

The Caves

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The father blithers now. No one understands him. It's not just that he has lost his last tooth. More is missing than that.

I translate for the tribe. Go this way, I say, pointing confidently through the trees. Stay put, I tell them other times. Fruit that way, I say. Meat this way, I add. Use your noses, I sometimes say.

I translate for us. I lie his noises into something meaningful. For the rest of us.

Once upon a time, our ghosts traveled with us. The dead were near and they spoke. They guided us. But not for a long time now. Not for months. Not since my oldest fell down, blood gushing from his face and head. When he died, we were afraid to eat him. He was the first. To get sick.

We were strong once. We ate meat, real meat. Sometimes we cooked it on the fire we made ourselves. Sometimes we ate it fresh, just as it had fallen in the field. Taken down by us. We could choose because we had strong teeth. Once upon a time, we killed the others we found. Except for their women. Their young women who could make children for us.

The father had no gray in his hair. Then. When his beard first showed, it burst forth from his face. I loved the father then.

I love the father now. I sit next to him in the evenings. I chew his food for him. Hold it out to him, in my palm. Dripping. He licks it greedily. He can still groom, he can still pick insects from us and pop them into his mouth. I look at his beard, scattered white and dying on his face, how it is coming off in patches. I remember his face hairless, how we loved each other. How strong we were. How strong we were.

I know we are going to die. Soon. We sit in the sunlight, its yellow mixing in with flickering shadow. All of us. We try to dry up our skin. Make it healthy again. We rub ourselves with rocks, with leaves, but it doesn't help. Nothing helps. We're sick, we're all sick, except for my last daughter. And one or two of the young men. The weak young men. A nephew. A cousin. Their family is sick and dying. We are sick and dying. All of us.

The caves, my daughter whispers to me, we'll find the caves. It's a question, not a statement. Yes, I say.

But the caves are stories I tell. No one remembers them except me.

We had many brave children once, strong sons, but they sickened and died. I keen for them. I keen for all of them. I keen in my head, where no one sees it. The brothers and sisters of the

father, their many brave children. Angry and powerful. Like our ghosts. Like our ancestors. Back when.

Our ghosts hate us now. Our ancestors are gone. I can no longer hear anyone. I no longer have dreams. I lead alone, with no one to help me. I am leading us back to where we can die. Like the pink fish my mother would tell me about. That travel up rivers to die.

I remember the father's sisters. Pregnant. And me. Pregnant. How safe we were. Moving. We were always moving. And surrounded. We were always surrounded by our powerful family. How often we made fires. Killed the cats that stalked us. Ate the game we hunted ourselves. I cannot allow new children now. We cannot protect them anymore.

I let no one near my daughter. I bark, snarl, imitate boars and hyenas. I curse and yowl, act beside myself. I shriek all of them away. I am the only elder who is still intact, who is not dead, whose blood is not running rotten into the ground. I've not been eaten. I'm the only elder they can still understand. They have no one but me.

She likes him. My daughter. And he is attractive. I can see that. Even though he is thin, even though he has not had enough to eat. And he's not sick. But he has no family to surround him. To surround her. He isn't sick, but the rest of us are. Our tribe is dying. We are dying. They cannot be a couple.

And he is nice. He doesn't rage. He doesn't kill for fun. Like my oldest did. How can he protect her? How can he protect anyone? If only I have time. If only I can keep them apart long enough.

The ground of the forest is thick here. We stop often. Stoop and feel around for moving things. To eat. I remember our caves. We were safe there. Why did we leave? I don't remember. Perhaps I've never known why we left.

Sometimes I sniff others in the wind. Very faintly. And then the breeze changes, and it's gone. Their smell. Smell tells me where to go. I listen. Sound tells me where to go. The father blithers. This way, I say. The father blithers. That way, I say.

They don't know that I can hardly see. That the father is saying nothing.

If only we could keep our memories in something other than the words we say to each other. This is what I think. Often. What we say changes what we know. Each time we talk. I have seen it so many times, and for so long.

I am far too old to be alive. But there is no one to replace me.

Perhaps this is what it is to be old. To see how they repeat everything wrong. To see how it all changes. If only we could make memories into pictures. And keep them in caves. The way we once did. Pictures we kept. That didn't change.

We move slowly out of forest and into plains. Before we step out of the forest's shadow, everyone turns to me. Should we go this way? This is what they are asking me with their sad faces. The father blithers. I sniff, and very faintly I smell others. That is the way to go. The father blithers again. Then I nod, as if he makes sense, as if he has informed me of something, and I point. And we go on. Some of us stagger. Some of us trudge. Ulcers on our legs and feet. That don't heal. That never heal. We move slowly because each one of us stops. Frequently. Each one of us picks up insects. We pop them into our mouths like berries. We move slowly because it hurts most of us to move at all.

Insects.

I close my wrinkled eyes, my old dying eyes, and sob inside where no one can see. This is eldering, I tell myself. My interior landscape is always wet. It is always raining. There is no sunlight in my mind. Where I live.

Each evening I feel my daughter's teeth, reach into her mouth while she protests, pushes back at me angrily. I nudge each tooth with a finger to see if it's starting to move. She hates this, she resists me, she punches at me with her small delicate hands. I like that. She is stronger than she looks. And her teeth. They are still strong too, they are still firm, they refuse to yield to my fingers. And they're straight. Almost completely. It's a miracle of beauty. Her teeth. I can't believe my luck. I can't believe her luck.

I don't have much time, this is what I think. We don't keep our teeth for very long.

She's not sick. I rub fresh mud over her body, let it dry on her skin. I don't talk to our ancestors anymore. I don't brag to them about how beautiful she is. I don't try to make our ancestors proud of her body. This is what we used to do. Before our ancestors evaporated. Before they deserted us the way water does.

My daughter holds my hand, and I tell her about the caves. How much food we had then. How there were shadows that we had tamed with our hands. That we made the shadows on the walls take shapes, like birds, like animals. That we made the shadows dance. Against the fire. Perhaps I exaggerate. I don't remember.

I rub mud onto her breasts. They are so firm, almost ready to nurse. The right child. With my blood in it. In a year or two, it will be too late. She will be too old. No one will keep her. I rub mud over her legs. They are starting to hair. I don't have much time.

We have found some fruit. Each globule is so intricate in its flavors. And in its beauty. Like they were made to entice us. To keep us living. Or wanting to. I listen to everyone eat, the quiet little whoops and sighs of pleasure. And then so quick, it's over. Like a cat snatching your child. There is no more fruit. Except for the one in front of me, the one that I've been watching. I give it to my daughter.

Once, I saw our stomachs bulge. We'd found a carcass, deserted for some reason. Not even carrion birds. Not even hyenas to fight off. Some of us ate. Some of us didn't. And then the ones that had eaten got sick. Laid themselves out on the ground. Groaning. Their stomachs expanding.

Some of us died. That day. And later. No one blamed the dead animal. Except me. We eat dead animals when we find them. Whenever we can. But some of them I don't trust. Like that one. That's why I'm the only mother left. That's what I think. Because I trust insects more than I trust meat.

I smell them. Pungent. Close by, very close by. The others smell something too, but they don't know what it means. The father blithers. Go this way, I say. That's what he says, I say.

The father moans. They think his moaning means something too. About them. About what they should do. I know that he is feeling pain. That the pain is bad enough for him to moan, and that it is getting worse. Much worse. I can smell his flesh changing on him. And I can smell the others, that they are so close now.

Why do we get sick? my daughter asks me. I don't answer. I know what hunger is. That you'll eat anything, take any chance. You'll eat what you find. That's how your ancestors made you, that's how you'll make your children. You'll do anything to make children. I can't say that to her. I don't know why.

I carry a beautiful rock. Small. I take it out. I've always loved looking at it. At its colors. I gaze at it the way we all gaze at the fire in the evenings. I don't know why we love to do that, I don't know what we see that make us want to keep looking. I've never known. The father once said that we were looking for people, for the people who live in the fire, who dance at its tips. I've always loved the father.

I press the rock into my daughter's hand. I'm giving it to her. The rock, she whispers. You give it to your lover, I tell her. When you have to, I say. If he loves you, he'll let you keep it, I say. He'll keep you. She doesn't understand. She will when she has to.

I dress her in the evening. I tie strips of fur around her waist so that they dangle, hang down below her waist in bands. So that her beautiful body is present and absent behind them. I've never understood why this works. Why glimpsing is more tantalizing than seeing. She doesn't want to wear it, but I'm firm, even angry. She yields. She wants to know why I'm making her wear this. I tell her that it will be cold soon.

There is so much that is true that I'll never tell her.

I've told her this. To hide if something happens. If another tribe finds us. To come out after they've calmed down. After their frenzy is over. This is what I can do for her.

Everyone is sleeping and the father moans quietly. They are so near. I smell them constantly now. He moans again. It is quiet, late. The rest of us are sleeping. I press my hands softly against

his throat. He gurgles a little, tries to resist my hands. But only a little. I close my eyes tight so that no water leaks out.

In the morning they will find us. I'll see their strong angry faces. He'll be the tallest, the strongest. His black hair. As he swings his rock at my face, as he kills me, I'll think of his fierceness, of his muscles. I'll know that he's the one. That he'll keep my daughter. Make children with her.

Children. My blood in their young bodies. My planted seeds growing in another tribe. Like trees, like tall trees.