ill, so I stopped walking and leaned against the fence in the hope of regaining my composure. Alas, it did not seem to help, and as I looked across the fjord at the setting sun, the clouds turned blood-red and began to pulsate in a dizzying *danse macabre* across the evening sky.

I had often observed the awesome displays of our beautiful Northern Lights, but never had I seen anything like this! Being something of a sensitive soul-and mystically inclined, as well, I began to wonder if I might not be witnessing the onset of Ragnarok itself, the "Twilight of the Gods" foretold in the tales of Norse mythology. The very notion that it might literally be true took my breath away and overwhelmed me with a feeling of dread. Then to my ears came the most horrifying sensation of all—an ever-mounting moaning and groaning that culminated, at last, in a blood-curdling shriek that seemed to go on and on. So penetrating was the sound that even clapping my hands over my ears failed to muffle it. I felt as if I were about to lose my mind!

Meanwhile, my friends continued on their way, seemingly oblivious to the bleeding sky, that horrible scream, my obvious discomfort, and even the fact that I was no longer walking beside them. How

could that be? Had I already gone mad?

A mysterious young-old woman, clad in a leafy cloak of fall colors, suddenly appeared at my side and spoke to me: "Take heart, Edvard Munch, you are of sounder mind than your friends. They have hardened their hearts and minds to my world of nature that surrounds them and are deaf to my pain."

Astonished by her appearance and puzzled by her words, I could only blurt: "You know my name . . . and you speak of *your* world of nature. Who *are* you?"

Reassuringly taking my left hand between hers, she said: "Every ancient culture speaks of me—each by its own name, but most of them would translate as Mother Earth. To your ancestors, I was Jorth, and it would please me if you would call me that, too. As for my knowing your name, why should I not know the names of all my children?"

Nodding my head, I replied: "Dear Mother Jorth, I think I begin to understand. But what is causing you such terrible pain, and can anything be done to ease it?"

"Whenever my mountainsides are stripped bare of forests for timber, and of topsoil for mining, the run-off defiles my beautiful streams and lakes-and my soul weeps. And whenever men slaughter wolves for 'sport,' a much-loved voice of the wilderness is forever silenced-and my soul cries out. Humankind is the cause of my pain, Edvard, and humankind must provide the cure . . . if there is to be one."

"Oh, Mother Jorth," I said in a quavering voice, with tears running down my cheeks, "I

am so very sorry . . . but why has this vision been revealed to me? What can I—one man—possibly do to change things in any meaningful way?”

The earth goddess gave a gentle smile as she replied: “You are a true artist, Edvard, for you paint not only what you see but what you feel. Render what you have just experienced as best you can and I promise you that people will be talking about your painting—and its meaning—for generations to come. I ask no more of you than that . . .

and yet no less. Will you do that for me?”

Sympathetic for her plight—and emboldened by her promise—readily assented: “With all my heart!”

Mother Jorth kissed my forehead, then faded from my sight as the first stars of evening began to appear in a now calm sky. Pausing only long enough to take a deep breath of the crisp autumn air, I hastened homeward, beginning all the while to plan out the canvas I just knew—somehow—I would have to title “The Scream.”

Author's Note: The earth goddess was as good as her promise. The first version of “The Scream” (known as “The Scream of Nature” in Germany”) appeared in 1893, and three more were executed over the next seventeen years. It has remained the best-known Norwegian painting ever since, and Edvard Munch (1863-1944) that country's best-known painter—as well as one of the leading lights in the expressionist movement. Despite the artist's leaving detailed notes about the event that triggered his painting “The Scream,” art critics have continued to debate its inspiration and meaning to this very day. For some reason, Munch failed to explicitly mention his encounter with Mother Jorth, which is now being revealed for the first time.

The pen-and-ink drawing of Munch's painting that accompanies this story was rendered by Sharon C. Rossman.