THE WOMAN WITH THE WOLF
She pulls the horn of an animal out of her bag and dips it in the spring in the dense undergrowth beneath the shady beech tree. Water that flows in the shade is good. Cold water is guarded by the White Snake. The water of the Black and Brown Snakes, in sunlit places, is not as good. Circles and spirals are good. Sharp edges are bad and only sometimes good. The bone points that the men tie on the ends of long sticks and kill animals with are sharp. And sometimes, defending against attackers and intruders, they kill people too.

Some of the women go hunting with the men. One of her two mamas, the one who had a painted body and a scar on her left shoulder, would go with them. The mama who died when she was born she doesn’t remember. She was cared for by her mamas who already had little Beer, and he was born from the one who weaves bags and baskets, headscarves and clothes – baskets and bags from the plants with the blue flowers, headscarves and clothes from the wool of thick-furred animals, mammoths too. Her people do not hunt mature mammoths. It is too dangerous to hunt the very big animals when they are mature. Sometimes they will kill the exhausted mammoth calves, but mainly they hunt smaller animals. Meat is good. But bones, horns, and tusks are also good, for carrying water and fat and for storing honey. Only the most agile of her people are able to collect honey. She does it herself. She straps a mesh of branches onto her back, covers them in nets, protects her arms and hands with quilted deerskin, and picks pieces of honeycomb out of the hive. She really likes honey. All her people like honey. Even Kela. Kela ... Kela! she calls out, looks around, and a moment later there is a rustling in the undergrowth and a wet
tongue is licking her all around her mouth. Kela, she says as she pets her and, laughing, tries to push her away. Stop, Kela! she cries, as the weight of the wolf’s body sends her falling into the cold stream that flows from under the wide trunk of the tree. Lying in the water, still laughing, she runs her hands over the smooth stream bed. The good, rounded stream bed. Again she is here. In the Place. Her Place. Few ever come here. None of her people do. The White Stream is here, in the Place, and not far away is the Big River. Rivers are not like streams. Rivers bring and take away. Not just things, but strangers too.

Just before the bigmoon completes its circle, she comes here, beneath the Mountain, with her people. In the Mountain is the Cave. Deep in the Cave lives Big Bear. Big Bear gives the hunters the skill and the strength to hunt animals. Big Bear gives the women the skill and the knowledge to make clothes from animal skins and plants. All the Bear clans spring from the Cave and return to it. This is why they do not kill bears. Her clan came out of Big Bear, and so did the other clans they gather with in the Cave beneath the Mountain at the full bigmoon, when the sun is at its greatest strength. Four clans – her Big-Paw clan and the other three: the Striped-Fur, Crooked-Hump, and Pointed-Snout clans. In the Cave, on the shortest night of the bigmoon, they offer up their weapons and tools to Big Bear. The bone points they have hunted with throughout the year. The stone wedges and awls, the scrapers, needles, and other tools the women make from the bones of dead bears and other animals. In the days leading up to the offering the men and women make new weapons and tools and place them around the big fire. The time of offering to Big Bear is the most wonderful time in the circle of the bigmoon. When the bigmoon is full, the young people choose their husbands and wives. Never from their own clan, always from one of the other three clans. Big Bear does not allow them to bear children within the same Bear clan. Big Bear punishes this. He punished her brother, too, the one who was once called Beer.
The Old Woman says that Big Bear knows everything. What he doesn’t see he learns from trees, bushes, grass, streams, rivers, birds, bees, moths. The Old Woman, better than anyone else, understands the rustling of the trees and reads what the birds say in their flight; she interprets the howls of wolves and foxes and understands the murmur of streams, rivers, rain. The Old Woman knows how to cast animal bones, in which she sees when it is good to go hunting and when it is better not to go hunting. When it is time to leave your dwelling place and move somewhere else. What plant will cure what sickness, and which herbs you need to roast in animal fat in order to heal your wounds and soothe the ache in your bones.

Six bigmoons ago the Old Woman stood before Moo and pointed her hand at Moo’s brother, at Beer, who was sharpening a bone point next to her. “Moo, Big Bear knows,” she said, shaking her head. “Deep in the Cave he is roaring in rage!”

Soon afterwards, as Beer was setting a trap for the piebald rabbit, Big Bear did not protect him when the ochre cat attacked from behind. He did not allow the cat to kill Beer, but it ripped his face open with its big-clawed paw. After that, Beer was no longer beautiful. His right eye bulged out and the flesh on his face, which the Old Woman had treated with ointments, healed in pits and ridges. Ever since then he has been called not Beer, but Cat-Face. He no longer goes hunting with the men but instead carves women with big breasts into stone and, along with two women who found their men in Moo’s clan, paints animals on the wall of the Cave before the time of offering to Big Bear; these are the animals the hunters will kill in the next bigmoon. She likes Beer more than anyone else among her people. To her, her brother Cat-Face will always be Beer. It was then, long ago, that their bodies first intertwined, the waters rising in them, the embers catching flame. Beer – Cat-Face – is not beautiful; he is horrible to look at. But such horror you soon get used to. It has been a long time since she even noticed it.
Beer was her first and she was his first. Many bigmoons ago they were like two young animals from the same nest. Look at the animals - that is what the Old Woman taught her all her life. Bear-women, too, chase their children from the lair when they are big enough, so they don’t mix among themselves. She-wolves, too, chase the male pups out, so they will make their own families. So what, she shrugged at the Old Woman’s words, “Beer understands me better than anyone else. I am not like other people. I am not like my sisters or my mothers. I know how to be alone. When I feel that I need to be by myself, I go to my places.”

It wasn’t just Beer who was punished; Big Bear punished her too. And took what he had given her. Six bigmoons ago in the Cave, the Old Woman, sitting by the fire, cast the bones, lifted her head, and pointed a finger at her. Before the offering at the full bigmoon, the Old Woman always casts bones from the backbone of an animal, and these bones choose a girl for Big Bear. Back then, six bigmoons ago, the bones chose her. To the sound of the drums, and the pipes made from the jawbones of bears, and the thick, resonant stones against which men strike thin pointed stones, a woman came and stood in front of her and placed a dried flying mushroom on her tongue. Flying mushrooms are red with white spots. Flying mushrooms are good. They lift you into the sky, so you fly with the eagles and understand the sounds they make. They plunge you into the river, so you understand how the trout keep still and how they make the water spiral around them and carry them into the current and even up the waterfall. They carry you through the treetops, so you understand what trees are saying in the rustling leaves. And the birds too. And the other animals. They lay you down on the riverbank, where the stones whisper in your ear. And the river too. And the wind. With flying mushrooms you understand the language of all that breathes and all that does not breathe. The speech of everything around you. But not always. Sometimes everything around you becomes quiet. Sometimes everything turns into a jumble of noise.
Then, long ago, nine littlemoons later, a bear cub crawled out of her body. A beautiful bear-boy, she thought every time she brought him to her breast. Beer hung tiny animal bones on a thin cord, and their sound made the little boy smile. His light-brown eyes would grow big when he grabbed at the plaything, but best of all he liked a soft ball stuffed with animal fur that had a wrinkly teat sticking out of it, which he started sucking at the same way he sucked at her nipple.

One warm day, when the cold darkness of the bigmoon was already losing strength, she came back to her people’s dwellings carrying roots and early-season herbs. When the child caught sight of her, he started toddling toward her, away from the other women, and she sat down and opened her clothes so she could nurse him. But that very moment a large bird darkened the sky and let out a terrible piercing cry. There is death in the flight of that bird, Moo thought with a shudder and put her hand over her mouth so the suckling child wouldn’t hear her crying. She closed her eyes and imprinted the image of his light-brown gaze firmly inside her. Now he is here. And soon, very probably, he won’t be. Or maybe it wasn’t death in the wings of the bird, she thought and opened her eyes. Is she really able to separate the meaning of the dark bird from the fear of losing something she loves even more than Beer? Maybe it is only fear ... it’s probably just fear, she kept repeating, when she had wrapped herself and the little one in a furry blanket and was lying with him on skins that were covered from above by mammoth bones woven with branches, clay, and pelts. Many children die when they are just a few bigmoons old, even just a few littlemoons old. But her bear child looked healthy. He smiled as she played with his hair. From now on I will watch him even more carefully, Moo thought, so he doesn’t get too close to the fire or, now that he’s walking, wander away from the dwellings. From now on I will check each time to make sure there’s no snake warming itself somewhere nearby. What more can I do?
The Old Woman raised her sparse grey eyebrows and clenched her lips, while with her fingers she read the bones cast on the ground. She darted a glance at the child and Moo, then shut her eyes and shook her head. Throw them again, Moo cried, but the Old Woman just shook her head and put the bones away in a bear skull. Not long after that, the child beside her was burning with fever. His body was like a flying mushroom, covered in white spots that were painful to the touch. The Old Woman smeared her ointments on him and dribbled a red liquid into his mouth. Next to him, Beer was beating softly on the taut skin of a drum and trying to get smoke from the herbs, but they were damp and wouldn’t burn properly. Moo hugged the child tightly and sang to him what she had learned from the Old Woman, and from the White Snake by the cold stream, and from the tender green leaves of the birch trees. When, on the fourth night, the moon disappeared, the child opened his light-brown eyes wide and wolves could be heard not far away. Then, convulsing, he breathed in air one last time and became completely still. Pain. Unbearable pain! If the Old Woman had not shoved dried black mushrooms into her mouth, the pain would have ripped her apart.

“Big Bear gave you the boy, and he also took him away,” the Old Woman said. “His circle was small. Barely three bigmoons and five littlemoons. No, Moo, this was not a punishment.” The Old Women looked up at the flickering eyes, which watched her from a sky almost black. “You were very good with Big Bear’s son, but he has called the boy back to his Cave. But as for you, Moo, you will begin a new circle. Not once, but three times I cast the bones, and each time they showed me the same thing. In this new circle you will have a new child, but it will not be a bear child. Your circle is very different from the circles of other women. You will see, Moo. Many good things await you.”

The littlemoon was still just a thin curve when Moo set off with her bag into the spruce trees to gather their fresh tips. She mixes them with honeycomb in a round wooden bowl, then covers the bowl with
a thin animal skin and sets it in the sun for three little moons, or if the sun is too weak, she puts it near the fire bed. But that was not really why she was going into the trees. Sorrow lay inside her like bad water in a deep pool. And her breasts were still filled to the brim with milk so that her body ached. On the way there she suddenly heard whimpering. She stopped and sniffed the wind, which bore the odour of carrion. She followed the stench and the whimpering, which was so thin she would certainly have missed it if the Old Woman had not taught her how to listen to what was around her. What if the ache in her body had shifted, so that now it sounds like the crying of little animals? Moo thought, as she noticed, concealed behind the trunk of an oak tree, an opening in the undergrowth. It’s somebody’s lair, she realized with a shudder, a wolf’s lair – and looked around her. From the stench and the whimpering she decided that the she-wolf must be dead and that the pups had been in there alone for some time now. She struck a fire from sticks and twigs, then took a dry branch, rubbed it with fat from her deer horn, and shoved it into the embers. With the flaming branch shining light into the lair, she covered her nose with her left hand and crept inside. Deep in the darkness a pair of tiny eyes were gleaming. Deep in the lair, three tiny bodies lay curled against each other. Ants and worms were crawling over the first, and the second was hardly breathing, but the third, when she moved closer to it with the fire, started whimpering more loudly in terror. She placed her stick on the pup whose snout and eyes were sealed with mucus and leaned on it until she heard bones cracking. She laid the dead body alongside the first one and with her arm made a spiral above them both; then she carefully picked up the pup that was still alive and crawled with it out of the lair.

Using the lower part of her garment, she wiped the pup off, its mouth opening wide all the while, then lifted it to her face and carefully inspected its hindquarters. And then, without even thinking about it, she opened the top of her garment and brought the pup to her breast; it started sucking. Relief. As the milk flowed out of her into
the little she-wolf, the sorrow, too, drained away. Her face relaxed. Everything in her became softer. Gently she stroked the little wolf’s head, which made the animal suck even harder at her nipple, as the oak tree above them rustled its leaves: *Kela* ... *Kela*, the treetops were saying. *Kela*... Moo looked up at the trees and then down to the half-closed eyes of the wolf. So it’s *Kela* then, Moo repeated, sliding a finger across the wolf’s head and forepaws, which dug into her skin with their claws.

“Big Bear took away your son and gave you a wolf pup,” said the Old Woman, who had recoiled when she first saw the wolf, but later, by the fire, she started swaying evenly back and forth. “Long ago, very long ago,” the Old Woman began, telling a story, “there lived a woman who, like you, brought home a wolf pup, a green-eyed male. And when his time came, he turned his head more and more toward where the smells and sounds of wolves were coming from, until one night he went into the trees and disappeared. Much later, when three bigmoons had passed, the woman found herself caught by the darkness far from human dwellings. Neither animal nor human voices were anywhere to be heard. And when the treetops in the wind hissed to her sharply: *Run!* – she could feel eyes watching her from behind. She turned and saw the grey eyes of a cat staring at her in the darkness. It is very hard for a person to escape an ochre cat – it attacks you soundlessly from behind. The big cat had hunched down and was about to pounce when three grey bodies came bounding through the trees. A big cat can kill a wolf, but when there are three it just lets out a roar and vanishes into the darkness. But now, in front of her, the woman saw not three wolves, but one big male wolf, who was looking at her with his pale-green eyes. It was her wolf pup standing in front of her, now the leader of a pack, and he watched her motionlessly. Her arm sprang toward him as if her fingers were remembering the thick fur she had endlessly been missing. The wolf thrust his snout slightly in her direction, lifted his head toward the swarm of flickering eyes in the sky, and howled at them, howled for
a very long time; then he looked once more at the woman, turned, and vanished. Later, at times, she often felt those pale-green eyes caressing her through the trees. And sometimes she noticed a large grey shadow following her in the distance. And sometimes she’d be woken from sleep by the voices of wolves and could recognize her own wolf among them.

“One day the woman left and never came back. When she disappeared, the eyes that had gazed out of the forest at the human dwellings also disappeared, and the wolf voices too were no longer heard nearby. Her people said that every so often hunters would see a woman running with a big grey wolf, that they would see the woman and the wolf on the riverbank or come across a trail where human tracks and wolf tracks were mixed together, and that sometimes, in the middle of a wolf’s howling, they could hear a woman singing as well.

“But that was a long time ago, a very, very long time ago.” The Old Woman had reached the end of her story. “If Kela can overcome the fear of fire that smoulders inside her wolf body, she will stay. If not, she will go. But sooner or later, when her time comes, Kela will go. And who knows if she will ever come back. About this the bones are silent. Even so, it will be a good thing, the bones say, and they also say that Big Bear took your son from you so you can care for the wolf pup. Moo, Big Bear has chosen you to take my place. I have been in this world for many, many bigmoons. And more and more often I hear the roaring from the Cave,” the Old Woman continued in a softer voice, “and when Big Bear calls me, I will go. No, Moo, do not be sad.” She leaned forward and stroked Moo’s face. “We all come from the Cave and we all go back to it. Our ancestors are there, from all the Bear clans, even from the clans that live in other places and meet in other Caves at the full bigmoon. All the Bear Caves are connected on the inside. Your bear-boy, Moo, is deep in the Cave. Your mama is there, inside the Cave, the one whose body you climbed out of, and so is the mama who went hunting and had a painted body.” The Old
Woman mumbled as she chewed the herbs that soothed her aches and pains. It occurred to Moo that the Old Woman was getting blinder every day and didn’t so much see what the bones told her as felt it with her aching, swollen fingers.

“You have learned a lot,” she continued, as Moo rubbed clay into the bloated joints on her hands and feet and wrapped them in big leaves. “Watch and listen to the things you are told by what breathes and what does not breathe. Pay attention to the smells that are carried by the winds. When you are in doubt, touch things and you will feel what is good and what is not good. It is you who will cast the bones at the next full bigmoon, and you will read which girl Big Bear has chosen for himself. Big Bear respects you; our Bear clan respects you, and so do the other three clans. Moo, your circle is very different from the circles of other people. You are the woman with the wolf, Moo.”

Again she is at the Place. Her Place. From the Cave in the Mountain come the sounds of drums, with which the men and the women are heating the fire. Here she has space. Here she has time to bathe in the Big River and prepare herself in peace. But, she thinks, there is something else too, something she must consider very carefully. Her eyes move from the Big River to the riverbank. Kela, go find! ... Go find, Kela! she signals with her hand to the wolf, who dashes across the pebbles and into the bushes.

“Moo,” she hears a little later from behind, and even before she turns toward the Big River, sparks catch fire and everything in her is burning. She knows that voice. There is a man behind that voice whose smell and touch she knows very well. He is not from here. It was exactly one bigmoon ago that she first encountered him, here, in her Place. He had come here with his men from far away, from very far away, where the water is so big there is no riverbank on the other side of it. That water, our water, doesn’t taste the same as rivers and streams,
he had told her the first time they jumped into the Big River together. He is taller than her people. His skin is darker, and his wavy hair is very dark. He is strong, and when he lifts his arm, the smell from his armpit carries her away, high, like the flying mushrooms and certain kinds of herbs.

“If you don’t want to come with me now,” he had told her then, one bigmoon ago, as he embraced her, pressed her to his body, “come with me next time, when we’ll be here again.”

Everything is just like the first time – his smell, the taste of his skin, his dark wavy hair gleaming as if he had greased it with bees’ wax. Everything is even faster than that first time. At the start, just their names, and then not a word, just smells, strong thrusts, soft touches.

“You are coming with me, aren’t you, Moo?” He strokes her backside as they lie on the riverbank, their furry clothes spread beneath them.

“What will I do there, so far away, where you and your people live?” Moo asks, glued to his body.

“You will be my woman. You will live with me and have my children,” he answers.

“But you already have a woman, and you have a son with her,” Moo says. “But ever since Big Bear called my son to the Cave it has been the beginning of a new circle for me.”

*Kela!* Moo calls to the wolf, who darts out of the bushes, stops in front of the stranger, and starts growling at him. Moo smiles. She likes it that the stranger is afraid of her wolf, who is still young and not fully mature. “My circle is different from the circles of other women,” Moo repeats, petting the wolf. “I understand the language of all that breathes and all that does not breathe. I know when it is good to go
hunting and when it is better not to go hunting. I can feel when the sky is about to get dark with danger. I can tell when the flight of a bird means something good and when it means something bad.”

But can I always? she wonders, as she raises herself a little and rolls on top of the man, wraps her legs around him and moves with him in one rhythm. When she is touching the stranger’s body, everything inside her says to go with him, to follow him.

“I like you,” he tells her. “I want you constantly by my side.” And his eyes move across her face above him.

The Big River brings many things, Moo thinks. With this man it has brought her something she never felt before with anyone. Not even Beer’s smell had spiralled as smoothly with hers into a single whole like this man’s smell. No skin had ever tasted the way this stranger’s skin tastes. With no one has she ever been lifted so high, been so completely dissolved.

“You yourself say that the river brings and takes away. If you don’t come with me now, you never will. We won’t be here again at the next full bigmoon.”

“But why do you come here at all at the full bigmoon?” she asks.

“Just like your people, we come here for the skins and bones of the big animals,” he answers. “And because this is when there’s the most light. We’re also looking for a cave. A very different kind of cave, a special cave. One that’s much bigger than the Cave of your bear. There is something in the walls of that cave that is colder than stone, colder than ice, and stronger than anything that exists. People say it’s even stronger than the roar of your Big Bear or the sound of the Horned Fish, who calls to us from the Big Water.”
“But most people do not come back from that cave – that’s what we say here. And the ones who do, soon die.” Moo looks at him with worry in her eyes. “That cave is bad; it is not a good cave. And whenever someone speaks of it, the sky grows dark” – she points her arm upwards – “like it’s doing now. This is a bad sign. A very bad sign.”

“Oh, Moo, what a woman you are.” The man kisses her nipple. “You women don’t have the courage we men have.”

“My courage is different!” she says, her eyes flaring at him. “Not because I’m a woman but because my circle is different from the circles of most people, men and women alike. Death is inside that cave – I can feel it. A very bad death. It’s not like when Big Bear calls you to his Cave. I am certain of this. It is also what the wind tells me, and the dark clouds that right now are climbing over the Mountain. I beg you, don’t go looking for it!” With a rough motion she runs her nails down his chest.

“You don’t understand, Moo. We go there, to that cave, to find something, and we don’t even know what it is. And then we will go back to where we came from. But at the next full bigmoon we won’t be here. Come with me, Moo. If you want, my wife and son will live apart from us. It will be just the two of us. You and me, Moo. And then our child will be with us too.”

At that moment the trees above the riverbank start thrashing their branches. The wind slashes at the surface of the Big River and the thick mass of clouds above them is like the dark wall of a cave. The body of the man is telling her to go with him. Everything around her is screaming don’t. Lightning and thunder break into the drumming from the Cave in the distance, and when she lifts her head above the man in her tight embrace, she sees Kela watching her motionlessly. Kela! Moo calls to the wolf, reading in her ochre eyes that she must not obey what the body beneath her is telling her. The distant drums
are getting stronger, the sky above them is getting darker, and the voices inside her are turning into a jumble of noise as if her body is about to burst.

Moo looks again at Kela, who gazes back at her. And when the wolf thrusts her head toward her, she takes a deep breath, a very deep breath, shuts her eyes and with her eyes shut waits for the noise inside her to untangle itself into clear and distinct voices. A few moments later, she takes another deep breath, opens her eyes and, letting her breath out slowly, nods to the wolf. Then she reaches for the man’s penis, which swells and grows firm in her sweaty hand. One more time, Moo thinks, one last time she will dissolve completely with this man and merge with everything around her. And then the man will leave. And she, and everything around her, will be calm again. And here in her Place, she will prepare herself in peace. And then she will stand up and make her way toward the drumming in the Cave. And for her the new circle will begin.
Mojca Kumerdej
THE WOMAN WITH THE WOLF

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Series edited by Janez Janša