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Ron Boyer

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The Boy Who Didn't Know Who-He-Was (An Existential Fairytale)

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(An Existential Fairytale)

By
Ron Boyer

1

Once upon a time, in a land faraway, a little boy grew up in the care of kindly old foster parents who loved the child as if he were their very own. The boy—named “Hans”—naturally believed himself to be the son of these simple older folks. It never occurred to him to question his origins or parentage, though it always seemed a bit strange to him that his folks were so much older than the parents of his little friends in the village where he grew up in what was called the American “Midwest.” There Hans lived in a sparsely populated countryside where most people, including his adopted parents, made their living in the old ways as farmers, growing their own food and raising diverse populations of barnyard animals, including pigs, chickens, cows, goats, ducks, and horses, accompanied by roaming feral cats and farmyard dogs to chase them.

Hans loved his life on the family farm and, while still a mere toddler, he grew strong from his labors, starting early in the pre-dawn darkness milking cows and goats in the shadowy stables, long before the cock crowed announcing a new day. Every morning in the wee hours, Hans assisted his old father with his milking chores. The old man, who devoutly loved the boy, was a simple peasant for whom this rural life seemed perfectly suited. A jolly fellow fond of telling the most amazing stories, he was also a physical brute, a bull-of-a-man with the kind of strength needed for laboring long days harnessed to his mules, ploughing fertile, rock-strewn fields from dawn till dusk.

When the tiny lad rode on the old man's thick shoulders, which happened often when taking breaks together from the hard work, he

felt his tiny warrior's heart grow large. Hans imagined that the powerful old man was a great warhorse as they herded cows in the lowlands and sheep in the high pastures. And sometimes, Hans would perch on the old man's shoulders as he strode through fields and forests, gun in hand, stalking fresh game for their dinner table. Rabbits, squirrels, and deer were favorite prey, along with diverse game birds, from pheasants nesting in the cornfields to the swift-flying partridge and tiny, zigzagging timber-doodles that populated nearby swamps. And from this tender age, the precocious lad acquired not only the heart, but the attitude and skills of a warrior, hunting and fishing in the nearby woods, learning the primitive arts of self-reliance. At the age of two, Hans slew his first pheasant with an arrow. At the age of three, he shot his first rabbit. And at the age of four, he killed his first deer, a handsome buck he trailed expertly through the deep woods, where every path was known to him from frequent romps through windswept fields and surrounding forests where, communing with the wonders of earth and sky, Hans felt most naturally himself.

From the time he could barely walk, Hans desired nothing so keenly as the joys of aimless hours spent wandering through forests nearby. While the old man taught the lad skills of the hunt, it was the free, wild life, wandering alone in the great out-of-doors, which truly called him. A vision of mist gliding over the forest floor at dawn, or over the mirror-like surface of one of the many small lakes and ponds found throughout the region, inspired his soul with rapture. For Hans was a moody and thoughtful lad, and the sounds and odors and sights of the deep woods

engendered delicious feelings inclined to his poetic sensibilities. He knew himself early on to be different, in this way, from the old farmer, who was purely a man of the earth, muscles hard as the stony ground he toiled on. And while the boy was remarkably strong for his age, and skillful in the hunting arts, he was also sensitive and wise beyond his years. Hans sensed that his real self was not at all like that of his parents, for—whenever he was finished with his chores and his father was busy elsewhere—Hans rejoiced in solitude and idle hours, passing long summer days gazing in reverie at his reflection in a deep forest pond, idly watching fish and turtles and water-snakes and all kinds of wild creatures emerge from, then disappear into the shadowy, sun-dappled depths of his favorite woodland pond. There, on the grassy banks beside the heart-shaped pool, Hans whiled away long summer hours lying on his back in the shade beneath the forest canopy, gazing up at the tops of ancient trees so tall they almost blocked the sunlight. Here and there a glimpse of azure sky broke through, where golden sunlight streaked down to the forest floor, illuminating the sparkling depths of the still forest pool and warming the boy's face in the sun. His nostrils filled with the musty odor of damp earth, and all around him sang the primeval language of buzzing insects and full-throated songbirds.

Then one fine summer day, while Hans sat idly on the bank of the pond, bare feet dangling in the water while watching fish circle about his worm-impaled fish hook, the largest bullfrog he'd ever seen leapt suddenly from the shore nearby and landed with a PLOP!—scattering the fish and startling the boy from his reveries. Hans watched as the giant bullfrog, with just a few long breaststrokes, swam gracefully down into the deep shadows and disappeared beneath a log. Inspired by the sudden appearance of the frog, Hans wondered if he might use his fishhook to catch the frog instead. After all, he had always loved the taste of frog legs above all the other

wild game his family typically feasted on, preferring them even to his favorite bluegills and perch. But as Hans watched his wormed-hook resting beside the fallen log and waited for the frog to re-emerge, he could hardly believe his eyes when, from the shadows beneath the log at the bottom of the pond, a beautiful maiden with long golden hair emerged and ascended from the depths towards him. The little boy's heart leapt at sight of her, for never had he seen a more strikingly handsome figure. As the numinous creature rose quickly to the surface, Hans felt himself swoon with giddy joy and, for a moment, he felt he might fall into the depths and disappear, just like the bullfrog.

“Hello, little Hans!” the mermaid cheerfully called as her face broke the surface of the pond where his own reflection had been a split-second before. “What brings you here on such a fine summer day?”

Hans wondered how this mysterious, fair-haired nymph knew his name, and he could not answer her, tongue-tied by the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. Still, though he'd never seen anyone like her, the Nereid's face seemed oddly familiar, as was the sense of enchantment this fleeting dreamlike memory stimulated. Hans wondered how he could possibly know her. As he pondered, the beguiling water-nymph reached out and touched him tenderly. Her smile warmed his heart, awakening sensations of an extraordinary and subtle kind. And mingled with her unearthly charms, which he found irresistible, Hans felt comforted, sensing in her a nurturing, kind, and protective nature.

Instinctively, Hans knew that she knew him better, and loved him more, than even the old woman who had raised him, who—until this very moment—he had adored above all women, the old crone who, beginning while Hans was still a babe in his cradle, doted on him as if he were her darling, royal prince. The old woman, whom he knew only as “mother”, cooked great feasts of wild game, and washed

Hans tenderly every evening before bed in the old wooden tub where she poured steaming water from a pot, heated on a nearby woodstove, and read the boy fairytales like “Mother Goose” and “Uncle Wiggly” at bedtime. Such were the charms of this golden-haired lady of the pond that Hans completely forgot his dear old mother, for no attraction in the world could rival this strangely intimate woodland nymph.

As she stroked his hair gently and glanced into his eyes, her voice lured him like a Siren’s song, though her lips never moved. To Hans, her form spoke a language of enchantment, a primordial language without words that called to mind his deepest yearnings. As he gazed at her, the lady’s shining countenance tugged at the boy’s heartstrings. In her silent singing, he gradually recognized the musical inner shape that called him from the depths of his most private reveries. In his mind’s eye, Hans suddenly witnessed a string of images tracing back to his earliest forgotten memories, until he saw himself floating inside a luminous sack, a twisted fleshy cord connecting him to the wall of his tiny liquid home.

“Yes, little Hans,” the water-nymph’s voice sang softly. “This tiny pond was once your home. It is time to come home and learn who you really are.”

“Please tell me: Where did I come from?” Hans heard himself ask in reply.

But when he opened his eyes, his numinous visitor was gone. With a sigh, the small boy picked himself up and shuffled home, moping, through the dark woods. He arrived home at the tiny cottage farm house just in time for evening chores.

That night, just before sleep, Hans worked up the courage to ask the old woman: “Mother, where do I come from?”

The old woman smiled indulgently at the innocent five year old, and told him the well-worn tale of the stork and how it dropped him in her lap one cold winter’s eve. But Hans wasn’t satisfied with her answer. He knew

instinctively that she was lying.

“Mother, I don’t mean that. I mean: *Where do I come from?*”

The old woman grew pensive: “Why do you ask such a question, Hans?”

At first reluctantly, he told her about the beautiful lady with golden-hair who lived in the pond in the woods. At mention of her, the old crone grew anxious. For the first time in his life, the little boy realized he had hurt his mother’s feelings. Her tone and the expression on her face told him he’d disappointed her and made her anxious and afraid.

“Shush, now! You are too young to worry about such things,” she scolded as she tucked him in bed. “Just promise me you’ll never go alone into those woods again. Now, promise me!”

Anxious, he shook his head “yes”, but Hans already knew he would break his promise. A twinge of shame wrenched his little heart. The voice of conscience he knew so well warned Hans that he’d better do as she asked or something terrible might happen. He fell asleep, for the first time he could recall, in the grip of galloping panic.

That night, as he slumbered, Hans had a terrible dream. He found himself back in the same deep forest, but now it was night there, too. Gone was the comfort of the dappled sunlight on the pond. All was swallowed in darkness, and no light broke through except for a few stars shining in the gaps of night sky that opened between the tree tops, high above. The sounds of the forest were no longer familiar but grew pregnant with danger. Even the familiar PLOP! of the great bullfrog startled him and froze his tiny heart with horror. Then the ominous hooting of a great horned owl nearby warned him that something strange was about to happen.

Hans glanced nervously through the darkness in the direction of the pond, where he heard a splashing sound. In the shadows, the dark shape of a woman emerged from the waters, dripping wet, approaching him. He

wanted to run, but his frozen little legs refused to cooperate. And with growing awareness of his paralysis, his terror grew stronger still. He couldn't lift his arms, either, to protect himself and keep the shadowy figure at bay. In fact, he couldn't move at all, and waited helplessly in the darkness as the malevolent presence drew near.

"Where do *you* come from? Where do *you* come from?" the dark stranger rasped. As she drew close, Hans dimly made out the face of an old hag, the sort of face he'd imagined from the stories of witches in fairytales he'd heard so many times from the old crone who had raised him.

"*You* shouldn't ask too many questions, if I were *you*!" the crone warned, bending down and drawing near, mere inches from his face. At sight of her face so near, and as the rotting stench of her foul breath engulfed him, little Hans swooned with terror . . .

Just then he woke up terrified, struggled to catch his breath, and whimpered in the night.

His old mother, awakened by the commotion, approached and comforted him. "You've just had a nightmare. There, there boy. Everything is all right now."

Then she carried him to her bed, and tucked him safely between her large, soft-bellied body and the powerfully-built old farmer, whose snoring shook the rafters of the tiny cottage and quickly sang the child to sleep.

2

The following day, Hans slipped away into the forest again. Everything had changed. For the first time, the joy he always felt in the forest was gone. Everywhere a dark feeling permeated the woodlands. The farther he entered the forest, the more ominous it felt. An eerie stillness filled the wood. The birds stopped singing. The creatures of the forest were nowhere to be seen. The deep shadows of

evening had already descended at noon, and so dim was the early afternoon light that it reminded him of the setting in his frightening dream. The skies overhead darkened, threatening to rain. Still Hans fought the fear bravely, waiting patiently beside the pool for the golden-haired maiden to appear. Time slowed to a standstill as he waited. And, as many children do, he gradually grew impatient after what seemed like many days had passed.

Just when he thought his quest might be in vain and was about to give up, Hans glanced up along the bank. There he saw the great bullfrog sitting. The creature stared at him, bulging eyes riveted to his, as if knowing some deep secret. Then it leapt again into the pond with a splash— PLOP! And once again, just like the day before, the lad fell instantly into a deep reverie. Suddenly, Hans noticed a flashing movement in the watery depths. Before he could even catch his breath, the golden-haired princess of the pond appeared. At sight of her, his anxiety—and the bone-deep chills after so many hours waiting in the rain—instantly melted away. As if Nature itself were magically attuned to her, the clouds disappeared, and the forest was once again filled with warm sunlight and birdsong, as it had been the day before.

"Hello, my little Hans," murmured the woodland fairy of the depths. "What brings you here again today?"

Reluctantly at first, he told her of his terrible dream, and how sad he felt for having disappointed his dear old mother, and how he was disappointing her further by returning just now, secretly, to the pond in the wood. But, in spite of his guilt, and his old mother's stern warning, he couldn't resist the charm of the water nymph's call. In fact, Hans confessed, he felt that he had no choice at all. The lady of the pond smiled and laughed, and this was the most beautiful sound the boy had ever heard. Her laughter seemed a fairy song. And gently stroking his face and fine yellow hair, she told him there was nothing more to fear.

After a moment, Hans summoned his courage and asked her where he had come from and also who he was.

“My little Hans,” the nymph replied, speaking in riddles, “you must keep asking the questions if you truly seek an answer. Some questions you are meant to live with for a long while before the answer comes. But you must be patient and keep asking. After all, how will you ever know who you truly are, unless you know where you come from?”

Before he could ask what she meant, the fairy vanished beneath the pond’s surface again, and with a few quick and graceful strokes, disappeared as swiftly as she’d come.

Alone once more, Hans heard the soft hooting of the wise horned owl in the nearby forest, as if answering his question with an echo.

“Who? Who? Who?” asked the owl, seemingly privy to his inmost thoughts.

3

That night, as she prepared the boy for bed, the old woman noticed that something in Hans had changed. His attitude seemed somehow different. Sensing an unexpected maturity and detachment emerging in her little son, the crone’s heart shrank with fear.

“Boy, did you obey me? Or did you break your promise to me after all?” his mother asked with an unusually stern tone. Her inquisitive eyes locked on his, probing and testing.

Hans grew tense at the surprisingly sharp tone of the old woman, and at the hint of coldness with which her eyes now beheld him. At first, he couldn’t quite put his finger on it, yet there was something at once familiar and uncanny about his old mother. Suddenly, Hans realized that she looked and sounded just like the horrid old witch in his dream the night before.

Then, the old farmer intervened with his wife.

“Dearest, now dearest, don’t give the boy such a hard time,” the old man pleaded. “He

was only doing what comes natural to him. He loves the fields and forests, just as I have taught him.”

The old woman’s expression warmed as she smiled and agreed. “I just want him to be safe and take care.” But, glancing down sideways at the boy, coldness flickered in her eyes, warning Hans. “I just don’t want anything to *happen* to him out there.”

She quickly tucked Hans into bed, and began to read his least favorite bedtime tale, a story of the Baba Yaga that reminded him of “Hansel and Gretel,” lost in the woods and about to be baked and eaten by the witch. His little heart beat fast as Hans fell into a deep sleep and began to dream. For the crone had forced him to drink a bitter potion made of herbs and roots, the better to ease his passage into sleep.

In the dream, Hans found himself again in the dark late-night forest near the pond. He heard the old owl’s haunting “Who? Who? Who?” as he watched the water anxiously, not knowing if the golden-haired nymph or the terrifying witch would emerge. At the sound of a voice behind him in the dark, the startled boy almost leapt out of his skin.

“*Who? Who? Who?*” rasped the witch, imitating the owl. At the sound, the wise old bird, sitting on a large low-hanging branch nearby, repeated: “Who? Who? Who?”

“Oh, shut up!” she scolded the bird, pointing threateningly in his direction with a crooked stick. Being wise, the great owl took wing and vanished quickly into the dark woods. Then she turned to the boy: “I thought I warned you not to come out here again.”

As he listened, heart pounding, Hans recognized the voice of the old woman he had always known as his mother.

“I thought I told you not to ask so many questions!” the witch-crone warned.

Hans noticed that she looked much fiercer than before. He also noticed, for the first time, that her eyes were sightless; two filmy, pale-white orbs stared blindly in his general

direction. Then he noticed her mouth gaping wide, her few jagged, fanglike teeth dripping blood. The malodorous orifice, only inches away, opened wide to swallow him.

Hans, startled, woke up in a sweat, the rank stench of the witch's hot breath lingering in the air around his bed. Nearby, his old foster parents slept soundly, a chorus of snores alternating between them. Silently, on tiptoes, the boy snuck into their great warm bed and snuggled safely between them. With a wary glance at his old mother, who no longer resembled the witch, Hans fell back to sleep.

4

On the following day, after finishing his pre-dawn chores and eating a stout breakfast of bread and porridge, Hans set off again for the deep woods, vowing to himself to find answers to his questions or never return. As he made his way across the lowland pastures to the edge of the wood, the skies grew dark, gathering force. Soon a thunderhead formed in the skies above the forest, which grew preternaturally quiet, except for the loud raindrops that fell to the forest floor through the wet leaves high overhead. The pitter-patter of the rain on the leaves and ground all around him—a song of the forest that lightened his mood—was quickly transformed as heavy winds shook the treetops and thunderclaps rumbled, shaking the ground.

At the side of the pond, Hans watched and waited as before, his eyes searched for the bullfrog, whose presence reliably signaled the nymph's otherwise unpredictable appearance. The bullfrog was nowhere to be seen. All day long Hans waited in the rain, but the water-fairy failed to appear. As the long hours passed, Hans grew evermore despondent and restless, until he rose and impatiently stalked the margins of the pond, staring wild-eyed into the murky depths for any sign of movement. His small body shivered and trembled, soaked by the cold, drenching rain.

Suddenly, a loud thunderclap shattered the skies high above the leafy canopy directly

overhead. A bolt of lightning streaked and sizzled, piercing through the small opening in the treetops and striking the surface of the pond. As the instantly expanding circle of electricity sizzled outwards, spreading out along the water's surface over the pond, Hans noticed too late that his foot had slipped into the water. The electric current engulfed him, making his aura one with the pond. Hans swooned, encircled in an aureole of light, and fell headlong into the depths. Nearing the bottom of the pool, on the verge of being drowned, he heard the Nereid's flute-like voice, singing nearby in the enchanted depths.

"Where are you going?" the voice asked repeatedly. "Where? Oh where?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" the boy heard a familiar voice within him reply, as he sank through the watery depths.

"Of course," said the laughing golden-haired lady, "if you don't know where you come from, you cannot possibly know where you're going." She laughed again, louder this time. "And if you don't know where you come from, you can hardly know who you truly are!"

Hans heard her voice clearly and felt strangely comforted by her words, even though he failed to fully grasp her meaning. To him, her voice sounded like a lullaby; she spoke in a musical language that seemed to issue from the depths of his soul. While he was still dreaming, the water-nymph told him—in a whispered phantasmagoria of fleeting images—of the mysteries of his origins, the forgotten secrets of his original nature before the world was made.

Once again, Hans found himself floating in a small bag of sunlit flesh and waters as he listened.

"Once upon a time, in a faraway land," he heard her voice say, "a Prince and Princess conceived a child, their first-born son.

"The Prince, a great warrior, had returned from war in distant lands. He won the Princess' hand in a contest of arms. They

prayed for a child, and in a dream an Evil Spirit told the Prince that he would have a son. But there would be a price: He would have to die in order for his son to be born.

“The Prince was sad, but desiring above all things the continuing legacy of his family name, agreed to the accursed pact. Soon thereafter, in the middle of night, in the depths of winter—while the Earth still slept, dreaming of spring—a son was born. The Prince, wounded by a sorcerer’s poisonous dart, died shortly thereafter.

“The widowed Princess, stricken with grief, nearly died of a broken heart. But her late husband’s parents, a King and his Queen, offered to raise the child secretly as their own son. To persuade her, the King and Queen made great promises to the Princess concerning the infant’s royal inheritance, and the greatness of the noble destiny to which he would now be sole heir. So the Princess, reluctantly, after many months grieving—first for the loss of her husband, and now for the loss of her son—finally conceded and gave the infant into their care. But on the day the child’s mother, the still-grieving Princess, left to begin her new life, the old Queen, who was secretly an evil witch, sent her familiar—a great

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bullfrog—to cast a spell on the Princess. And in the depths of an enchanted forest nearby, the frog cast a spell that turned her into a lonely water-sprite. There, for many years, she dwelled in loneliness under a log in the depths of a heart-shaped forest pool until, one day, a very special little boy appeared beside the pond, dreaming unknowingly of her, his true mother. And hearing his dream song, she rose to the surface to greet her lost son, who had already grown into a sturdy little lad.”

As the golden-haired nymph smiled, Hans woke up. He was no longer in the wild forest, as he supposed, not even in his own bed. He found himself in a favored place, the bed of his old parents, beside a large warm body that awakened within his sleepy heart the silkiest threads of comfort and feeling. He opened his sleep-filled eyes to look, but his old foster father, the farmer, wasn’t there. Then he turned to his old mother who, snuggling, held him securely from behind, arms wrapped tightly about him. But, as he turned to look at her, to his great surprise, the old crone was also gone.

There, in her place next to Hans, lay the sleeping water-nymph, his beloved Princess with Hair of Gold. And, for the first time in his life, little Hans actually knew *Who-He-Was*.