

THE BOY'S NAME WAS SANTIAGO. DUSK WAS FALLING AS the boy arrived with his herd at an abandoned church. The roof had fallen in long ago, and an enormous sycamore had grown on the spot where the sacristy had once stood.

He decided to spend the night there. He saw to it that all the sheep entered through the ruined gate, and then laid some planks across it to prevent the flock from wandering away during the night. There were no wolves in the region, but once an animal had strayed during the night, and the boy had had to spend the entire next day searching for it.

He swept the floor with his jacket and lay down, using the book he had just finished reading as a pillow. He told himself that he would have to start reading thicker books: they lasted longer, and made more comfortable pillows.

It was still dark when he awoke, and, looking up, he could see the stars through the half-destroyed roof.

I wanted to sleep a little longer, he thought. He had had the same dream that night as a week ago, and once again he had awakened before it ended.

He arose and, taking up his crook, began to awaken the sheep that still slept. He had noticed that, as soon as he awoke, most of his animals also began to stir. It was as if some mysterious energy bound his life to that of the sheep, with whom he had spent the past two years, leading them through the countryside in search of food and water. "They are so used to me that they know my schedule," he muttered. Thinking about that for a moment, he realized that it

could be the other way around: that it was he who had become accustomed to *their* schedule.

But there were certain of them who took a bit longer to awaken. The boy prodded them, one by one, with his crook, calling each by name. He had always believed that the sheep were able to understand what he said. So there were times when he read them parts of his books that had made an impression on him, or when he would tell them of the loneliness or the happiness of a shepherd in the fields. Sometimes he would comment to them on the things he had seen in the villages they passed.

But for the past few days he had spoken to them about only one thing: the girl, the daughter of a merchant who lived in the village they would reach in about four days. He had been to the village only once, the year before. The merchant was the proprietor of a dry goods shop, and he always demanded that the sheep be sheared in his presence, so that he would not be cheated. A friend had told the boy about the shop, and he had taken his sheep there.

“I NEED TO SELL SOME WOOL,” THE BOY TOLD THE merchant.

The shop was busy, and the man asked the shepherd to wait until the afternoon. So the boy sat on the steps of the shop and took a book from his bag.

“I didn’t know shepherds knew how to read,” said a girl’s voice behind him.

The girl was typical of the region of Andalusia, with flowing black hair, and eyes that vaguely recalled the Moorish conquerors.

“Well, usually I learn more from my sheep than from books,” he answered. During the two hours that they talked, she told him she

was the merchant's daughter, and spoke of life in the village, where each day was like all the others. The shepherd told her of the Andalusian countryside, and related the news from the other towns where he had stopped. It was a pleasant change from talking to his sheep.

"How did you learn to read?" the girl asked at one point.

"Like everybody learns," he said. "In school."

"Well, if you know how to read, why are you just a shepherd?"

The boy mumbled an answer that allowed him to avoid responding to her question. He was sure the girl would never understand. He went on telling stories about his travels, and her bright, Moorish eyes went wide with fear and surprise. As the time passed, the boy found himself wishing that the day would never end, that her father would stay busy and keep him waiting for three days. He recognized that he was feeling something he had never experienced before: the desire to live in one place forever. With the girl with the raven hair, his days would never be the same again.

But finally the merchant appeared, and asked the boy to shear four sheep. He paid for the wool and asked the shepherd to come back the following year.

AND NOW IT WAS ONLY FOUR DAYS BEFORE HE WOULD BE back in that same village. He was excited, and at the same time uneasy: maybe the girl had already forgotten him. Lots of shepherds passed through, selling their wool.

"It doesn't matter," he said to his sheep. "I know other girls in other places."

But in his heart he knew that it did matter. And he knew that shepherds, like seamen and like traveling salesmen, always found a town where there was someone who could make them forget the joys of carefree wandering.

The day was dawning, and the shepherd urged his sheep in the direction of the sun. They never have to make any decisions, he thought. Maybe that's why they always stay close to me.

The only things that concerned the sheep were food and water. As long as the boy knew how to find the best pastures in Andalusia, they would be his friends. Yes, their days were all the same, with the seemingly endless hours between sunrise and dusk; and they had never read a book in their young lives, and didn't understand when the boy told them about the sights of the cities. They were content with just food and water, and, in exchange, they generously gave of their wool, their company, and—once in a while—their meat.

If I became a monster today, and decided to kill them, one by one, they would become aware only after most of the flock had been slaughtered, thought the boy. They trust me, and they've forgotten how to rely on their own instincts, because I lead them to nourishment.

The boy was surprised at his thoughts. Maybe the church, with the sycamore growing from within, had been haunted. It had caused him to have the same dream for a second time, and it was causing him to feel anger toward his faithful companions. He drank a bit from the wine that remained from his dinner of the night before, and he gathered his jacket closer to his body. He knew that a few hours from now, with the sun at its zenith, the heat would be so great that he would not be able to lead his flock across the fields. It was the time of day when all of Spain slept during the summer. The heat lasted until nightfall, and all that time he had to carry his

jacket. But when he thought to complain about the burden of its weight, he remembered that, because he had the jacket, he had withstood the cold of the dawn.

We have to be prepared for change, he thought, and he was grateful for the jacket's weight and warmth.

The jacket had a purpose, and so did the boy. His purpose in life was to travel, and, after two years of walking the Andalusian terrain, he knew all the cities of the region. He was planning, on this visit, to explain to the girl how it was that a simple shepherd knew how to read. That he had attended a seminary until he was sixteen. His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family. They worked hard just to have food and water, like the sheep. He had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins. One afternoon, on a visit to his family, he had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel.

"PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD HAVE PASSED through this village, son," said his father. "They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived. They climb the mountain to see the castle, and they wind up thinking that the past was better than what we have now. They have blond hair, or dark skin, but basically they're the same as the people who live right here."

"But I'd like to see the castles in the towns where they live," the boy explained.

“Those people, when they see our land, say that they would like to live here forever,” his father continued.

“Well, I’d like to see their land, and see how they live,” said his son.

“The people who come here have a lot of money to spend, so they can afford to travel,” his father said. “Amongst us, the only ones who travel are the shepherds.”

“Well, then I’ll be a shepherd!”

His father said no more. The next day, he gave his son a pouch that held three ancient Spanish gold coins.

“I found these one day in the fields. I wanted them to be a part of your inheritance. But use them to buy your flock. Take to the fields, and someday you’ll learn that our countryside is the best, and our women are the most beautiful.”

And he gave the boy his blessing. The boy could see in his father’s gaze a desire to be able, himself, to travel the world—a desire that was still alive, despite his father’s having had to bury it, over dozens of years, under the burden of struggling for water to drink, food to eat, and the same place to sleep every night of his life.

THE HORIZON WAS TINGED WITH RED, AND SUDDENLY THE sun appeared. The boy thought back to that conversation with his father, and felt happy; he had already seen many castles and met many women (but none the equal of the one who awaited him several days hence). He owned a jacket, a book that he could trade for another, and a flock of sheep. But, most important, he was able every day to live out his dream. If he were to tire of the Andalusian fields, he could sell his sheep and go to sea. By the time he had had enough of the sea, he

would already have known other cities, other women, and other chances to be happy. I couldn't have found God in the seminary, he thought, as he looked at the sunrise.

Whenever he could, he sought out a new road to travel. He had never been to that ruined church before, in spite of having traveled through those parts many times. The world was huge and inexhaustible; he had only to allow his sheep to set the route for a while, and he would discover other interesting things. The problem is that they don't even realize that they're walking a new road every day. They don't see that the fields are new and the seasons change. All they think about is food and water.

Maybe we're all that way, the boy mused. Even me—I haven't thought of other women since I met the merchant's daughter. Looking at the sun, he calculated that he would reach Tarifa before midday. There, he could exchange his book for a thicker one, fill his wine bottle, shave, and have a haircut; he had to prepare himself for his meeting with the girl, and he didn't want to think about the possibility that some other shepherd, with a larger flock of sheep, had arrived there before him and asked for her hand.

It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting, he thought, as he looked again at the position of the sun, and hurried his pace. He had suddenly remembered that, in Tarifa, there was an old woman who interpreted dreams.

THE OLD WOMAN LED THE BOY TO A ROOM AT THE BACK of her house; it was separated from her living room by a curtain of colored beads. The room's furnishings consisted of a table, an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and two chairs.

The woman sat down, and told him to be seated as well. Then she took both of his hands in hers, and began quietly to pray.

It sounded like a Gypsy prayer. The boy had already had experience on the road with Gypsies; they also traveled, but they had no flocks of sheep. People said that Gypsies spent their lives tricking others. It was also said that they had a pact with the devil, and that they kidnapped children and, taking them away to their mysterious camps, made them their slaves. As a child, the boy had always been frightened to death that he would be captured by Gypsies, and this childhood fear returned when the old woman took his hands in hers.

But she has the Sacred Heart of Jesus there, he thought, trying to reassure himself. He didn't want his hand to begin trembling, showing the old woman that he was fearful. He recited an Our Father silently.

"Very interesting," said the woman, never taking her eyes from the boy's hands, and then she fell silent.

The boy was becoming nervous. His hands began to tremble, and the woman sensed it. He quickly pulled his hands away.

"I didn't come here to have you read my palm," he said, already regretting having come. He thought for a moment that it would be better to pay her fee and leave without learning a thing, that he was giving too much importance to his recurrent dream.

"You came so that you could learn about your dreams," said the old woman. "And dreams are the language of God. When he speaks in our language, I can interpret what he has said. But if he speaks in the language of the soul, it is only you who can understand. But, whichever it is, I'm going to charge you for the consultation."

Another trick, the boy thought. But he decided to take a chance. A shepherd always takes his chances with wolves and with drought, and that's what makes a shepherd's life exciting.

"I have had the same dream twice," he said. "I dreamed that I was in a field with my sheep, when a child appeared and began to play with the animals. I don't like people to do that, because the sheep are afraid of strangers. But children always seem to be able to play with them without frightening them. I don't know why. I don't know how animals know the age of human beings."

"Tell me more about your dream," said the woman. "I have to get back to my cooking, and, since you don't have much money, I can't give you a lot of time."

"The child went on playing with my sheep for quite a while," continued the boy, a bit upset. "And suddenly, the child took me by both hands and transported me to the Egyptian pyramids."

He paused for a moment to see if the woman knew what the Egyptian pyramids were. But she said nothing.

"Then, at the Egyptian pyramids,"—he said the last three words slowly, so that the old woman would understand—"the child said to me, 'If you come here, you will find a hidden treasure.' And, just as she was about to show me the exact location, I woke up. Both times."

The woman was silent for some time. Then she again took his hands and studied them carefully.

"I'm not going to charge you anything now," she said. "But I want one-tenth of the treasure, if you find it."

The boy laughed—out of happiness. He was going to be able to save the little money he had because of a dream about hidden treasure!

"Well, interpret the dream," he said.

“First, swear to me. Swear that you will give me one-tenth of your treasure in exchange for what I am going to tell you.”

The shepherd swore that he would. The old woman asked him to swear again while looking at the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“It’s a dream in the language of the world,” she said. “I can interpret it, but the interpretation is very difficult. That’s why I feel that I deserve a part of what you find.

“And this is my interpretation: you must go to the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but, if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man.”

The boy was surprised, and then irritated. He didn’t need to seek out the old woman for this! But then he remembered that he wasn’t going to have to pay anything.

“I didn’t need to waste my time just for this,” he said.

“I told you that your dream was a difficult one. It’s the simple things in life that are the most extraordinary; only wise men are able to understand them. And since I am not wise, I have had to learn other arts, such as the reading of palms.”

“Well, how am I going to get to Egypt?”

“I only interpret dreams. I don’t know how to turn them into reality. That’s why I have to live off what my daughters provide me with.”

“And what if I never get to Egypt?”

“Then I don’t get paid. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

And the woman told the boy to leave, saying she had already wasted too much time with him.

So the boy was disappointed; he decided that he would never again believe in dreams. He remembered that he had a number of things he had to take care of: he went to the market for something

to eat, he traded his book for one that was thicker, and he found a bench in the plaza where he could sample the new wine he had bought. The day was hot, and the wine was refreshing. The sheep were at the gates of the city, in a stable that belonged to a friend. The boy knew a lot of people in the city. That was what made traveling appeal to him—he always made new friends, and he didn't need to spend all of his time with them. When someone sees the same people every day, as had happened with him at the seminary, they wind up becoming a part of that person's life. And then they want the person to change. If someone isn't what others want them to be, the others become angry. Everyone seems to have a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own.

He decided to wait until the sun had sunk a bit lower in the sky before following his flock back through the fields. Three days from now, he would be with the merchant's daughter.

He started to read the book he had bought. On the very first page it described a burial ceremony. And the names of the people involved were very difficult to pronounce. If he ever wrote a book, he thought, he would present one person at a time, so that the reader wouldn't have to worry about memorizing a lot of names.

When he was finally able to concentrate on what he was reading, he liked the book better; the burial was on a snowy day, and he welcomed the feeling of being cold. As he read on, an old man sat down at his side and tried to strike up a conversation.

"What are they doing?" the old man asked, pointing at the people in the plaza.

"Working," the boy answered dryly, making it look as if he wanted to concentrate on his reading.

Actually, he was thinking about shearing his sheep in front of the merchant's daughter, so that she could see that he was someone who was capable of doing difficult things. He had already imagined the scene many times; every time, the girl became fascinated when he explained that the sheep had to be sheared from back to front. He also tried to remember some good stories to relate as he sheared the sheep. Most of them he had read in books, but he would tell them as if they were from his personal experience. She would never know the difference, because she didn't know how to read.

Meanwhile, the old man persisted in his attempt to strike up a conversation. He said that he was tired and thirsty, and asked if he might have a sip of the boy's wine. The boy offered his bottle, hoping that the old man would leave him alone.

But the old man wanted to talk, and he asked the boy what book he was reading. The boy was tempted to be rude, and move to another bench, but his father had taught him to be respectful of the elderly. So he held out the book to the man—for two reasons: first, that he, himself, wasn't sure how to pronounce the title; and second, that if the old man didn't know how to read, he would probably feel ashamed and decide of his own accord to change benches.

"Hmm..." said the old man, looking at all sides of the book, as if it were some strange object. "This is an important book, but it's really irritating."

The boy was shocked. The old man knew how to read, and had already read the book. And if the book was irritating, as the old man had said, the boy still had time to change it for another.

"It's a book that says the same thing almost all the other books in the world say," continued the old man. "It describes people's inability to choose their own Personal Legends. And it ends up saying that everyone believes the world's greatest lie."

“What’s the world’s greatest lie?” the boy asked, completely surprised.

“It’s this: that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That’s the world’s greatest lie.”

“That’s never happened to me,” the boy said. “They wanted me to be a priest, but I decided to become a shepherd.”

“Much better,” said the old man. “Because you really like to travel.”

“He knew what I was thinking,” the boy said to himself. The old man, meanwhile, was leafing through the book, without seeming to want to return it at all. The boy noticed that the man’s clothing was strange. He looked like an Arab, which was not unusual in those parts. Africa was only a few hours from Tarifa; one had only to cross the narrow straits by boat. Arabs often appeared in the city, shopping and chanting their strange prayers several times a day.

“Where are you from?” the boy asked.

“From many places.”

“No one can be from many places,” the boy said. “I’m a shepherd, and I have been to many places, but I come from only one place—from a city near an ancient castle. That’s where I was born.”

“Well then, we could say that I was born in Salem.”

The boy didn’t know where Salem was, but he didn’t want to ask, fearing that he would appear ignorant. He looked at the people in the plaza for a while; they were coming and going, and all of them seemed to be very busy.

“So, what is Salem like?” he asked, trying to get some sort of clue.

“It’s like it always has been.”

No clue yet. But he knew that Salem wasn’t in Andalusia. If it were, he would already have heard of it.

“And what do you do in Salem?” he insisted.

“What do I do in Salem?” The old man laughed. “Well, I’m the king of Salem!”

People say strange things, the boy thought. Sometimes it’s better to be with the sheep, who don’t say anything. And better still to be alone with one’s books. They tell their incredible stories at the time when you want to hear them. But when you’re talking to people, they say some things that are so strange that you don’t know how to continue the conversation.

“My name is Melchizedek,” said the old man. “How many sheep do you have?”

“Enough,” said the boy. He could see that the old man wanted to know more about his life.

“Well, then, we’ve got a problem. I can’t help you if you feel you’ve got enough sheep.”

The boy was getting irritated. He wasn’t asking for help. It was the old man who had asked for a drink of his wine, and had started the conversation.

“Give me my book,” the boy said. “I have to go and gather my sheep and get going.”

“Give me one-tenth of your sheep,” said the old man, “and I’ll tell you how to find the hidden treasure.”

The boy remembered his dream, and suddenly everything was clear to him. The old woman hadn’t charged him anything, but the old man—maybe he was her husband—was going to find a way to get much more money in exchange for information about something that didn’t even exist. The old man was probably a Gypsy, too.

But before the boy could say anything, the old man leaned over, picked up a stick, and began to write in the sand of the plaza. Something bright reflected from his chest with such intensity that

the boy was momentarily blinded. With a movement that was too quick for someone his age, the man covered whatever it was with his cape. When his vision returned to normal, the boy was able to read what the old man had written in the sand.

There, in the sand of the plaza of that small city, the boy read the names of his father and his mother and the name of the seminary he had attended. He read the name of the merchant's daughter, which he hadn't even known, and he read things he had never told anyone.

"I'M THE KING OF SALEM," THE OLD MAN HAD SAID.

"Why would a king be talking with a shepherd?" the boy asked, awed and embarrassed.

"For several reasons. But let's say that the most important is that you have succeeded in discovering your Personal Legend."

The boy didn't know what a person's "Personal Legend" was.

"It's what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their Personal Legend is.

"At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But, as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their Personal Legend."

None of what the old man was saying made much sense to the boy. But he wanted to know what the "mysterious force" was; the merchant's daughter would be impressed when he told her about that!

"It's a force that appears to be negative, but actually shows you how to realize your Personal Legend. It prepares your spirit and

your will, because there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, it's because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It's your mission on earth."

"Even when all you want to do is travel? Or marry the daughter of a textile merchant?"

"Yes, or even search for treasure. The Soul of the World is nourished by people's happiness. And also by unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one's Personal Legend is a person's only real obligation. All things are one.

"And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

They were both silent for a time, observing the plaza and the townspeople. It was the old man who spoke first.

"Why do you tend a flock of sheep?"

"Because I like to travel."

The old man pointed to a baker standing in his shop window at one corner of the plaza. "When he was a child, that man wanted to travel, too. But he decided first to buy his bakery and put some money aside. When he's an old man, he's going to spend a month in Africa. He never realized that people are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of."

"He should have decided to become a shepherd," the boy said.

"Well, he thought about that," the old man said. "But bakers are more important people than shepherds. Bakers have homes, while shepherds sleep out in the open. Parents would rather see their children marry bakers than shepherds."

The boy felt a pang in his heart, thinking about the merchant's daughter. There was surely a baker in her town.

The old man continued, “In the long run, what people think about shepherds and bakers becomes more important for them than their own Personal Legends.”

The old man leafed through the book, and fell to reading a page he came to. The boy waited, and then interrupted the old man just as he himself had been interrupted. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because you are trying to realize your Personal Legend. And you are at the point where you’re about to give it all up.”

“And that’s when you always appear on the scene?”

“Not always in this way, but I always appear in one form or another. Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen. There are other things I do, too, but most of the time people don’t realize I’ve done them.”

The old man related that, the week before, he had been forced to appear before a miner, and had taken the form of a stone. The miner had abandoned everything to go mining for emeralds. For five years he had been working a certain river, and had examined hundreds of thousands of stones looking for an emerald. The miner was about to give it all up, right at the point when, if he were to examine just one more stone—just *one more*—he would find his emerald. Since the miner had sacrificed everything to his Personal Legend, the old man decided to become involved. He transformed himself into a stone that rolled up to the miner’s foot. The miner, with all the anger and frustration of his five fruitless years, picked up the stone and threw it aside. But he had thrown it with such force that it broke the stone it fell upon, and there, embedded in the broken stone, was the most beautiful emerald in the world.

“People learn, early in their lives, what is their reason for being,” said the old man, with a certain bitterness. “Maybe that’s why they give up on it so early, too. But that’s the way it is.”

The boy reminded the old man that he had said something about hidden treasure.

“Treasure is uncovered by the force of flowing water, and it is buried by the same currents,” said the old man. “If you want to learn about your own treasure, you will have to give me one-tenth of your flock.”

“What about one-tenth of my treasure?”

The old man looked disappointed. “If you start out by promising what you don’t even have yet, you’ll lose your desire to work toward getting it.”

The boy told him that he had already promised to give one-tenth of his treasure to the Gypsy.

“Gypsies are experts at getting people to do that,” sighed the old man. “In any case, it’s good that you’ve learned that everything in life has its price. This is what the Warriors of the Light try to teach.”

The old man returned the book to the boy.

“Tomorrow, at this same time, bring me a tenth of your flock. And I will tell you how to find the hidden treasure. Good afternoon.”

And he vanished around the corner of the plaza.

THE BOY BEGAN AGAIN TO READ HIS BOOK, BUT HE WAS NO longer able to concentrate. He was tense and upset, because he knew that the old man was right. He went over to the bakery and bought a loaf of bread, thinking about whether or not he should tell the baker what the old man had said about him. Sometimes it’s better to leave

things as they are, he thought to himself, and decided to say nothing. If he were to say anything, the baker would spend three days thinking about giving it all up, even though he had gotten used to the way things were. The boy could certainly resist causing that kind of anxiety for the baker. So he began to wander through the city, and found himself at the gates. There was a small building there, with a window at which people bought tickets to Africa. And he knew that Egypt was in Africa.

“Can I help you?” asked the man behind the window.

“Maybe tomorrow,” said the boy, moving away. If he sold just one of his sheep, he’d have enough to get to the other shore of the strait. The idea frightened him.

“Another dreamer,” said the ticket seller to his assistant, watching the boy walk away. “He doesn’t have enough money to travel.”

While standing at the ticket window, the boy had remembered his flock, and decided he should go back to being a shepherd. In two years he had learned everything about shepherding: he knew how to shear sheep, how to care for pregnant ewes, and how to protect the sheep from wolves. He knew all the fields and pastures of Andalusia. And he knew what was the fair price for every one of his animals.

He decided to return to his friend’s stable by the longest route possible. As he walked past the city’s castle, he interrupted his return, and climbed the stone ramp that led to the top of the wall. From there, he could see Africa in the distance. Someone had once told him that it was from there that the Moors had come, to occupy all of Spain.

He could see almost the entire city from where he sat, including the plaza where he had talked with the old man. Curse the moment I

met that old man, he thought. He had come to the town only to find a woman who could interpret his dream. Neither the woman nor the old man was at all impressed by the fact that he was a shepherd. They were solitary individuals who no longer believed in things, and didn't understand that shepherds become attached to their sheep. He knew everything about each member of his flock: he knew which ones were lame, which one was to give birth two months from now, and which were the laziest. He knew how to shear them, and how to slaughter them. If he ever decided to leave them, they would suffer.

The wind began to pick up. He knew that wind: people called it the levanter, because on it the Moors had come from the Levant at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

The levanter increased in intensity. Here I am, between my flock and my treasure, the boy thought. He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have. There was also the merchant's daughter, but she wasn't as important as his flock, because she didn't depend on him. Maybe she didn't even remember him. He was sure that it made no difference to her on which day he appeared: for her, every day was the same, and when each day is the same as the next, it's because people fail to recognize the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises.

I left my father, my mother, and the town castle behind. They have gotten used to my being away, and so have I. The sheep will get used to my not being there, too, the boy thought.

From where he sat, he could observe the plaza. People continued to come and go from the baker's shop. A young couple sat on the bench where he had talked with the old man, and they kissed.

“That baker...” he said to himself, without completing the thought. The levanter was still getting stronger, and he felt its force on his face. That wind had brought the Moors, yes, but it had also brought the smell of the desert and of veiled women. It had brought with it the sweat and the dreams of men who had once left to search for the unknown, and for gold and adventure—and for the Pyramids. The boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind, and saw that he could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself. The sheep, the merchant’s daughter, and the fields of Andalusia were only steps along the way to his Personal Legend.

The next day, the boy met the old man at noon. He brought six sheep with him.

“I’m surprised,” the boy said. “My friend bought all the other sheep immediately. He said that he had always dreamed of being a shepherd, and that it was a good omen.”

“That’s the way it always is,” said the old man. “It’s called the principle of favorability. When you play cards the first time, you are almost sure to win. Beginner’s luck.”

“Why is that?”

“Because there is a force that wants you to realize your Personal Legend; it whets your appetite with a taste of success.”

Then the old man began to inspect the sheep, and he saw that one was lame. The boy explained that it wasn’t important, since that sheep was the most intelligent of the flock, and produced the most wool.

“Where is the treasure?” he asked.

“It’s in Egypt, near the Pyramids.”

The boy was startled. The old woman had said the same thing. But she hadn’t charged him anything.

“In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you.”

Before the boy could reply, a butterfly appeared and fluttered between him and the old man. He remembered something his grandfather had once told him: that butterflies were a good omen. Like crickets, and like grasshoppers; like lizards and four-leaf clovers.

“That’s right,” said the old man, able to read the boy’s thoughts. “Just as your grandfather taught you. These are good omens.”

The old man opened his cape, and the boy was struck by what he saw. The old man wore a breastplate of heavy gold, covered with precious stones. The boy recalled the brilliance he had noticed on the previous day.

He really was a king! He must be disguised to avoid encounters with thieves.

“Take these,” said the old man, holding out a white stone and a black stone that had been embedded at the center of the breastplate. “They are called Urim and Thummim. The black signifies ‘yes,’ and the white ‘no.’ When you are unable to read the omens, they will help you to do so. Always ask an objective question.

“But, if you can, try to make your own decisions. The treasure is at the Pyramids; that you already knew. But I had to insist on the payment of six sheep because I helped you to make your decision.”

The boy put the stones in his pouch. From then on, he would make his own decisions.

“Don’t forget that everything you deal with is only one thing and nothing else. And don’t forget the language of omens. And, above all,

don't forget to follow your Personal Legend through to its conclusion.

"But before I go, I want to tell you a little story.

"A certain shopkeeper sent his son to learn about the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world. The lad wandered through the desert for forty days, and finally came upon a beautiful castle, high atop a mountain. It was there that the wise man lived.

"Rather than finding a saintly man, though, our hero, on entering the main room of the castle, saw a hive of activity: tradesmen came and went, people were conversing in the corners, a small orchestra was playing soft music, and there was a table covered with platters of the most delicious food in that part of the world. The wise man conversed with everyone, and the boy had to wait for two hours before it was his turn to be given the man's attention.

"The wise man listened attentively to the boy's explanation of why he had come, but told him that he didn't have time just then to explain the secret of happiness. He suggested that the boy look around the palace and return in two hours.

"'Meanwhile, I want to ask you to do something,' said the wise man, handing the boy a teaspoon that held two drops of oil. 'As you wander around, carry this spoon with you without allowing the oil to spill.'

"The boy began climbing and descending the many stairways of the palace, keeping his eyes fixed on the spoon. After two hours, he returned to the room where the wise man was.

"'Well,' asked the wise man, 'did you see the Persian tapestries that are hanging in my dining hall? Did you see the garden that it took the master gardener ten years to create? Did you notice the beautiful parchments in my library?'

“The boy was embarrassed, and confessed that he had observed nothing. His only concern had been not to spill the oil that the wise man had entrusted to him.

“‘Then go back and observe the marvels of my world,’ said the wise man. ‘You cannot trust a man if you don’t know his house.’

“Relieved, the boy picked up the spoon and returned to his exploration of the palace, this time observing all of the works of art on the ceilings and the walls. He saw the gardens, the mountains all around him, the beauty of the flowers, and the taste with which everything had been selected. Upon returning to the wise man, he related in detail everything he had seen.

“‘But where are the drops of oil I entrusted to you?’ asked the wise man.

“Looking down at the spoon he held, the boy saw that the oil was gone.

“‘Well, there is only one piece of advice I can give you,’ said the wisest of wise men. ‘The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon.’”

The shepherd said nothing. He had understood the story the old king had told him. A shepherd may like to travel, but he should never forget about his sheep.

The old man looked at the boy and, with his hands held together, made several strange gestures over the boy’s head. Then, taking his sheep, he walked away.

AT THE HIGHEST POINT IN TARIFA THERE IS AN OLD FORT, built by the Moors. From atop its walls, one can catch a glimpse of Africa. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, sat on the wall of the fort that

afternoon, and felt the levanter blowing in his face. The sheep fidgeted nearby, uneasy with their new owner and excited by so much change. All they wanted was food and water.

Melchizedek watched a small ship that was plowing its way out of the port. He would never again see the boy, just as he had never seen Abraham again after having charged him his one-tenth fee. That was his work.

The gods should not have desires, because they don't have Personal Legends. But the king of Salem hoped desperately that the boy would be successful.

It's too bad that he's quickly going to forget my name, he thought. I should have repeated it for him. Then when he spoke about me he would say that I am Melchizedek, the king of Salem.

He looked to the skies, feeling a bit abashed, and said, "I know it's the vanity of vanities, as you said, my Lord. But an old king sometimes has to take some pride in himself."

HOW STRANGE AFRICA IS, THOUGHT THE BOY.

He was sitting in a bar very much like the other bars he had seen along the narrow streets of Tangier. Some men were smoking from a gigantic pipe that they passed from one to the other. In just a few hours he had seen men walking hand in hand, women with their faces covered, and priests that climbed to the tops of towers and chanted—as everyone about him went to their knees and placed their foreheads on the ground.

"A practice of infidels," he said to himself. As a child in church, he had always looked at the image of Saint Santiago Matamoros on his white horse, his sword unsheathed, and figures such as these

kneeling at his feet. The boy felt ill and terribly alone. The infidels had an evil look about them.

Besides this, in the rush of his travels he had forgotten a detail, just one detail, which could keep him from his treasure for a long time: only Arabic was spoken in this country.

The owner of the bar approached him, and the boy pointed to a drink that had been served at the next table. It turned out to be a bitter tea. The boy preferred wine.

But he didn't need to worry about that right now. What he had to be concerned about was his treasure, and how he was going to go about getting it. The sale of his sheep had left him with enough money in his pouch, and the boy knew that in money there was magic; whoever has money is never really alone. Before long, maybe in just a few days, he would be at the Pyramids. An old man, with a breastplate of gold, wouldn't have lied just to acquire six sheep.

The old man had spoken about signs and omens, and, as the boy was crossing the strait, he had thought about omens. Yes, the old man had known what he was talking about: during the time the boy had spent in the fields of Andalusia, he had become used to learning which path he should take by observing the ground and the sky. He had discovered that the presence of a certain bird meant that a snake was nearby, and that a certain shrub was a sign that there was water in the area. The sheep had taught him that.

If God leads the sheep so well, he will also lead a man, he thought, and that made him feel better. The tea seemed less bitter.

"Who are you?" he heard a voice ask him in Spanish.

The boy was relieved. He was thinking about omens, and someone had appeared.

“How come you speak Spanish?” he asked. The new arrival was a young man in Western dress, but the color of his skin suggested he was from this city. He was about the same age and height as the boy.

“Almost everyone here speaks Spanish. We’re only two hours from Spain.”

“Sit down, and let me treat you to something,” said the boy. “And ask for a glass of wine for me. I hate this tea.”

“There is no wine in this country,” the young man said. “The religion here forbids it.”

The boy told him then that he needed to get to the Pyramids. He almost began to tell about his treasure, but decided not to do so. If he did, it was possible that the Arab would want a part of it as payment for taking him there. He remembered what the old man had said about offering something you didn’t even have yet.

“I’d like you to take me there if you can. I can pay you to serve as my guide.”

“Do you have any idea how to get there?” the newcomer asked.

The boy noticed that the owner of the bar stood nearby, listening attentively to their conversation. He felt uneasy at the man’s presence. But he had found a guide, and didn’t want to miss out on an opportunity.

“You have to cross the entire Sahara desert,” said the young man. “And to do that, you need money. I need to know whether you have enough.”

The boy thought it a strange question. But he trusted in the old man, who had said that, when you really want something, the universe always conspires in your favor.

He took his money from his pouch and showed it to the young man. The owner of the bar came over and looked, as well. The two

men exchanged some words in Arabic, and the bar owner seemed irritated.

“Let’s get out of here,” said the new arrival. “He wants us to leave.”

The boy was relieved. He got up to pay the bill, but the owner grabbed him and began to speak to him in an angry stream of words. The boy was strong, and wanted to retaliate, but he was in a foreign country. His new friend pushed the owner aside, and pulled the boy outside with him. “He wanted your money,” he said. “Tangier is not like the rest of Africa. This is a port, and every port has its thieves.”

The boy trusted his new friend. He had helped him out in a dangerous situation. He took out his money and counted it.

“We could get to the Pyramids by tomorrow,” said the other, taking the money. “But I have to buy two camels.”

They walked together through the narrow streets of Tangier. Everywhere there were stalls with items for sale. They reached the center of a large plaza where the market was held. There were thousands of people there, arguing, selling, and buying; vegetables for sale amongst daggers, and carpets displayed alongside tobacco. But the boy never took his eye off his new friend. After all, he had all his money. He thought about asking him to give it back, but decided that would be unfriendly. He knew nothing about the customs of the strange land he was in.

“I’ll just watch him,” he said to himself. He knew he was stronger than his friend.

Suddenly, there in the midst of all that confusion, he saw the most beautiful sword he had ever seen. The scabbard was embossed in silver, and the handle was black and encrusted with precious

stones. The boy promised himself that, when he returned from Egypt, he would buy that sword.

“Ask the owner of that stall how much the sword costs,” he said to his friend. Then he realized that he had been distracted for a few moments, looking at the sword. His heart squeezed, as if his chest had suddenly compressed it. He was afraid to look around, because he knew what he would find. He continued to look at the beautiful sword for a bit longer, until he summoned the courage to turn around.

All around him was the market, with people coming and going, shouting and buying, and the aroma of strange foods...but nowhere could he find his new companion.

The boy wanted to believe that his friend had simply become separated from him by accident. He decided to stay right there and await his return. As he waited, a priest climbed to the top of a nearby tower and began his chant; everyone in the market fell to their knees, touched their foreheads to the ground, and took up the chant. Then, like a colony of worker ants, they dismantled their stalls and left.

The sun began its departure, as well. The boy watched it through its trajectory for some time, until it was hidden behind the white houses surrounding the plaza. He recalled that when the sun had risen that morning, he was on another continent, still a shepherd with sixty sheep, and looking forward to meeting with a girl. That morning he had known everything that was going to happen to him as he walked through the familiar fields. But now, as the sun began to set, he was in a different country, a stranger in a strange land, where he couldn't even speak the language. He was no longer a shepherd, and he had nothing, not even the money to return and start everything over.

All this happened between sunrise and sunset, the boy thought. He was feeling sorry for himself, and lamenting the fact that his life could have changed so suddenly and so drastically.

He was so ashamed that he wanted to cry. He had never even wept in front of his own sheep. But the marketplace was empty, and he was far from home, so he wept. He wept because God was unfair, and because this was the way God repaid those who believed in their dreams.

When I had my sheep, I was happy, and I made those around me happy. People saw me coming and welcomed me, he thought. But now I'm sad and alone. I'm going to become bitter and distrustful of people because one person betrayed me. I'm going to hate those who have found their treasure because I never found mine. And I'm going to hold on to what little I have, because I'm too insignificant to conquer the world.

He opened his pouch to see what was left of his possessions; maybe there was a bit left of the sandwich he had eaten on the ship. But all he found was the heavy book, his jacket, and the two stones the old man had given him.

As he looked at the stones, he felt relieved for some reason. He had exchanged six sheep for two precious stones that had been taken from a gold breastplate. He could sell the stones and buy a return ticket. But this time I'll be smarter, the boy thought, removing them from the pouch so he could put them in his pocket. This was a port town, and the only truthful thing his friend had told him was that port towns are full of thieves.

Now he understood why the owner of the bar had been so upset: he was trying to tell him not to trust that man. "I'm like everyone else—I see the world in terms of what I would like to see happen, not what actually does."

He ran his fingers slowly over the stones, sensing their temperature and feeling their surfaces. They were his treasure. Just handling them made him feel better. They reminded him of the old man.

“When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it,” he had said.

The boy was trying to understand the truth of what the old man had said. There he was in the empty marketplace, without a cent to his name, and with not a sheep to guard through the night. But the stones were proof that he had met with a king—a king who knew of the boy’s past.

“They’re called Urim and Thummim, and they can help you to read the omens.” The boy put the stones back in the pouch and decided to do an experiment. The old man had said to ask very clear questions, and to do that, the boy had to know what he wanted. So, he asked if the old man’s blessing was still with him.

He took out one of the stones. It was “yes.”

“Am I going to find my treasure?” he asked.

He stuck his hand into the pouch, and felt around for one of the stones. As he did so, both of them pushed through a hole in the pouch and fell to the ground. The boy had never even noticed that there was a hole in his pouch. He knelt down to find Urim and Thummim and put them back in the pouch. But as he saw them lying there on the ground, another phrase came to his mind.

“Learn to recognize omens, and follow them,” the old king had said.

An omen. The boy smiled to himself. He picked up the two stones and put them back in his pouch. He didn’t consider mending the hole—the stones could fall through any time they wanted. He had learned that there were certain things one shouldn’t ask about,

so as not to flee from one's own Personal Legend. "I promised that I would make my own decisions," he said to himself.

But the stones had told him that the old man was still with him, and that made him feel more confident. He looked around at the empty plaza again, feeling less desperate than before. This wasn't a strange place; it was a new one.

After all, what he had always wanted was just that: to know new places. Even if he never got to the Pyramids, he had already traveled farther than any shepherd he knew. Oh, if they only knew how different things are just two hours by ship from where they are, he thought. Although his new world at the moment was just an empty marketplace, he had already seen it when it was teeming with life, and he would never forget it. He remembered the sword. It hurt him a bit to think about it, but he had never seen one like it before. As he mused about these things, he realized that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure.

"I'm an adventurer, looking for treasure," he said to himself.

HE WAS SHAKEN INTO WAKEFULNESS BY SOMEONE. HE had fallen asleep in the middle of the marketplace, and life in the plaza was about to resume.

Looking around, he sought his sheep, and then realized that he was in a new world. But instead of being saddened, he was happy. He no longer had to seek out food and water for the sheep; he could go in search of his treasure, instead. He had not a cent in his pocket, but he had faith. He had decided, the night before, that he would be as much an adventurer as the ones he had admired in books.

He walked slowly through the market. The merchants were assembling their stalls, and the boy helped a candy seller to do his. The candy seller had a smile on his face: he was happy, aware of what his life was about, and ready to begin a day's work. His smile reminded the boy of the old man—the mysterious old king he had met. "This candy merchant isn't making candy so that later he can travel or marry a shopkeeper's daughter. He's doing it because it's what he wants to do," thought the boy. He realized that he could do the same thing the old man had done—sense whether a person was near to or far from his Personal Legend. Just by looking at them. It's easy, and yet I've never done it before, he thought.

When the stall was assembled, the candy seller offered the boy the first sweet he had made for the day. The boy thanked him, ate it, and went on his way. When he had gone only a short distance, he realized that, while they were erecting the stall, one of them had spoken Arabic and the other Spanish.

And they had understood each other perfectly well.

There must be a language that doesn't depend on words, the boy thought. I've already had that experience with my sheep, and now it's happening with people.

He was learning a lot of new things. Some of them were things that he had already experienced, and weren't really new, but that he had never perceived before. And he hadn't perceived them because he had become accustomed to them. He realized: If I can learn to understand this language without words, I can learn to understand the world.

Relaxed and unhurried, he resolved that he would walk through the narrow streets of Tangier. Only in that way would he be able to read the omens. He knew it would require a lot of patience, but shepherds know all about patience. Once again he saw that, in that

strange land, he was applying the same lessons he had learned with his sheep.

“All things are one,” the old man had said.

THE CRYSTAL MERCHANT AWOKE WITH THE DAY, AND FELT the same anxiety that he felt every morning. He had been in the same place for thirty years: a shop at the top of a hilly street where few customers passed. Now it was too late to change anything—the only thing he had ever learned to do was to buy and sell crystal glassware. There had been a time when many people knew of his shop: Arab merchants, French and English geologists, German soldiers who were always well-heeled. In those days it had been wonderful to be selling crystal, and he had thought how he would become rich, and have beautiful women at his side as he grew older.

But, as time passed, Tangier had changed. The nearby city of Ceuta had grown faster than Tangier, and business had fallen off. Neighbors moved away, and there remained only a few small shops on the hill. And no one was going to climb the hill just to browse through a few small shops.

But the crystal merchant had no choice. He had lived thirty years of his life buying and selling crystal pieces, and now it was too late to do anything else.

He spent the entire morning observing the infrequent comings and goings in the street. He had done this for years, and knew the schedule of everyone who passed. But, just before lunchtime, a boy stopped in front of the shop. He was dressed normally, but the practiced eyes of the crystal merchant could see that the boy had no

money to spend. Nevertheless, the merchant decided to delay his lunch for a few minutes until the boy moved on.

A CARD HANGING IN THE DOORWAY ANNOUNCED THAT several languages were spoken in the shop. The boy saw a man appear behind the counter.

“I can clean up those glasses in the window, if you want,” said the boy. “The way they look now, nobody is going to want to buy them.”

The man looked at him without responding.

“In exchange, you could give me something to eat.”

The man still said nothing, and the boy sensed that he was going to have to make a decision. In his pouch, he had his jacket—he certainly wasn’t going to need it in the desert. Taking the jacket out, he began to clean the glasses. In half an hour, he had cleaned all the glasses in the window, and, as he was doing so, two customers had entered the shop and bought some crystal.

When he had completed the cleaning, he asked the man for something to eat. “Let’s go and have some lunch,” said the crystal merchant.

He put a sign on the door, and they went to a small café nearby. As they sat down at the only table in the place, the crystal merchant laughed.

“You didn’t have to do any cleaning,” he said. “The Koran requires me to feed a hungry person.”

“Well then, why did you let me do it?” the boy asked.

“Because the crystal was dirty. And both you and I needed to cleanse our minds of negative thoughts.”

When they had eaten, the merchant turned to the boy and said, "I'd like you to work in my shop. Two customers came in today while you were working, and that's a good omen."

People talk a lot about omens, thought the shepherd. But they really don't know what they're saying. Just as I hadn't realized that for so many years I had been speaking a language without words to my sheep.

"Do you want to go to work for me?" the merchant asked.

"I can work for the rest of today," the boy answered. "I'll work all night, until dawn, and I'll clean every piece of crystal in your shop. In return, I need money to get to Egypt tomorrow."

The merchant laughed. "Even if you cleaned my crystal for an entire year...even if you earned a good commission selling every piece, you would still have to borrow money to get to Egypt. There are thousands of kilometers of desert between here and there."

There was a moment of silence so profound that it seemed the city was asleep. No sound from the bazaars, no arguments among the merchants, no men climbing to the towers to chant. No hope, no adventure, no old kings or Personal Legends, no treasure, and no Pyramids. It was as if the world had fallen silent because the boy's soul had. He sat there, staring blankly through the door of the café, wishing that he had died, and that everything would end forever at that moment.

The merchant looked anxiously at the boy. All the joy he had seen that morning had suddenly disappeared.

"I can give you the money you need to get back to your country, my son," said the crystal merchant.

The boy said nothing. He got up, adjusted his clothing, and picked up his pouch.

"I'll work for you," he said.

And after another long silence, he added, "I need money to buy some sheep."