

Metamorphosis

*I am a story-teller to be. It is nestled within. Cocooning.
It is a skill I must learn. It is a gift, but not for me.
I must become a story-teller, for some stories must be told.
They are given for me to digest, ingest, transmute bit-wise, regurgitate, and feed you.
You, who are my sisters and brothers. You, who are my mothers and fathers. You, who are
my daughters and sons. You, we, are all of these.
I do not always like these stories I am given to tell.
But I must tell them from beginning to end.
I must focus now. We begin for the first time.*

*Let me tell you a story.
It will be complicated to make, and perhaps to digest.
I will need to make the bindings. That is the craft.
There will be some cleverness for the ones with time to pay (attention).
Some secrets are made for the wrong reasons. I will not hide what should not be hidden.
I must focus now. We begin for the second time.*

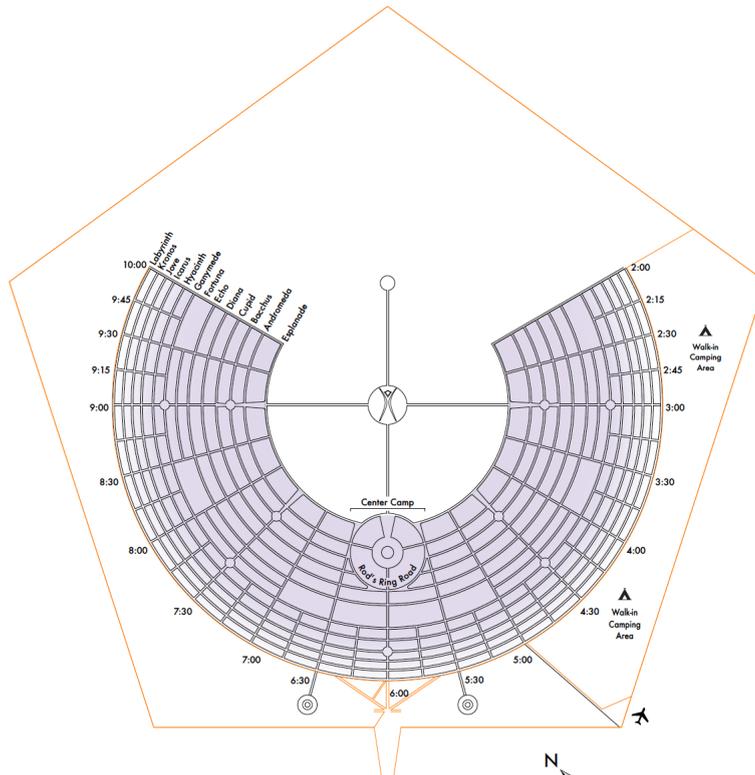
*I must hone a craft.
That of weaving.
That of gathering forty years worth of scattered knowledge, wisdom, wit.
That of finding in these gatherings what had to be found, and binding it. A story.
I have honed the craft for longer than I have noticed.*

*For now, for I am still a cocoon, the scaffolds are here, 'round the story.
I will not take them down. I will show you the secret of how the story is built.
Thus, let me disclose that this is a story about time.*

*In time, I will remove such scaffolds and let you go exploring all by yourselves.
For now I leave them be.
I must focus now. We begin for the third time.*

*The third time shall work, of course. For three is of the magic numbers of women.
The virgin, mother, sage. They await at the beginning and end of every fable, and this is a
fable.*

We begin.



Ashoka and I are on a mission. A task.
 It is a small task in appearances. But it can grow as large as I'd like it to be.
 I love having missions. Putting things in their right place (when possible).
 Making connections. Bolting together hardware and humanware.
 I get joy from that. I like helping.

Here is our mission, come join me:
 Ashoka and I are going on an ice run.
 We are going to purchase and carry blocks of ice. It is Burning Man.
 The year is 2019.
 It is a year before the big 2.0 2.0

*A year where it is metamorphosis time, still.
 A year when I am pulsating. Pupating.*

It is my first Burning Man. It is my first ice run.
 Ashoka has done it many times. Burns and ice runs both.
 But like all burners, he only does so once a year¹.

*Memory is a fickle thing.
 Remember that.*

¹ If you do not know what Burning Man and burners and that burning business is all about, let us declare and define some notation. A burner is a person who attends Burning Man, an annual week-long event, sometimes fondly called a burn. And what is this event? It is many things, and defies most explanations. Let us agree it is a city built in the Nevada desert for a week of the year, for some 80,000 people to attend, build, create, explore, and then disassemble and disappear, leaving no trace. Many burners congregate in groups that operate together like extended families, sharing common living spaces they erect. These are known as camps. Some camps provide certain services to the entire city. For now, these definitions will suffice.

A journey in three parts.

We will need to get to the place where ice is purchased. *The Way there.*

We will need to wait in line, buy ice. *At Arctica*

We will need to carry the ice back to our camp. *On The Way Back.*



The way there is from our camp to the ice camp, on our bicycles. A cart was attached to Ashoka's bike to hold the heavy ice load.

How do we get there? For that I need to know where we are and where we are heading, as do you. For the city in the desert is laid out in a circle, a disc. And locations along the disc are denoted with time. Like a big clock.

Of course it is a clock. We are binding space and time. The place binds space and time whether we wish to or not.

The ice resides at the city centre, our camp does not. We will need to make a few right and left turns on the curved and straight sandy trails of the city².

The ice camp - It is called Arctica. Let us ride there.

The way there is mine to do as I wish with - inhale the desert dust, explore with eyes wide open the sites and sounds and scents of the bustling city, still being built, for it is on its first day of this year's burn and I am a virgin³.



At Arctica, we arrive, just before when the gates of ice open. A long line has already formed. The long wait in line is also mine to do as I wish with. Talk to folks sharing the wait time with us. They are magnificent, all, In all their human glory. We await our turn and share stories.

These are not my stories to share.

A woman tells me "I found my people" when she first sees me, inserting herself into our line. That meant one thing for her and another for me. She wears her hair in two long silver braids, her face is sun-baked creases, her eyes are glorious. When she hears I am a virgin she asks if I would accept a blessing. She leans down, covers her hand with the desert dust, and puts her palm, fingers open, upon my belly. There is more to this story. But no, focus we must. Leaving things behind is part of the craft.

I am slightly nauseated. For I am pregnant with a big fat rosy-cheeked story, although I do not know that yet.

² It is of interest to some that while the place is a circle, it pays respects to what should not be precisely mapped and located. For the sake of creativity that has no bounds and boundaries. The city does not spread along the full 360 degrees, and it never will. A wedge is reserved, where the circle is not closed. It is the pathway to the deep play ground. You can walk outside the circle. Go exploring until the sun rises.

³ A virgin is a burner on their very first burn. *Welcome Home*, the folks say as they hear of it, and always offer a hug.

There is always a price to pay.

The line moves slowly, weaving its way. Then, it is time, it is our turn (of the clock). We are ready to buy ice. I am concentrating hard so hard on my mission. For I am a virgin and do not want to disappoint.

That camp Arctica that provides us with ice, it is a madhouse of human creativity and productivity. It is a logistical nightmare. For providing ice in the desert with no running water and no electricity, providing ice in the desert for so many people who do not strictly need but very much want some ice, that is a logistical nightmare.

No, not a nightmare, a daymare.

No, not a daymare, a challenge.

It is simply a challenge. For all virgins, upon entering the city gate for the first time, are asked and encouraged to leave all judgment behind.

There are those who take joy in solving large logistical challenges, and right here right now these happy folks also get to spend their time walking in and out of semi-trailer truck freezers in the middle of the desert when it's 40 degrees celsius outside ($32+9/5*40$) and that is *hot*. And inside the ice truck it must be nice and cool.

There is always a gift to receive.

As I look at this efficient distribution tent, with many lanes and cashiers, and trucks full of ice of the blocked and crushed variety lining it, I am also concentrating on my mission.

Folks, this is the pulsating heart of our story. And yet, it is not even the start of the story. I am in an ice hall, yet it is bustling with life. And in a desert. I am at the northernmost place of past by name, Arctica, yet in the centre of all things in the city of the desert. It is three left turns and a right from our camp. Or not. It's your choice. You can always go in a circle for a bit to see where it takes you.

I need to put in the order, and pay, in cash.

In return, I will accept the precious ice.

Ice is water taken through time in a lowered temperature. It is a patient process. We cannot expedite it. Unlike fire, we cannot expediently burn water into ice. I ask for your patience. Stay with me in the process.

I need to give the money to a kind man with beautiful eyelashes and red fingernails. A man who opened the cashier that he had just closed, just for us. Because we misunderstood what a gesture of crossed fists to the heart meant. It can mean *come hither to my closed heart and I shall open it*. It can also mean *this lane is closed*. We came hither.

I need to give him the money I was given back at camp. I reach in and close my fingers to a tight fist around these carefully counted rolled-up notes.

I bring out that fistful of dollars. I am ready to hand it out⁴.

*But - there is always a But. But is the sister of And. We need to let But in when it needs to⁵.
Yet - yet is the third sister, friend, lover of And, of But. We will get to her in a while.
Patience my darlings, for these bindings are hard and my skill is young.*

Focus. We must focus now.

Focus time thrice more. Focus three more times.

It takes energy.

I am sweating.

The man reaches for my fist, clenched around the notes. My hand opens. A burst of wind. I see, I see a 20 dollar bill floating into the distance from my hand. As it floats away, I see it shimmering.

Shimmering. The word binds the bolding of a thing - giving it focus, yet implies a fickleness. It is suspect to disappearing. It may have not even been there to begin with. It may have been a mirage.

Let's bind.

Memory is a fickle thing.

But memory is what binds the passage of time to living tissue.

So that we can recall time past.

Memory binds space and time - for living matter is space, occupied. Moving through time, in one direction. Memory is the gift of going back in time. Sit on this for a bit if need be.

Binding living tissue to space and time - these are bonds of alchemy, are they not?

Life requires time. It does. Without time, there is no notion for life to nestle in.

Sit on this for a bit if need be.

Focus. We must focus now.

Focus time twice more. Focus two more times.

It takes energy.

I am sweating.

⁴ Arcitca is one of the only two places that accept money here in this miracle mirage of a city. Mirage you say? Of course it is. This city of the Burning Men and Smoldering Women appears out of nowhere in the desert, and a week later disappears. Leaving No Trace. And it is about many things, too many to count, there are many stories, too many to be told, but if you are a stranger to our parts there is one more thing you must know. We do not use money. At all. Not even the smallest unit of currency. For one week, once a year, we do not sell or buy, we do not even barter. We Gift. Yes.

⁵ But - there are exceptions. For ice, as we noted. Ice is an extreme undertaking. It is expensive to make, haul, bring. We cannot burden the community with that cost. It is not a necessity. The people working there - eye lashed, red nailed, and whatever else, volunteer their precious time and love and muscles to lift and carry and provide ice. But the ice is expensive to make and so for ice itself we do pay.

That money - I see it both floating away in a shimmer, and yet, I also don't.
The man counts. Red nails.
Indeed, we are 20 dollars short.
I tell him of the money floating away, for I saw it shimmering and knew it happened and did not at the same time, for a reason which I do not yet know.

I will know soon soon soon.

Perhaps I was never given the right amount in the first place. But I trust those fierce smoldering women who sent me on my mission and provided these rolled-up notes.

Perhaps it is in my backpack. For reasons that remain obscure, sifting through all that is in there, all that I needed on an ice run in the desert, to find 20 dollars seems like an undertaking I cannot undertake⁶.

Instead, we must make do. Make do with less. More with less. Planning and then making do without the plan is part of the spirit of this place. In the desert. For a week. Once a year.

Weaving. Technology Magic Space Time.

I am sweating from the effort. And from the heat. Of course. It is the desert.

Sweet thick irony. From these arid landscapes, creativity sprouts in the most spectacular ways. In the deep play grounds. And elsewhere in the city.

Focus. We must focus now.

Focus time once more. Focus one more time.

It takes energy.

I am sweating.

For it is finally time to tell a story. And for the final binding. Come with me now.



On the way back. I am a companion. A friend. Let the story begin.

The way back is intense physical labour for Ashoka. Carrier of ice.
Ashoka. He Without Sorrow.

The way back is for me to provide nourishment for Ashoka.

I wish to tell him a story.

I wish to tell him a story to make the passing of time more pleasant for him, take his mind off of the load.

I wish to tell him a story because it dawns on me that I have a story. A story that I have carried with me for many years. It burrowed inside. At times, I would recall it with sorrow.

I always wondered why that story wouldn't leave me. It is but one adventure among many of our soon to be introduced heros, Nils, Oggy, Akka.

⁶ One does not just leave camp here. There are items that must always be taken, for the desert is hot and can be wild and unforgiving. For the desert summons wind, and dusty storms descend unannounced. And so on.

But - it is the only one I ever remembered.

And - thought of it I have, many times.

Yet - here, in this city in the desert, the story is suddenly ready. It is about to leave its childhood cocoon and is ready for the telling.

Ashoka agrees.

I need to tell of Nils

I need to tell of money, even the smallest amount.

I need to tell of a story I have heard many years ago.

Ashoka will not believe me. He will think I made it up for our ice journey.

I do not make up stories so easily (not yet not yet not yet)

I collect stories, and I tell them.

A story is shimmering in this mirage of a city, a city I know now I carried in my heart all these years, and did not know that I did.

In one moment of magic, I see with clarity, a story.

For me.

For Ashoka.

For burners and smolderers.

For all.

Let us begin. From the middle. Of the circle. And weave our way back to camp. All the way to the end. It is about time we began.

Time flows differently here, but flow it does.

At every turn we make on the city clock, as we cycle away from the centre, we will stop to give Ashoka water. The stops will be short, but will accentuate the story. Provide structure.

We stop. I give Ashoka water. We continue.

I tell him the story.



When I was young, there was a television show for children, an animated one, that I was somewhat fond of. The story of the show is based on a Swedish children's book that is widely known and loved in Sweden, and thus, we can assume, almost nowhere else.

It is a story of a young boy, Nils, who is cruel to animals, and mischievous towards all.

It is a story of a female goose, Commander Akka, a she-goose of magic. A commander of a fleet of migratory geese, who casts a curse, binds a bind, and makes Nils as small as a thing that comfortably sits upon the wings of geese. Akka takes him on a journey. Nils is upset and resentful, for he sees it as punishment, and cannot see beyond that.

Akka is wise. She knows the power of time. And the learnings along a journey that cannot be otherwise taught. Through that gift of a curse, to be made a tiny thing, vulnerable, Akka knows Nils will learn to become a better human being.

Nils, though cruel to animals, did have a pet he was fond of. A hamster. Oggy.

Let us consider his companion for a minute. Friendships are another powerful binding.

Oggy, the companion is there to listen. He is there to remind us of scale. For even if Nils is that much smaller under the curse, Oggy shrunk in the appropriate ratio (having sat in Nils's pocket when things were getting unreal).

A geometric projection that it is. A matrix multiplication that it is.

Oggy remains small and vulnerable with respect to Nils. Nils will retain the opportunity to practice compassion to something even smaller than himself while going through some other major learnings, courtesy of Akka. Nils will learn of friendship. Real friendship.

Oggy, meanwhile, does bring to mind hamster wheels and time used in a futile manner, reminding us of going around in circles, moving and not moving, while time moves. Let us remember that. Let us leave that be, however, lest we drown in symbols. Let us leave this as an exercise to the reader.

That is the arc of the story, the scaffold, I tell Ashoka.

Every episode of the show tells of an independent story, a different adventure, a new learning for Nils (and Oggy).

I will tell you of the only episode I remember, I tell Ashoka.

It has been nestled within me for years. I have recounted it before. But it was not at the right place nor the right time. It was simply a sorrowful story, profoundly so, for me.

Taken out, retold, folded back into me.

Today, I promise him, it is going to be different. Today I will not cry. For I know how the story fits. I have found its place. It is time.

I will cry, perhaps, Ashoka suggests.

We stop. I give Ashoka water. We continue.



In this particular episode of the show, in this story within a story, (within a story), Nils and Oggy find themselves in a desert. I do not recall where Commander Akka and the rest of her geese had gone for the duration of the episode, for they are absent. I do not remember how Nils and Oggy arrived at that place. It matters not.

And memory is a fickle thing.

They find themselves in the desert, and right next to them, there lies a coin in the sand. A penny. No. Let us be precise. It would be the Swedish equivalent of a penny. The smallest unit of currency there is.

It is humongous. It is overwhelming. It is much larger than Nils. Let us remember that. And let us be more precise. It is, shall we say, thrice as tall as Nils at its full diametric height. A circle that it is.

Nils and Oggy briefly and lacklusterly inspect the coin. It carries no meaning for them, in their miniaturized form.

Far in the distance, on the horizon they see a city.
A city shimmering in the desert.

Ahem.

They go to explore the city.

The city is magical. It has a bustling market filled with merchants and food, stores and booths. The merchants offer them all manner of earthly goods.

How much? Nils asks.

A single penny, each and every one of them replies. A single penny.

Or the Swedish equivalent.

Darn it. Thinks Nils. (Perhaps Oggy shares a similar thought as well. It is hard to say).

We have no coin.

Yet we know where to find one.

But Nils has no specific need for any of what the city folk offer.

As they move through the market maze, Nils comes across one thing he does need. Two, to be precise. For you see, he has been bare of feet for awhile. The shrinking curse didn't bind the wood of his Swedish clogs.

One penny for bespoke tiny little clogs. They will be done in no time, promises the clog maker. Nils and Oggy know what needs to be done. They will go back and roll that magnificent, magnified penny to the city. Pay the maker.

Nils and Oggy and ourselves, let's get rolling. But before we get rolling, we meander here and there in the market, see more sights, one can never see all a magical city has to offer.

The minutes pass. It is nearly dusk.

Nils and Oggy do not know that, but the city folks have begun to panic.

For there is a secret here.

Did we not say we should not hold on to unnecessary secrets?

Did we not say we should be respectful to time?
And we did. But we did. Yet we did.

And of the virgin, But of the mother. Yet of the sage.

So. The folks break down and fess up.
The city has been cursed.
For greed.

*I think it was for greed. I will be honest. I do not remember. For memory is a fickle thing at best and bindings are hard.
But I move bits into places. Greed fits to this particular place.*

The curse, then. They tell him of the curse. Their city rises up from the sands only once every one hundred years.
One hundred years.

It rises up for only one hour.
One hour.

The hour ends, you guessed it, when the last sun rays of the day hit the large face of the clock at the top of the tower in the centre of the city.

The city will be freed from the curse if, if and only if, someone, anyone, of any size, color, age, will purchase something.
Anything.
For as little as a penny.

This is the hour.
And time is running out.

The third turn, the last lag of the journey back to our camp.
Ashoka is panting. Sweating. It is hard labour and it is hot so hot so hot. And heavy. Ice is a heavy load to carry through a desert.
We stop. I give Ashoka water. We continue.



Nils and Oggy, now that they know, make a dash for it. Running in the desert heat, panting. Sweating. They find the coin. They roll it towards the city. It is many times their size. Three. And it is heavy.

Almost at the city gates, they are no longer doing it for a pair of clogs. They wish to do a good deed. To be a good human being (and hamster being). Good on you Nils, learning your lessons.

Yet, they are too slow.

As they arrive at the city gates, the last ray of sun hits the clock tower, the gates shut.
The city shimmers away into nothing.

It will be gone for another one hundred years.



The story always brought me sorrow I could never express well. Something to do with an almost, with an if only, with a so close and yet so far away, I tell Ashoka.

Not anymore, I tell Ashoka. Now I know why it has been with me, why it is no longer as sorrowful. It is now without sorrow, I tell Ashoka.

Who is a companion to whom, then?

Now I know. The city folks found salvation.
Now I know. The city folks learned the lesson.
We know the lesson and we know the salvation.

They. Are. Us.

The Lesson, then.
Sometimes, even the smallest unit of currency is too much.
Sometimes a secret does you no good.
Sometimes time is precious, the most precious commodity. Not sometimes. All the time. See how many times it has embedded itself in these words?
But these are many lessons. Three. Too many.
Let us take it a lesson at a time. No. Let us take just one.

Focus. Here it comes. The final binding.

The lesson for the folks of the city is this. Sometimes even the smallest unit of currency is too much. It is not needed. We can do better than that.
We can gift.

The salvation for the folks of the city is this - *hear me now* - it is no longer one hour every one hundred years. The curse was sweetened, softened.
It is one week, once a year.

A city rises in the desert.
We build. We glow and sweat and shimmer under the hard sun.
We do magic.
In this week, we do not ask for money.
We learned that lesson.
We do better.

We gift.

The city, the city is still not free in full from the curse. The salvation is only partial. The lesson has yet to be learned by all. But we wait, and meanwhile we enjoy the magic.

And what of Nils? Nils knows nothing of all that but he got his lesson. He did the best he could (with Oggy, Oggy, hamster on a wheel cycling to where?) to be a better human being, to help others. To want nothing in return.

The coin now waits just outside the city gates.

We can say - perhaps the next visitor will bring it inside, and lift the curse.

Or, we can say - let us always leave it at the gate.

And what of me? I learned why I carried a story, nurtured for many years. I received a gift. It is no longer a story full of sorrow. I can now tell it into its place. For here I have seen the sun sets and sun rises, and my oh my isn't it magnificent.

And what of Ashoka? He needed to carry the load of ice and a story made it easier and a memory was formed, a fond and fickle one to carry forward in time. Perhaps he also needed a friend. That is not for me to tell. I do not know if he is indeed without sorrow. But friendships are in me to give. Not just stories.

And what of my burners? We know that sometimes we leave the coin outside the city gates. That a new comer can be an old comer. That things shimmer in the making and after. That we need to let go when the time is right. That time is our greatest friend. And we need to be oh so humbled and grateful for her gifts.

So we say - Nils in our story within a story (within a story) in three parts (in three parts), is learning to be a better human being. Oggy, little creature that he always was, is there for the ride, and for companionship. What of the geese? Commander Akka - our spirit of the north, our teacher, is also important. But we don't quite need her. Not yet. Not in this story. For there will be more stories, and we may need all the help we can get.

Later, at camp, looking at the mountains, I will count how many years the story was with me. Not a decade, nor two, nor a quarter of a century. More. Perhaps more than 30 years in the making.

The story that I carried with me, a burden of sorrow, can now rest here in the city where it belongs. For it has found a home. And I have found a home. And I can let go.

This binding is done.

QED.



Yet, there is a lemma.

The bill of 20 dollars, shimmering away, remember that?

It did not shimmer away, of course. It lay there in my backpack. Nestled, cocooned.

Because we needed to pay for the one thing that must be purchased here.

Because we needed to recall the memory of money.

Because we needed to see it shimmer away.

If Ashoka and I had gone on any other adventure, free of that weight of money, ready to be gifted all we need, with no shimmer disappearing into the distance, binding all that was needed, the story would have not been found.

Here. Now.



I am a story-teller.

I weave from the yarns shown to me.

By the virgin -- trusting me to see an ancient city with fresh eyes wide open,

By the mother -- trusting me to make a fable for nourishment on a journey,

By the sage -- trusting I am an old old citizen of this city, with a library of stories to draw upon, so that the birds of stories may fly.

This binding is done.

Metamorphosis.

Magic.

QED.

Thank you for the reading.