

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Out of nowhere, unannounced, the old guy appeared in my room, pulled out my chair and sat himself down at my desk without being invited. He sat looking toward the window. I was lying on the divan, from where I saw only half of his face in profile.

Quickly I rose, rubbed my sleepy eyes and said, "Good evening, uncle. Who are you looking for?"

"Me? I'm not looking for anyone. I'm wherever you are; so I don't need to look around for you, do I?"

He turned his head, triggering my startle reflex. His terrible face, rendered more sinister by the darkness of night, made me shudder. It was a face profusely marked with scars and liver spots. Like an expanse of land full of bomb craters.

He threw me a mischievous glance, then opened his mouth slightly in a wicked smile. "Do you really think I'm very old? I have lived the same number of years that marks your age. So why did you call me uncle? It sounds so formal."

"Oh, really? Are you only as old as I?" I omitted the term "uncle" which one customarily uses to politely address a man of one's parents' generation.

"Yes, but I look too old, don't I? Well, it's because I'm not so lucky as you. Everywhere you go, you're loved, respected, and given preferential treatment. You are cheerful, full of self-confidence, self-pride, self-worship, self-conceit, self-importance, self-satisfaction, so much so that you give yourself airs, spiritual airs. Therefore your face must remain young and bright. As for me? Alas, no one cares to look at me. People only want to gaze at those with an attractive outward appearance, like you. And they shove me into darkness where I live like a scabby stray dog. Even you! Didn't you jump upon seeing my disgusting face?"

"Oh, don't say that... after all, that's only the exterior. What's important is the inner quality."

"You say that just for the sake of saying something to console me, but in actuality you disregard even what you call my inner quality. You only know of Buddha's mind, only respect and search for Buddha-mind. Forget it, I don't need your sympathy and encouragement. I would rather have you talk with me sincerely."

"I wonder what degree of sincerity will be adequate to please you."

"What degree? I didn't know you can measure sincerity." His tone was sarcastic.

"I didn't mean that. How can the two of us hope to communicate and understand each other when you twist every single word I say?"

"Ha ha ha! We don't need to communicate to gain knowledge and understanding. Don't I already know you thoroughly, from the general to the particulars of your life?"

"I don't know who you are. How can you know me?" I asked.

"Don't you know me, really? Of course you do. You've seen me many times. You've once driven me away, in fact. The only thing is, you've seen only the nape of my neck and my back. And for that matter, it was only my shadow that you drove away that time."

"Hmmm... It's very hard to follow what you're saying. Who are you, seriously? And what do you want?"

"Must you ask? I've come to bargain with you just over that matter."

"What matter? Mind you, I'm not used to trading and bargaining at all."

"Hell. You think you're not used to it, not familiar with it, but in point of fact your whole life has been characterized by continuous bargaining between uprightness and depravity, refinement and vulgarity, honor and humiliation, success and failure, good and evil, true and false, reality and dream, Buddha and the devil, heaven and hell, Nirvana and birth and death."

"What do you expect? Monks like me are supposed to know how to differentiate the values of those things."

"To differentiate in order to choose? Isn't that the same as bargaining? Good, then! I've come to negotiate that matter with you."

"Again, what matter are you talking about? Be straightforward, don't say things halfway."

"Oh la la. Take it easy, take it easy. Don't rush. It's something we both love to talk about. But it'll be even more titillating if we keep it in our hearts, not confessing it outright."

"Don't be crazy. Whatever it is, come out with it right now. Don't waste my time like this." I began to feel irritated.

"You already know it," he said with nonchalance, in a tone which exasperated me. "It's what at present you're constantly thinking of, dreaming about, longing for, craving and eagerly awaiting -- and wanting to possess."

"Ah, you're referring to the wish for enlightenment and liberation."

"No, that's certainly not it. And don't pretend, don't deceive yourself like that. Enlightenment and liberation don't mean a thing to you now. All you want to do is indulge yourself in the sweet feeling of love and in sensual pleasure."

"Ho-hum. You talk nonsense! Again, who are you, really? What do you want?"

"I want to talk with you about Nhu Nhu."

"What? You... you know her?"

"Ho, ho, ho. Isn't it too late for you to ask that question now? While you were cautious like a refined gentleman, approaching her by hesitant steps, I myself rushed straight to the very target of my desire."

"You mean... What do you mean? What have you done to her?"

"What have I done? Don't you have any imagination at all? What's wrong with your sensitivity? Oh, you regret, don't you? Ha, ha, ha. It's so obvious that upon hearing my words you were stunned with regret. Listen, let me tell you. You know what possession is, don't you? Yes, I possessed her. I approached her without singing her praises, without having to concentrate on meditation, without having to count my in-and-out breathings, without closing my eyes to recite Buddha's name. Instead, I simply stroked her hair, kissed her star-bright eyes and her rosy lips. Then I took off her white *ao dai*, stripped her of everything she was wearing, tightly embraced her, and soon we

blended together into one. Hell, don't snicker at me like that. Don't you believe me? You think I'm so ugly that Nhu Nhu couldn't have accepted me, that she could have easily refused physical union with me, don't you? You are wrong. In fact, Nhu Nhu is not your love exclusively. She was also my lover in many previous incarnations. Ha, ha, ha. In the end, you and I are in the same boat, having the same object of desire. It's very interesting, isn't it? The only difference is, I have possessed her, while you're too busy playing the role of a gentleman. While you secretly want her, in outward appearance you pretend to be serious, exemplary, busy in your struggle with a few unattainable ideals and ambitions."

"So what do you want now?"

"See that? There. It's you. You are the one who wishes to strike a bargain with me."

"I don't need to bargain. I only want to ask you why you came here and told me these things. The matter of union between you two has virtually nothing to do with me, so why did you tell me about it?"

"Of course it has a great deal to do with you. Isn't it correct that you also love Nhu Nhu and want to become one with her? Give me an honest answer. There are only you and me in this room; you don't need to worry about other people's gossip and judgment. And all you need to do is say yes or no. Do you want to join Nhu Nhu physically and become one with her, yes or no?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Then, this is my request. Some time later today, Nhu Nhu will come and spend the night with you, and she'll be here until tomorrow evening. Is that correct? Answer truthfully, then I'll go on. I know everything, so there's no point concealing this. Ah, yes, you've nodded your admission. She'll come alone and willingly stay the night here. That shows she's ready for physical union with you. Don't try to defend her. In fact, she said her only wish was to be with you and talk with you; but if you do something further than that, you know she will agree just the same."

"Enough of that! Get directly to the point; don't beat about the bush."

"Fine. Listen, she has voluntarily offered herself and you also want to reach perfect identification with her. So let me remind you of this: at the very moment she arrives, you must, of your own accord, put away everything. I mean you must strip yourself of everything, not only the monk's outfit of burlap-like cotton that you always wear with pride, but also the layers of what you call spiritual values you cover yourself in. Get rid of them, throw them all away: self-esteem and shame; noble inclinations and the virtue of purity; the ideal of leaving the world and the vow to save it; the idea of engagement with life and the hope of self-liberation. Unless you discard these things, you can't form a whole together with her."

"If it's merely a question of how to reach oneness, how to achieve absolute union, I'll have no problem. I know what is to be done."

"You think you know it all? No, you know nothing about it. I'm sure you've learned the way to absolute union only in theory. And the desire for such union, since it has been nurtured, since it has grown enormously inside you, at times you imagine that you can integrate yourself into whatever and whoever you want. But, in reality, you haven't been able to become one with anything. This is because you carry so many things in your mind and heart. You hold too many ideals, images, symbols, too many choice

words and notions. You drag them along with you wherever you go. They crawl around inside you in disorder. Being burdened like that, how can you hope for physical union with Nhu Nhu?"

"But, first of all, why do you encourage me to do that? What's in it for you? And moreover, why do I need to have physical union with Nhu Nhu, whom you've possessed, with whom you've had such a union?"

"Ah ha! You're truly a fool. Look closely at yourself. I'm not wrong in saying that your head is full of differentiating concepts. You still worship purity or chastity, and deplore impurity. Really, you want to be the first to possess her, and you resent being one who comes second. In your mind the notion of time and space is rigidly formulated. Do you think that when someone has entered into physical union with Nhu Nhu, she would lose her purity? Do you think that when someone else has already engaged in such a union with her, that would make you a late comer? When talking about absolute union, how can you think of a distinction between purity and impurity, first and last, virginity and its loss?"

He paused for a few seconds, then continued. "You're an ignoramus. All you do is drown yourself in hollow words. Now, regarding your question as to what I will get from your union with Nhu Nhu, which makes me encourage you to perform that act, this is my answer: I have kept an eye on you for years, and realized that you've never been truly happy. You've spent your life since childhood, or rather through countless previous incarnations, chasing after illusions and obtaining nothing but illusions. In fact, sometimes you know they are illusions, but you cannot find anything true to substitute for them. In front of your eyes is a delusory and impermanent universe. In view of that, you eagerly search for, but at the same time reject, anything within reach you can get. How can you be happy that way? And you think your happiness has nothing to do with me? If that's what you think, it shows that you haven't the slightest understanding of cause and effect, of reciprocal creation and destruction, of inter-being. Go ahead and blend yourself wholly with Nhu Nhu, be perfectly happy with her. Only then will I and the whole universe rejoice in a state of bliss."

"All right. You talk too much. Now go away and leave me in peace."

"How can I go away when you haven't promised me anything?"

"But what do you want me to promise?"

"Listen, it was I who searched out and brought Nhu Nhu to you. You have only this one chance to grasp what you've wished for. You must promise me that you will discard all the words and concepts unrelated to her so that you can form a whole with her. That will make me feel it worthwhile, not a waste of time, to have worked hard in arranging the proper situation for you. You must be aware that she is a TRUE ENTITY. But that true entity is such ONLY WHEN YOU HAVE COMPLETELY BECOME ONE WITH IT. Without such perfect union, this whole universe remains an illusion. You should remember that. Nhu Nhu's coming to you tonight is a true reality. Well, you've promised, right? Okay, I'm leaving. Nhu Nhu is about to appear. You'd better turn off the light."

Without waiting for me to act, the old guy reached over and switched off the light, then in no time at all he was gone, vanished into the darkness. I sighed with relief. It was so exhausting talking with him; he made my nerves smart with tension, and the tautness caused my heart to thump in an abnormal rhythm.

I was about to get up and go wash my face when Nhu Nhu opened the door and entered. Even in the dark, I immediately recognized her in the white ao dai she had worn on Buddha's birthday.

"Oh, Nhu Nhu, is it truly you?" I asked.

"Of course it's me. Weren't you waiting for me at all?"

"I very much want to see you. But I suspect that this is only a dream."

"I'm real. Let me close the door; then we can talk. Agreed?"

"Did you meet anyone on your way here?"

"No, no one."

"Come here and give me your hand," I said.

"You still don't believe that I've actually come, do you?"

"I believe it now. You've arrived. And you're Nhu Nhu."

Nhu Nhu sat down beside me on the divan. Gingerly I put my arm over her shoulder and drew her close to me. Her flesh felt soft and smooth under the thin white silk. With abandonment she laid her head on my shoulder. I placed a gentle kiss on her hair which subtly suggested the fragrance of frangipani flowers.

Holding my hand, Nhu Nhu said, "Do you remember that you still owe me three words as yet to be spoken?"

"Yes, I do."

"I want to hear you say them. This is the best and most suitable time for you to pay me that debt."

I smiled. "It's no longer necessary to say those three words, my dearest. Actually, there's no word or concept that is comparable to your presence."

"I have the feeling I've heard such a sentence uttered by someone before. Or is it you who said it to me?"

I did not answer. It must have been that old guy, I thought. Perhaps he had spoken those three words to her. A petty feeling of jealousy arose in me and darkened my heart. Immediately I lost the pleasure of holding her. Withdrawing my arm, I stood up, then walked to the window and looked out at the evening sky. Nhu Nhu came over and hugged me from behind, circling her arms around me while pressing her face and body against me.

"My dear," she said, "if you and I are unreal, then the evening sky out there is also not real. Neither are the desk in this room and the whole universe. Don't you think I'm right? Reality always exists. It turns into a dream only when we reject it. The same goes for love. It's a reality."

I turned around and embraced her. We kissed in the dark of night. Then, leaning on each other, we moved toward the divan. Willingly, Nhu Nhu lay down, waiting. In darkness I stumbled, trying to find the path to a perfect union. I removed and discarded everything that was not related to Nhu Nhu. A split second after bending down to meet her, I melted into her being. We became an integrated crystal prism, as clear as if formed by marvelous dew drops from this earthly world. But very soon afterward, I reverted to separateness, to the binary world of human beings in all times, and realized with a start that I had violated Nhu Nhu.

"Nhu Nhu, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Khang, I love you. What happened between us was of my own free will. In truth, I haven't lost anything. I'll be the same forever. Don't you know that you and I are one?"

"Oh, you seem to have learned to repeat after that guy? He only deceived us. You and I are one in essence only. But in reality, your body and mine, as well as your mind and mine, are two separate entities. You can't possibly be me, and conversely I can't possibly be you. We are separate and transient dew drops or specks of dust flying about in the limited sky. And about myself? Oh, I'm so ashamed. I did exactly what a wicked ugly old man incited me to do in order to possess you, by violating you, by destroying you. Nhu Nhu, please forgive me. I took away from you what should have been protected with utmost respect."

That was as much as I could say before the guy reappeared. Without ceremony he planted himself by the divan, facing us. I bolted upright and hurriedly put on my clothes. In the meantime, Nhu Nhu stayed where she was, quite nonchalant, not the least ashamed of exposing herself in the presence of an unknown third person.

"What did you come in here for?" I screamed, covering Nhu Nhu with her clothes.

The old guy advanced, and with both arms dragged me and forced me face down on top of her. As he pressed my back against her body, he shouted loudly, "Blend! Blend! You idiotic fool! You must become one with Nhu Nhu. Throw away all; don't think anything. Step in further, and move toward the wondrous end, the monistic universe which you've been searching for. It's right there in front of your face. Quickly blend into one!"

I struggled to free myself, then turned around and pushed Nhu Nhu away toward the wall, urging her to put her clothes back on.

Raising a fist in front of his face, I threatened him. "Don't go to the extreme! I won't tolerate it any more."

Exhibiting no fear, the guy brought his terribly ugly face close to mine. He taunted me. "You'll never be a happy person because you always turn your back on reality, always reject it. And whatever you do, you invariably consider it carefully, weighing the pros and cons, or show regret and repentance after the fact. Nothing is seen as perfect, not in your whole life. How can you be so thick-headed? Even at this final stage, how can you still insist on drawing clear-cut barriers between Nhu Nhu and yourself? Given that, how could you talk about the path of engagement, of blending with the world, of saving all beings in a perfect way? You've learned only to talk and to think in an orthodox way, in accordance with Buddhist canons and texts, and never acquired knowledge and experience in the way of action. In the meantime, absolute union is itself the way of action. Didn't you know that? Aren't you able to practice it? If so, then you've lost all. If you don't have the capacity for complete union with her, let me do it myself."

So saying, he forcefully pushed me aside, climbed upon the divan, and stretched out on top of Nhu Nhu.

I grasped him by the neck and tried to pull him up. "Get out of here! You've no right to violate her."

Emitting a peal of laughter, the man spit out word by word from behind clenched teeth: "I mean to show you that both you and I are capable of perfect identification with Nhu Nhu. Your problem is, you attach too much weight to distinguishing between you

and me. Alas, I don't know when you'll be willing to do what I wish. Let me also tell you something important: in actuality, it's not only that both you and I unite with Nhu Nhu into one entity; even between you and myself, there's absolutely no separation, no dividing line."

As he finished the last words, the fellow detached himself from Nhu Nhu, then turned to me. Bringing his scarred face close to mine, he wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed me down onto the divan. He was about to kiss me, apparently wanting to become one with me, to blend himself into my body and soul.

I was so terrified I gave out a shout and awoke, my whole body drenched in sweat. Looking out the window, I saw that it was still daytime. Evening had not yet descended. A branch with two violet flowers swayed beyond the net screen covering the open window. Rays of late-afternoon sun played hide-and-seek among branches covered with leaves. I jumped up, left the room, and went for a shower. How fortunate it was just a dream, I said to myself.

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The shower made me feel so refreshed and in full possession of my faculties that I no longer shivered at the thought of the disgusting dream. Walking past the living room of the monastery, I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was five o'clock. I remembered my seven o'clock appointment with Nhu Nhu in my room. This rendezvous would be a reality, not a dream, I told myself. And it was coming soon. Feeling elated, I hurried back to my room where I cursorily swept the floor and put things in perfect order. Then I went up to the attic to check and see if anything else needed to be done in preparation for our date. I had the vision of sitting side by side with Nhu Nhu in this room where we would talk until we were exhausted; thereupon she would stay and sleep here while I would retreat to the divan down below, or the other way around. Or we both might lie down to sleep in the attic. Since it was not furnished, it offered more than enough room for each of us to take up a corner separate from the other. Hence, there would be no problem to be concerned about. We would stretch ourselves comfortably on the floor, talking throughout the night and the next day. When hungry, I would go search for food. We might eat from the same bowl, drink from the same glass. What could be more pleasurable than that?

After having arranged everything for the romantic date in the attic room to my satisfaction, I left the drum tower and sat down to wait by the flagpole in the front courtyard of the main building. For a long time now, in fact since I heard master Tue Van recite a verse in *Dang Vuong Cac Tu* by Vuong Bot, I had not sat at this spot and watched the two flocks of white storks that fly across the immense rice field every late afternoon. Back then, I had been afraid of isolation, and wanted to escape from it. The line of verse vividly evoking the image of a lonely stork flying by itself had magnified my inner solitude, which consequently urged me to look for and indulge in what I should not even have contemplated. At present, however, knowing that I would have Nhu Nhu's company tonight, the feeling of loneliness was gone. Thus, bravely, I sat waiting for the flocks of storks and especially for the playful single stork that seemed always to lag behind. So much excitement burst forth and reinvigorated my heart, which had been rendered austere by monastic life. I will have Nhu Nhu by my side tonight, I reassured myself. In over an hour, when darkness descended, she would be here. That empty drum tower, the old tower that had been exposed to the changing weather of all times and had

listened to thousands of prayer sessions, would serve as the place where we, a young couple, would share our emotions and inner thoughts. It would be like a cozy pigeon loft for an amorous couple.

Upon this thought, an unfamiliar arousal stirred in me. Again, I shivered at recollection of the afternoon dream. Who in the world was that ugly wicked old man? Who was he to disturb me so in my sleep? His face was truly scary; his language brutally coarse. But... there seemed to be something about his physique that made him somewhat resemble me. Yes, that was it. His eyes, his nose, his mouth, all suggested the image of myself. The only difference was his facial skin, all wrinkled-up, all blotched with scars, and made more deplorable by his shifty glancing left and right, by his sniffing and constant pursing and licking of his lips. Who could he be? I must have encountered him at least once in my life for his image to appear so clearly in my dream, but I could not recall when or where. Well, I don't have to think about him any further, as Nhu Nhu is coming soon, I told myself. The thought of her triggered an embarrassing memory of that part of the dream in which she and I engaged in an objectionable act. No, that can't be allowed to happen. It won't work.

I jumped up and headed back in toward the main temple. Pacing back and forth in front of its veranda, I was consumed with an inner struggle. No, I can't allow the physical act to occur. It's not only because of monastic rules and regulations, but also because of another reason: to prevent that disturbing dream from ever becoming a reality. I would let Nhu Nhu come as arranged, I decided. Though full of apprehension, I still wanted her to come tonight. Only, I would try to keep this date a reality floating on a beautiful dream where nothing excessive and vulgar was involved.

I turned around and walked out to the flagpole.

On second thought, it may be better if she doesn't come, I retracted. *Dear Nhu Nhu, please don't show. Perhaps you'll be hindered by something and won't be able to make it to our date. Let it be so, as we'd be better off.* Sunset approached, and the familiar flocks of white storks one after the other flew over the large green field. And lo, moments later, the stubborn and arrogant one, all by himself, soared behind, seemingly pulling along with him the whole grey sky of solitude.

*Dear Nhu Nhu, please come, yes, please come. I can't bear this terrible loneliness. Please come, Nhu Nhu. You promised and I have been waiting for you for three days. Tonight will be the most important night which determines the outcome of our love. I'll give you answers you've hoped for. I'll also tell you the three words that I owe you. Everything will be decided and settled this very night. So do come to me. Perhaps I'll have you and you me. Or maybe we'll bid farewell to each other so that I can resume my soaring in the immense and solitary horizon of my life. Please come, Nhu Nhu, because both you and I are ready to accept whatever price for the date.*

She is coming in another hour, I repeated to myself and began to tremble. *Nhu Nhu, is it true that you are coming tonight? Yes, it is, I'm sure, for I remember that you have arranged everything, and you are determined to be here soon. Then what shall we say, what shall we do for the whole night and the following day? We will embrace and kiss each other like any pair of lovers in this world, completely infatuated as we are, very much in the same manner that we acted in the dream I had this afternoon. Subsequently, leaning on each other, we will proceed to the divan. And thus we will perform what the old scoundrel said, reaching for absolute union through sensuous engagement of the*

*flesh. No, that's not permissible. Nhu Nhu, I have never known myself better than I do at this moment. I know that I won't have any strength and will power to resist my intense lust. I won't be able to restrain myself, especially under such a favorable circumstance as this. No power can hinder me, even if there were a thousand pictures of the guardian deity pasted over the four walls of the attic room.*

Suddenly, in a flashing instant of awakening, I at once realized, or rather I knew, that the obnoxious scar-faced old man was in fact no stranger: he was myself, my lust, my base ego. Frightened, I hurriedly grasped my bag and stuffed in it some clothes including a monk's robe, a pen and a notebook filled with poems. I closed and locked the door. I ran.

Like those refugees who fled the country under the thumb of a power which they could not muster any courage and strength to resist, I ran away from a delirious love affair. I did not want to experience failure. Neither did I care for any glorious conquering in that love. I only wanted to survive, to be intact.

I ran heedlessly on Sunset Path that zigzags along a slope of Trai Thuy hill. Evening had arrived. I stumbled and almost fell a few times on the path strewn with rugged stones. When nearly half a mile as the crow flies away from my attic room, I stopped in the middle of the hill, my heart throbbing wildly from the exertion.

From this spot, I could see Linh Phong pagoda in a distance on my left, hidden under secular tamarind trees. About the same distance on my right was the impressive silhouette of Hai Duc monastery with its two towers rising above the crowns of frangipani trees. In one of those two white-washed buildings was my little attic room, barely discernable in the dark of night. Involuntarily I burst out laughing, all to myself. *Vo tru, 'non-dwelling'. Go to the south. It's a pity that a small thing restrains a great thing.* Hadn't my own master discreetly tried to show me the way to liberation through those enigmatic expressions of his? In practical real life as well as in the metaphorical path of self-liberation, one will get entangled and become attached to something if he stops and stays still in one place. I don't need to seek "permanent residence", nor "temporary residence". I must search for *vo tru, 'non-dwelling'*.

*Farewell my beloved Hai Duc monastery and my own master, the august and virtuous father who has guided me every step in my religious training and opened the path to 'non-dwelling' for me tonight.*

*Goodbye Linh Phong pagoda and the strict Bodhisattva Trung Hung who has protected me and helped nourish the attribute of tolerance in me through many trials and conflicts.*

*And my dearest Nhu Nhu, let me bid farewell to you and your love. If you fully understand that my path to religious engagement can't begin with a night of physical indulgence, perhaps you'll be able to forgive me. As for myself, whenever I think of the extreme misery borne by our people, I'll be reminded that many times I have cruelly caused you pain. And once again, tonight I will let you down. You'll stand in the dark waiting on Trai Thuy hill, but I can't personally say goodbye to you or offer any explanation.*

I was about to walk on when suddenly I recalled that since Nhu Nhu had playfully made me postpone it, until this moment I had not had a chance to say the three words that I owed her. Now, having decided to leave Nha Trang city for good, I would in no way be able to pay her that debt. At a loss for what to do, I stood still for awhile. Finally,

looking toward the old drum tower and my little room where she might be at this moment, I cupped my hands into a megaphone and called out loudly.

"Hello Nhu Nhu!" Three simple words.

It was a desperate call for Nhu Nhu. It was simultaneously an anguished call of longing for Buddhahood, because her name Nhu Nhu is the same as the Buddhist term referring to Such-ness -- true self-nature uncontaminated by worldly concerns.

After the call, I began my journey. And as I made the first steps, I had the feeling that the call reverberated powerfully in my heart, pressing and rocking the left side of my chest. Clutching at my thorax, I bowed my head and walked into the darkness of gathering night. Behind me, echo of my call bounced off the rocky side of the mount, spread through wild trees and grass in wave after wave, pierced the dense opacity, then broke and disintegrated into tiny specks of dust, which scattered to infinity.

THE END