

**An Excerpt from  
"Re-enchanting the Forest: Meaningful Ritual in a Secular World"  
by William Ayot**

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With a foreword by Mark Rylance

**Chapter One**

**A Journey of a Thousand Miles**

*"Forget explanations. Just do ritual. All will become clear".*

**Malidoma Patrice Somé**

I was in my late thirties when I finally stumbled into the world of ritual. Close to burnout, I had been working in the gaming industry for twenty years, since losing my childhood home in Hertfordshire and drifting down to London. Mildly dyslexic, and still a teenager, I had applied for a job as a courier and ended up as a croupier in one of London's newly legalised casinos.

"Why d'you wanna work for us?" asked the manager.

"Well, I've always wanted to travel," I said, innocently enough.

"Okay, smart-ass. Show me your hands."

I put out my hands, which showed him that I didn't bite my nails - you can't deal blackjack if you bite your nails - and, too embarrassed to explain my mistake, I stuck around, learned to deal cards. Then I got paid - an astonishing amount of money for an eighteen year old - and found myself working in Soho, which in those days was still London's red light district; a fascinating world of low-lives, and arab princes, gamblers and gangsters, pimps and hookers. Like other young drifters, I settled into this world and promised myself that I would move on soon enough. I didn't. It was safe and anonymous and it allowed me to quietly opt out of my life.

Thus, like a half-grown salmon, swimming out into the Atlantic, I entered the long years of my gaming career, moving from Soho on to Chelsea, and then up to Mayfair and Knightsbridge. After more than twenty years of aimlessness and drift, I knew that my life was bleeding away. I'd been writing plays in my free time with the occasional little success, and one transfer to London, but even that had brought me little joy. By my late thirties I was lost and depressed, emotionally numb and spiritually empty.

One quiet summer's evening, while I was working a double shift in the casino, I fell into conversation with a sprightly old lady who used to haunt the Blackjack pit where we'd both washed up. I had a soft spot for her and felt that her Jewish humour and direct way of speaking were familiar to me. This particular evening she was talking about where her family came from. I suddenly realized who she reminded me of - it was Ivy Isaacs.

Ivy Isaacs was a local hairdresser when I was a lad, a hard-headed, successful Jewish businesswoman in the nearest town who had taken me under her wing, having seen something worth nurturing in the lonely, dysfunctional teenager that I had become. For my part, I was fascinated by Ivy – everyone seemed to admire her strength and acumen but they were wary of her too. Her directness scared people. I was mesmerised by her wicked sense of humour and her deliciously shocking use of language. I used to hang around at the end of the day, sweeping up in her salon, waiting for her next gloriously foulmouthed outburst while she ‘titivated’ herself by adjusting her teeteringly baroque hair-dos, and what she called her war paint – a make-up so weirdly and wildly applied that it made me think of the clowns at Bertram Mills Circus, or Dusty Springfield in a tribal mask.

I hadn’t thought of Ivy for years and I was ashamed. How could I have forgotten this extraordinary woman – her laughter, her fierceness, her dogged sense of survival, her kindness and her generosity? How could I possibly have blocked her out of my life?

Walking home from the casino, through St James’s Park and over Westminster Bridge, I worried at her memory, pulling at it, fleshing out odd incidents as they arose. By the time I had curved my way round the deserted Southbank and on to the Borough, I had put together a mosaic of forgotten fragments; snippets of language and memories. It was as if a door had creaked and swung opened.

As I approached the square where I lived, other faces began swimming up out of my past: faces from my teens and schooldays, images from my time at boarding school, a hundred occurrences and dozens of long-forgotten faces. And then, as from the bottom of a well, I became aware of a circle of elderly faces from my childhood village: old men and women, mainly maiden ladies as they were called back then – a group at first, then individual faces – each one smiling sadly, silently asking to be remembered. At home, I sat for what felt like hours as they visited me, these sweet gentle old people – and I slowly began to realize why I had shut them out of my life. I couldn’t bear the pain.

Most of the time, I was the only child in the village I lived in. As I grew up, I was surrounded by a tragedy common to hundreds of villages across Europe. Nearly all the men of my village had been killed during the First World War. Wiped out, almost to a man, on the Western Front. They had left behind a shattered circle of women: widows and fiancés, mothers, sweethearts and sisters, most of whom were in their sixties by the time that I turned up – a solitary, golden-haired boy who loved to listen to their stories. I absorbed their infinite sadness as they filled me with tea and biscuits, and treated me like Holy Boy, a miraculous little demi-god, upon whom they could shower all the love and affection they had been unable to find a home for. I seemed to be the perfect audience.

It started to rain outside, and I remembered a miserable wet winter afternoon with Ivy Isaacs. I had popped in to see her but, by her own estimation, she was poor company. The plate-glass window of her salon was steamed up and

dripping, shutting out the town and giving the place a closed-in, steamy, oppressive feeling. Ivy perched on her plastic-covered barstool behind the reception desk, her hair still plain and as yet unadorned. Sensing her mood, I leant on the reception desk and watched her intently as she stared at the condensation, which ran down her weeping window. I waited.

“They’re all gone,” she said at last, very quietly. “Mama, Papa, Zayde and Bubbe... aunts , uncles, cousins... all gone. Only my brother survived. He left me here and went on to Israel, but he was killed in ’48. He’s buried in Jerusalem. He’s the only one of us that has a grave. One day, I’ll go to Jerusalem, and when I do, I’ll place a stone for him. I’ll place a stone for every one of them. Every single one.”

Ivy turned and looked at me as I shifted uncomfortably, staring down at the huge diamond rings on her claw-like fingers. She lifted my head and placed a tender hand on my cheek. “We have to remember – or we are nothing.”

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I remembered those stones as I walked up through the woods towards the Hertfordshire village where I spent my childhood. At thirty eight, I had no real understanding of what I was doing, but looking back, I can see that I was instinctively reaching for ritual as a way of dealing with something – something that was haunting me – long after it should have been laid to rest. There was something I had to do that day.

By the spring, where the brook gushes out, I clambered down into a steep-sided gully, where I straddled the bed of the once familiar stream. I started to look for treasure, as I used to as a boy. A careful climb down the gully soon brought me to a fallen tree trunk and beneath it a sandy bank. I ran my hands through the wet silt, relishing the chill of the water, and dredged up what I had been looking for – a handful of polished pebbles, glistening wet, their colours and shadows clear and bright. I rinsed them off and made my selection: little planets of orange-veined marble, darker blues that may once have been flints, and gobs of chert with their iron-stained and roughened peel. I sat back on the bank and listened to the silence.

I climbed out of the gully, cupping the pebbles, like a boy holding birds’ eggs against my belly, I reached the path again, turned left and headed uphill. As I walked along, I took the pebbles one by one; rolling them between my fingers, polishing them against my trouser leg as their rich colours faded and they dried to a common dullness. I walked on, head down and pensive, close to an emotion that I was not yet able to name. For weeks I had been nursing an indeterminate feeling, a pain somewhere between guilt and shame (I hadn’t yet learned how to distinguish the two) and something much deeper than my habitual gloom – a nameless, shapeless, bottomless ache.

The Welsh have a word, which has no equivalent in English. *Hiraeth* speaks of a yearning, a deep nostalgia for place. Not so much a homesickness, as something deeper, layered with grief, rooted in the loss of those we have loved; composted and enriched with deposits of sadness; a deep and abiding melancholy, fed by a particular soil and its ancient, ever-present dead.

This was the feeling that had brought me back, though I'd yet to find a name for it, still less acknowledge it as truly mine. Like a blind and tired salmon, I was sliding up the pebbled stream of my belonging, seeking out the one shaded pool that birthed me; the village that grew me, the place that I'd carried, hidden in my heart, ever since I was exiled as a lad.

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