

SHAKTIPAT
the man with stars in his eyes

Pat was a very quiet man. He spent a lot of time on his own. Not because he didnt like people, but because people seemed to find it awkward to be with someone so quiet as Pat. When he was with people he didnt say very much. Not because he wasnt interested in people but because he was. He was more interested than most people could manage. He not only found it more interesting to listen to people, and feel them, but also that he really didnt have very much to say. He found it hard to talk about the weather, and the latest trends in fashion or business. He didnt really mind what kind of music was popular at the moment: nor which car makers were bringing out new models.

What he did care about was why so many people seemed from their eyes to be crying inside yet looked at each other with smiles on their faces. He didnt really understand why people carried on like that. He knew from times of his own sadness how hard it could sometimes be to be human. But he could not see any point in making it harder by bottling things up inside.

Whenever he tried to do that it just made things worse. It would feel like he was being blown up with some hot, burning gas that got into the pit of his belly, and into his throat, and pushed out from the insides of his eyes. And if he didnt let the tears come he would become all grumpy and impatient, and the people he met would all seem to be stupid or ugly. But he knew in his heart that this wasnt so. He knew that they werent as awful as he saw them. The horridness he saw was just a reflection of the bottled up sadness inside of him.

So, instead of spending time with people, Pat used to go for long, long walks on his own. He used to love walking along watching the sky making its ever different patterns of cloud and sunlight, tracing the flight of the hawks and pigeons, the crows and the starlings as they

chased their day across the sky. He could sit for hours by the side of the waterfall near where he lived, just watching the water falling, tumbling down the steep drop, and spinning and churning its way down the lower level of the river. Sometimes he would see fishes shimmering under the water or leaping out of expanding ripples. He didnt know their names, but he knew their shapes, their colours and the different ways they flicked their tails to drive themselves through the water.

One of his favourite passtimes in late summer was to sit by the side of a corn field and watch the sun go down, painting the sky in brilliant burning colours above the dancing sheaves of corn that slowly turned from gold to purple and finally disappeared into the dark of night. Then he would walk home, alone but content, watching the stars come slowly out. First one at a time, then in great clusters and sweeps until the dark sea of the night was speckled with millions of beacons of light. But no matter how much peace the beauty of nature lent to his heart, Pat remained always a little troubled. Perhaps if he never saw anyone else at all, he would have been quite happy. But as it was he couldnt help but see another man or a woman even a little boy or girl without being saddened by the hidden sorrows that they all seemed to carry secretly inside them.

As the years passed this troubled Pat more and more. It didnt seem to help him even if he spent days and days walking on his own without seeing a soul. Even when he began to avoid people except when he had to go to town, once a month for extra supplies, this feeling of trouble never quite left him.

In fact the more time he spent in the silence of his own company, no matter how much he listened to the happy song of the birds, or listened to the crystal rhythms of the river, this little something that gnawed away inside him seemed to grow and grow. The quieter he became the louder came this strange wailing that he knew was not his own. It was the silenced cry of his brothers and sisters, that because they would not let it out had buried itself deep in their hearts, and Pat

as he grew deeper and deeper into his own silence found that it echoed in the quietest moments of his own heart.

Now, Pat was a very thoughtful man. He could spend hours thinking about a single subject without becoming bored. Sometimes when he watched the birds in the sky he would try to imagine how all of the muscles in their wings and bodies would need to work to keep them from falling to the ground. And he would consider and try to calculate how much resistance their feathers would give to the wind as they flew through the air.

Or, when sitting by the river he would think about what he saw. Sometimes about how even though each drop of water that fell down the waterfall was different how they all looked the same. And how the river flowed in a kind of pattern making shapes and ripples that moved in different patterns according to where the big rocks, and the branches lay on the river bed. And yet , again, even though this pattern of ripples and little waves was always the same, the water was always changing. Pat could think about things like this all day long.

But he wasnt an educated man. He had left school when he was very young to take care of his fathers farm, when he had become ill. And when his father had died Pat had sold most of the farm, except for a small cottage on the edge of the woods by the stream, and a little patch of land to grow his grain and vegetables on. So, when Pat went walking he didnt know the names of the tress and plants, the birds and the clusters of stars in the sky. But he gave them his own names.

To name a plant, or a tree, a bird or a star, he would look at them for a long time, and think about them. When naming a star he would compare the quality of light it gave off to that of other stars, and he would judge its brilliance and how much it twinkled, and he would watch to see how it would change when a full moon passed near by. And then , after hours and hours of thought Pat would give it a name, like Red Blister, or Yellow Child, Cheeky Diamond, or Orange Flare.

When it came to trees, Pat would look at them, studying the shape, the colour and the density of their leaves. He would consider how the branches on different trees of the same type would grow, depending on how close they were to other trees, and how much they were exposed to the wind. Then he would rub their bark with his fingers his cheeks, even his lips, and he would even lick their leaves to taste them. Then he would give them their own names, and their family name. Like Sleepy Rootmaster, Trailing Dancingfingers, Little Bigman. There was one tree in particular that Pat loved very deeply. It was a great big tree with seven huge trunks all curled around each other. It was such a big powerful tree, with its roots biting deep deep down into the earth, that there was no other tree, or plant of any kind but moss and grass within fifty feet of it, so hungry was it for the water in the earth around it. Even though Pat spent more time sitting in the root caves of this tree, or perched up amongst its branches than any other he could not think of a name for it. Everything he thought of was wrong, even the family name of Greenbrightstrong that he used for its brothers and sisters wasnt good enough. He tried so many names, but none of them worked. Names like King Silence, Tranquil Mountain, Best Friend. Somehow none of them worked.

One day when pat was puzzling over this something very strange began to happen. His mind began to feel as though it was changing shape, very gently, very gradually. It seemed to be opening and pat could see the waves and currents of his thoughts turning about everything that he knew and felt about this tree, and all that he had learned about naming. He began to see the pattern of his thoughts as if they were the water that made up the river that he spent so many hours beside. He could see his thoughts twisting this way and that, moving backwards and forwards, repeating themselves and finding new friends amongst themselves. He marvelled at how they spun and wove, how they tumbled and fell through his mind without so much as a by-your-leave or an invitation from him.

And as he watched the churning of his thoughts, turning and twisting all on their own, he noticed how much they tended to stray. As he noticed this they reminded him less of the water in the river flowing

tirelessly and constantly down to the sea, and more of a leaf torn off a high branch in early winter, spiralling and tossing here and there, lifting up and tumbling down giddily on the currents of the wind.

He was amazed at how far his thoughts could stray. Even though he had sat down to think about naming his favourite tree, under whose canopy of branches he sat, leaning against a huge rounded root, he found that his thoughts were in a hundred other places too. He found himself remembering the rabbit he had found near the path with a dislocated shoulder, and how he had taken it home and nursed it. He found himself wondering whether the sky would be clear tonight, if the wisps of cloud that hung over the late afternoon would be blown away in time for him to watch Venus rising in the glow of the setting sun. He found his thoughts could move so fast and so far that they seemed almost able to go in two directions at once, and neither of them the one he had chosen.

But as he watched mesmerised by the unguided stream of his thoughts, that took him this way or that quite without warning, he noticed that some kind of a pattern, some consistency, some rhythm was beginning to emerge in the movement of his mind. Even though his thoughts still ran off after cloud, and river, alongside animals, and out into open meadows, more and more they seemed to be turning themselves to trees. Yes, he was quite sure now, more and more of his thoughts were about trees, even though he was no longer trying to think about naming his favourite tree. He had given that idea up a while back, so entranced was he to discover that his mind seemed to have a will of its own, quite separate from his intention. In fact it seemed more like many little, short lasting wills, as he noticed that even though his mind would all of a sudden shoot off in a quite unexpected direction, it would quite soon flit off in another.

While Pat watched the movement of his mind, and noticed how, gradually and almost unnoticeably his thoughts were gathering themselves around the subject of trees, he also noticed three other things. First was that he had lost all feeling for where he was in the usual sense. Of course, he knew exactly where he was: sitting cross

legged in the curve of a great root of his favourite tree, with his back against the warm bark of one of its massive trunks. But he could no longer feel his legs on the ground, his back on the bark, the pattern of falling sunlight mottling his face as the leaves tossed lightly in the wind. He could no longer even hear the rustling of that wind as it passed through the leaves above him, shaking and ringing them in the air. Nor could he smell the loam of the earth, the sap of the tree that circled and spun up its trunk, along its branches, and out into each leaf on every branch. And, of course, he was thinking so hard that his eyes were closed, so he could not see anything at all.

The reason for this was that his mind was so closely bound up in watching his thoughts, that there was no room for him to notice anything else. He seemed to have shrunk and disappeared into his own mind. But, at the same time, his mind seemed to have swelled, and expanded so that it was quite big enough to contain him easily without any sense of pressure or discomfort. In fact, it was quite the reverse. It seemed to Pat, as he sat quietly watching the strange and novel dance of his mind, that he was lighter, more relaxed, more open than he usually felt when he was aware of his body and its surroundings. And, oddly enough, this didnt surprise him at all. It seemed natural to him that there was a world inside him that was every bit as spacious and interesting as the one outside of him, and that somehow felt more inviting, more comfortable, even if it was quite unfamiliar.

The second thing was that he seemed no longer even to be breathing, so, so quiet had he become. It was as if even the quiet, gentle movement of his chest and belly as he breathed would be an intrusion. Not only on this new inner world that he had discovered, but even in the outer one also. In fact, Pat began to notice that really there were not two worlds at all, or so it began to seem. As more and more his thoughts became centred on trees, and the soil into which they plunged their great sucking roots, and the bright air into which they cast their curling, lunging branches, the more he noticed that that was all there was around him anyway. He was surrounded by trees, and it

was only of trees, and the soil and the air in which they sat, that his ears, his nose, his skin, his eyes could tell him of.

And he soon began to notice how in fact the two worlds seemed to spark off one another. How a sudden thought about the path of sap in a tree would be connected to gust of wind blowing the smell of sap into his nose. How the thought of the texture of bark would be paralleled by the rustling sound of a squirrel scampering around the tree just above his head. And as Pat began to notice this he began to laugh a little. Ever so quietly and gently he began to laugh to find that he didnt seem to know anymore what was inside of him and what was outside of him. This too didnt come as a surprise to him at all. It didnt make him wonder or feel odd, it simply made him laugh quietly to himself with a sound that was hard to distinguish from that of the leaves swinging in the breeze, or even that of the squirrels chasing each other from branch to branch, tree to tree.

The third thing that he began to notice was that more and more often, and for longer and longer moments, there seemed to be pauses in his thought. And into those pauses came the strangest thing. At first Pat wasn't sure what it was, even though it seemed very familiar to him. But there was something about it that was quite new to him. And at first he could not even tell what that was. But then he began to realise that this sense of something familiar, something he knew very, very well, was making itself known to him without any of the usual means to do so. This sensation that was emerging, this tentative awareness that was overcoming him, had none of the usual qualities that he was used to. It had no smell. It had no taste. It had no shape or colour. It had no sense of physical contact: no pressure, no heat, no movement. It had no sound. At least none that he could distinguish. And yet it seemed to have strange echoes of all of these. It didnt even feel like a sensation at all, yet there was no denying that it was happening, and that he could feel it.

As this strange yet familiar feeling began to gain in strength so that it began to push away all thoughts of any kind, until Pat had quite stopped thinking altogether so insistent, so huge, so deep had this

feeling become, he began to know this feeling not only with his mind, but with his whole body. His hands and feet, his legs and arms, his trunk and head seemed to throb and pulse with it. And as this feeling deepened Pat began to lose all sense of himself as contained within his body, all sense of himself as being restricted to a specific size, a definite shape, a measurable amount of space. It was as if he was descending down, deeply, deep into the earth, and reaching up and out endlessly into the air. All of a sudden Pat seemed to breathing in the wind through every pore of his skin, each one of which seemed to be fluttering about like a leaf in a breeze. At the same time every pore of his skin felt as if it were sucking in little sips of water, that began to circulate around inside of him. Also, each and every pore of his skin seemed to be drinking in the warm rays of the sun and this was charging up the circulation of wind and water inside of him. Pat could feel the flow of water, the breath of wind, the warmth of sunlight meeting and mixing together with tiny little explosions of delight inside of him. What a marvellous feeling it was to feel the elements that he was so used to seeing and feeling outside of himself now so deeply inside of him and quite at home there, as if that was where they had always been.

As Pat sat there enjoying this huge, wonderful sensation of having the world pulsating and throbbing inside him in wave after wave of delight, he noticed that he seemed to be trembling. His arms and legs, his belly and his chest were all shaking and rumbling. His throat and his lips, the insides of his cheeks were all vibrating with a soft insistent tingle. As he entered into this tide that swept over him he found that it had a sound. A sound that rose up from somewhere deep deep down in the roots of his belly and rolled and thundered out into his trunk and limbs, along his throat in throbbing waves, and out of his mouth as peal after peal of uncontrollable laughter. Pat was laughing. As if for the very first time. He was laughing with the whole of his body. He was laughing with the whole of his mind. There wasnt a bit of him that wasnt laughing. And in the sound of his laughing he could make out the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. He could hear the sound of branch scraping against branch. He could hear the soft and happy moan of root and trunk lurching in the soil, in the wind. He could make

out the call of crows in the treetops, of a hawk on the wind. He could even hear the tinkling swish of water pouring joyfully over the falls, away on the far side of the trees. And if you had been walking by that afternoon, in the glade the great tree made for itself, you might not have even noticed Pat. For the roots of the tree where he sat embraced him so perfectly that he did not know anymore where he ended and they began. And the sound of the wind in the branches above him was so deeply entwined with his laughter that he couldn't tell if the tree was laughing him, or he was laughing the tree.

And nor would you.

