

# **EARTH RENEWS; AND HUMANKIND...**

**FUTURE FICTION**

robert wolff

## Earth Renews

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters in this book are real, of course—after all, this takes place in the future. People and events exist only in the author’s imagination.

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## Dedication

To my children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. And to all of us, of course: who we once were and can be again.

To the man, who stepped into my path as I bicycled to work, held out both hands, grabbing my handlebars. The bike under me rock steady; I never took my feet off the pedals. He looked me in the eyes; I looked back. I recall the depression between his eyebrows, a valley at the top of a wide flaring nose. After at least a minute, he asked whether I was the young Dr. Wolff. "I hear you are one of us." Without a moment's hesitation I said, YES, without a thought about who "us" was. I felt a kind of elation, to be accepted by this very black, very large man. We continued looking at each other. He grinned, turning aside while holding the handle bar with one hand, then giving me a light shove. I pedaled away. I turned my head, but he had disappeared. Others were watching me, all smiling it seems, as I swerved out of the path of a cart.

That was many years ago, but that image comes back to me every now and then, each time shifting my understanding of the "us" I had no hesitation to be one of. Way deep the inspiration that wrote this story.

And "Loyt'nant Hansen," whose name popped into my head just as he left the building and so helped me walk away from the Gestapo and so, without a doubt, saved my life..

The dark brown, hunched over "cleaning lady" under the window, who winked at me, startling me awake when I had given up, almost reached the edge.

The faces, always dark, always very much alive. Eyes that blistered, bored, burnt. Healing a patch on broken skin.

And, of course, Tiger, who saved my life many times.

And a drop of water on a leaf.

Kancil from the dreams.

The white car that drove me, then always got lost.

And many others, like Moa, who reminded, warned, pointed.

Thank all of you for a very interesting life.

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# Rain of Ashes

## chapter one

Tomorrow I die. That's what the new teacher says. How can she know? Joe and Larry died a long time ago. Maybe ten days, or thirty? It's hard to know what days mean any more when it is always night. The teacher's name is La Honda. Funny name. She says it is where she grew up, or where she was before, I can't remember. La Honda says it will be day again. One of these days she said. I've sort of forgotten what "day" means. Night was when we were in bed, but now I sleep when I'm tired. So many hours are a day. But, how do you know what hours are? When La Honda said I die tomorrow, she meant soon, I think. Because I threw up in school. Well, not really school. It is that house where some people lived we did not like. I don't know why we did not like them; I thought they were okay. But, my mom says they do bad things. How does she know?

My mom also says that she has lost count of the days that it has been night. But, she thinks it may be months. Perhaps a year. She does not sleep, she says. Maybe when she and my dad sleep together that is when she sleeps. They did that a lot at first. Now they are too tired, she says. My mom says she cannot see. Maybe she is blind. No, there is something wrong with her eyes she says, but not blind.

I remember months. One month I had a birthday and nine boys came, and we hung around although my dad kept telling us to play games. My dad is not really my dad, but he wants me to call him dad. He sleeps with my mother. That's all they do now. Before, he used to go to work. Sometimes we saw him, then he was gone for a long time. And I remember another month was Christmas, with a tree with lights in the house. Not real light, but little electric things that blinked on and off. Mom says that was supposed to look like candles. We had candles for a while. Until they were all gone.

It's not really night now, not all dark. We can see. But the sky is dark. My mom says that the bombs pushed the sun away, but one of the teachers we had, says that is not true. The sun is still there, he said. The bombs made smoke so that we can't see the sun. He says the sun will come back when we're all dead. That teacher died, but then we got another. Now we have a woman. She is not very good at teaching, she says. She doesn't know anything, she says. I don't know anything either; so what? The teachers are not really teachers, like the ones we had when I went to school. But my mom wants me to go to school, even in a house. About two blocks from home, it has a big room and we all sit around. The teacher tells stories. Sometimes they are real stories, she says. How can you tell, I asked her? You can't, she said. Sometimes she tells. One of the man teachers we had said he told only real stories, things that really happened, but when they happened so long ago how real is that?

Now the teacher says we should call her Elaine, but first it was La Honda. Do you have two names?

No, she said that was another teacher. But, my mom says it is not polite, we should not ask and call them all just teacher. What is polite? It's a name. That is true, she said.

I used to be hungry, but not now. I drink water. The faucets in our house don't work any more, but we have a big round thing under one of the spouts that come from the roof. When it rains, we have water. Sometimes it is thick. It crunches when you chew it, because my dad says it has ashes in it. I don't know where the ashes come from; we never had a fire here. But, my dad says it is the ash from dead people. Or perhaps from their houses. If they had wood houses. Stone does not burn. Does it? But, my dad says; whole buildings burned because the fire was so hot. I've never seen stone burning.

Grandma was the first to die. Probably because she could not go to a hospital. There are no more doctors. They died too, probably. Or perhaps they cannot be doctors without hospitals. Grandma was always sick, and lying down. Then the dog died. Probably all the dogs died because I haven't seen one for a long time. There's a cat I saw. He is not dead yet. The neighbor girl died too. Suzy. Her name was really Suzanne, but we say Suzy. Her eyes got real big; she could not eat. I don't remember the other people who died. They mostly disappear. Kids go to school, and then they disappear. A few new kids came, but not any more. There are only five kids left. Our teacher says we are dying.

My mom says that when we die we go to heaven. But, my dad does not think so. He says when you die you just go away. To where, I said? Just away, gone. Maybe to a big city, I think. I went to a big city once, we drove in our car for a very long time and there were so many houses and people; they had lights on the street that turned different colors. And a place where I saw a movie with my dad. About ships that shot puffs of smoke and then far away the buildings broke. They showed that too. But so fast that I closed my eyes. Like when you turn your head very fast, and you almost get dizzy. The puffs of smoke and then the buildings falling down. There were people in it too. Running around and yelling at each other. And other people you could not see only hear their voices yelling. Like a radio. And a woman and a man kissing, then she slapped him in the face, but then they were kissing again. But maybe that was another man, he had no shirt on. And loud music all the time. Big cities are dangerous places, but perhaps when I am dead I shall go there again. But, if all the buildings are broken by the puffs from the ship I won't.

My mom is dead; my dad said. But she is still here. So how can she go to heaven? My dad is running around, looking for matches. We used up all the matches when we had candles. Now he cannot find matches. I told him we have no more candles. He said he wanted to burn the green sofa that mom was lying on. She did not talk, and she looked sort of funny. One eye was open, but the other was closed. Don't touch her, my dad said. That is not really my mom, he said, it is only her body. My mom stepped out of her body. How do you do that? Never mind, he said. That's all he said, never mind, and help me look for matches.

He found one, and then we found some paper, books and old magazines that nobody looked at any more, and all mom's clothes and some other stuff, like boxes and some branches from the dead tree in front of the house. And then he said, take some clothes and go outside. Then he came

outside too. He did not talk; and the house burned. Now we live in the school. But, the teacher has already gone. Maybe she died too. Only two other kids stay here, and a man who sleeps all the time. I sleep too, most of the time. The water here is different; it sits in a tub outside. I cannot reach inside, but one of the girls showed me what she called a dipper, a cup with a stick. Mostly I sleep.

And then, my dad killed himself. He always said, next year he would show me how to shoot, and we would go hunting. I don't know what we would hunt. There are no bears. Maybe birds? He had a little string tied to the trigger, and the gun was in his mouth. I did not hear the gun. When the girl and I found him he was dead. I thought about taking the gun, but what would I do with it? Have not seen the cat around any more. The other girl said we should bury him. My dad. I said we should burn the house, that's what we did when my mom died. Now there are no more matches. We moved to another house, the two girls and I. The older girl found some crackers to eat, a whole box. We all were sick. Then we could not find water, but after sleeping again we found some. In another house. My head hurts a lot. The smaller girl said she wants to sleep too. The older girl too.

Carefully the man approaches what at first sight looked like a heap of old and very dirty clothes. He walks bent over, with a gnarled stick that must be older than the man although it is hard to tell the age of man or stick. He is thin, very thin. Bald, of course, although now snow white fuzz dances around his head. His face is unlined, the skin leathery and tight across the bones. His hunched over posture makes him look old. He talks to himself, Wonder how I found them. It's the smell. Human shit. Some kids curled up in a ball. Still alive? He reaches down and gently runs his free hand over the back of the boy, who slowly opens one eye. Then, with a sound of surprise, disentangles himself and sits up. The two girls wake up. The older one licks her lips and says, Water, water. The old man reaches behind him for his water bottle and hands it to the girl who does not seem to know what to do with it. Drink, it is good water! All three sip, then drink, now fully awake.

The man sits down with them. He looks more closely at the children. Yes, they smell. The youngest could be ten at most. All of them are filthy. Of course, how could it be other? The little girl has tufts of hair missing, but she still has some dark hair, now tangled in thick knots. They are all thin, of course. The older girl seems to have no flesh on her any more. The boy looks thirteen, perhaps. Big frame, the man thinks, needing some flesh, muscle. The older girl might be twelve or fifteen. Hard to tell. She seems tall, lanky; her hands with long fingers, nails bit raw. How to start a conversation? Do not want to ask questions; that is what adults did with strange children. Things are different now. Survivors together.

I have been walking for a long time, he says. Looking for food mostly, and for people. He opens his backpack and carefully takes out another bottle of clear water and two raw potatoes. He shrugs his shoulders, Not very good raw, but it fills the stomach. He has a knife, and cuts thin slices to hand out. Do you have more water, old man, the little girl asks? He smiles, Yes that is good enough for a name, Old Man. Do you have a name? Yes, she says, before drinking a big gulp, but she does not volunteer a name. The boy reaches for the water, looks at Old Man, and

says, My name is Chuck. The children pass the water around until it comes back to Old Man, who puts it away in his bag, now in front of him. They sit, not saying anything. He's been alone so long now, that he talks to himself, We've gone through life times of shock. Back to basics. We must find food. No need to ask whether these kids are hungry: they have been hungry too long to know what it is like not to be hungry. He looks at them, one by one, I shall look around and find something to eat. You kids stay here.

Nobody says anything. They look at him. He slowly stands up. Here, I'll leave this bottle of water with you kids. I shall come back as soon as I can. He looks at the boy, Chuck, you stay with the girls, okay? Chuck nods.

Old Man slowly walks away. He wants to look back at the children, but doesn't. This new world is too uncertain, too new, he mumbles softly. This is a small town. No, not even that: a village. He passes a dead gas station, a ruined church. Houses deserted, many burned down, or obviously broken into. Nothing new. There is a small General Store, visibly emptied. The Ma and Pa who ran this place lived upstairs. The store is completely empty, of course. He expects it. He goes upstairs. One bedroom, nothing seems to be touched. He finds no dead people. A small kitchen. The first thing that attracts his attention is a cast iron frying pan. Heavy, but useful perhaps. He looks in the small refrigerator. Nothing, of course. No, there is a plastic tub in the back. He carefully opens it. A white powder. He carefully puts a few grains on his finger and licks. Milk powder! Perhaps a bit rancid, not fat free. He searches the kitchen, and then the other rooms, very carefully. Thick mold on what could have been a bit of chocolate. No longer edible. A very small, sealed bag of peanuts. He finds a good canvas shopping bag, puts the milk and the peanuts in, adds the frying pan at the last. On a hunch, he finds a little garden outside. Nothing green, of course. But, some digging brings a few edible carrots, a few small potatoes. We have to learn to make a fire with two sticks again, he says to himself.

As he is leaving to go back to the children his eye is caught by a beat-up garbage can, leaning at a crazy angle against a down spout, one side dented: as if someone kicked it. The lid twisted on so tight that it does not come off with only one hand. Someone must have been mad at it, kicked it, took a rock to it? Carefully he works to pry up the lid. The garbage can is very heavy. Maybe water, he thinks, although he does not hear sloshing. He works on it for a long time, then suddenly it pops open. Priceless treasure: tightly filled with canned food and things in heavy plastic, Round cans, square cans, large and small cans, many without label. Whoever did this, carefully filled holes with smaller cans, and even smaller tins, and some things in heavy plastic.

Old Man sits on the back steps of the little house and weeps. He deliberately licks up the tears. Water is precious, and so is salt. Not many tears left. These are for the children. When you're not around people very much you need to talk, otherwise, you forget how to. No, that's not true. When your head is too full of thoughts and memories that cannot be resolved, you talk to forget. Not true either, but maybe. When the world is dark and still you talk to keep your spirits up. A human sound. The only world I knew is dead, what is this new world? For some reason, I survived the radioactive whatever it was in the air. Barely survived. Everyone around me died. I walked. Getting away from it. Scavenging food and water in houses, a little here, a cup of water



there. Another reason to move. How many miles have I walked? I don't even know how many days I have walked! Months maybe. Years! It seems like forever. And now there are the children. They survived. Maybe. I must take them some of this food. What do you give to people who are skin and bones?

Old Man carefully selected some cans of that thick soupy stuff that was made for old people. Oh, a can opener. It takes a while to find a can opener in another house.

The children seem asleep again. Too weak to sit up they had curled themselves in a tight huddle again.

Old Man sat down close, silent. Waiting for them to wake up.

Again, the boy is the first to open one eye, see him, sit up. The girls wake up; they were not asleep perhaps, just bone tired. "Wasted" is the word.

Carefully Old Man feeds them the sweet soup. The effect is almost miraculous. The children sit up straighter; something lights their eyes again. Easy does it. Not too much at once, he remembers reading somewhere. Starving people was not unknown in the old world. Frequent small portions, as often as can be taken, he remembers. Stomachs shrink.

Old Man and the children lived on the cans out of that forgotten garbage can for a long time. When the children were strong enough, they had walked to the little store to be closer to the food. They had found a water tank nearby that someone must have had for cattle. They had baths. But, the greatest luxury perhaps was an outhouse with some lye left in it.

Are you a new teacher, the little girl asked? Old Man thought how to answer that. Maybe in a way, he said.

Do you tell stories?

Yes, but first we need to eat before I can tell stories.

The children slept most of the time, but now for shorter periods. They could eat more, but he had to think about rationing the cans from this hoard and find more food. Water they had enough now, they even had washed their faces. Amazing to see the color of their skin when ash and dirt is washed off. Chuck's skin was dark. The little girl was the lightest of all of them, the big girl olive; her hair too seemed to be coming back in a dark fuzz.

He asks the children what the name of this village is. Something with Rock in it, they agree, but none of the three can remember. In fact, they cannot remember much at all. Their life before the Dark had been so suddenly and completely cut off that it is difficult to remember anything. They remember going to schools in a nearby town. A bus had taken them. Yellow, the little girl asks? Yes, there were colors then; now everything shades of gray and black. Old Man realizes he must have walked through that town with the schools on his way here. Burned out. They were in a mountainous region. He had climbed to get here.

Once they heard noises as if something alive were rooting through the ruins. Old Man had gone to look, very carefully, peeking around trees. A rat he had thought. Small anyway, and probably no danger. After that they heard no other sounds. They must be the only four people here.

The children recover remarkably in what seems like a short time, but hard to judge without daylight. And they talk more. They begin to remember. Each of them has a different way of dealing with shock and starvation. The youngest, whom they have started to call Girl, has soft crying spells when she mentions something she lost. Where is my calico doll? A sweater, or someone knitting a sweater for her. Where are shiny shoes?

Chuck suddenly stops in mid-sentence and stares in the distance. We went up the mountain, he says, and there was someone living up there. She had a goat and chickens. Maybe two goats.

The older girl, who now is Missy, talks the most, but what she says is unrelated to the present. I told her not to do that, but she would not listen. Or, Nancy and Paul said they were going to get married, but you cannot get married before you are eighteen, or perhaps sixteen? Old Man asked how old she is? A blank look. I don't know, I cannot know; before the Dark I was fourteen. Nancy was a few months older, but in the same class. Paul too; he was not a good student, he always... And there the memory stops. They all learned not to press; leave each to their own memories. Don't ask. They avoid talking about the Dark, or family, or even looking each other in the eyes. They don't ask.

They must start looking for more food and water. Old Man tries to organize them, but it takes time to learn to search houses systematically and thoroughly. Old Man looks for another store or perhaps some kind of storage or warehouse in this village. They found only a few cellars with preserved vegetables and fruit in old Kerr jars. Missy got cut on her hand by a sharp piece of glass. Fortunately, it heals well and quickly. Old Man thinks probably the glass had been from a bottle of liquor.

One time, after they had eaten well and sitting back pleasantly full, the boy speaks suddenly: I have a new name. Chuck belongs to another boy. Old Man asks what name he has now. I've been thinking about a dog we had. He was always looking in garbage. His name was Brown. I feel like a Brown.

They all agree that is a good name for him. Missy turns to Old Man, Do you have another name than Old Man? You're not really old, are you?

No, before the Dark I was twenty-five. That is not really very old.

My dad was forty, Missy said. Is she blushing? Hard to tell.

Nobody talks about dads and moms. There is a long silence, then they sleep again. Scavenging, eating, and sleeping.

A few meals later Old Man says his name before the Dark really does not fit him any more either.

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Perhaps the others can think of a name for him? But, nobody can think of a better name, so he remains Old Man.

Just as it became obvious that the village would not yield more food and water, it also seemed to have become a little lighter. Or, at least some of the time they thought they could see lighter patches in the universal gray. And they had rains that were not black.

Old Man says, as casually as he can, Maybe we should wander on and find some new places to look for food and water.

Girl says, I saw green.

They look at her. Color? Green color?

Yes, not far from here. A tree with green on it.

They almost run. They stare in awe at an evergreen tree that actually seems to have green needles.

They get closer almost reverently. They feel the bark of the tree, and listen, perhaps for a heart beat? And it smells, too, they agree. It smells good.

Old Man mumbles something: The green of life. Have we found another survivor? Even without light, this tree is still alive. Nobody says anything for a long time.

One of them—who? They look at each other—suggests they sleep by the tree. Without a word they sit down, resting their backs against the tree, touching the tree.

**chapter two**

Brown had a dream. He told the others as soon as they were all awake. I must tell it now before it goes away. I dreamed we were walking to see the old woman who lives on the mountain with goats and chickens. I dreamed it was lighter there, and cold. But there was food.

Missy and Girl had also dreamed about cold and a person who gave them food.

And a sweater, Girl added. A red and blue sweater. And it was real wool.

Missy talked about the food she had eaten in her dream.

Old Man listened, then very softly said he too had dreamed of a climb to where there were more green trees. A whole forest.

What's a forest, asked Girl?

Obviously they had to move. Find food somewhere, the village did not yield much any more. They had enough cans left to last them a while, if they ate carefully. Old Man had begun to ration as well as attempt to make a more balanced diet. They decided they needed warmer clothes, and perhaps a cart or something to carry food with them. And water? Clothes were not hard to find; they all knew where there were still closets full of good clothes. They found some carts that would be useful to carry the collection of cans and water containers they had gathered.

Do you know where this old woman lives, Old Man asked?

Brown admitted that he had been thinking about it, and that perhaps he could remember, although things were looking different in the dark.

They all thought it seemed lighter; they had found other pines and firs that looked almost green. All of them could see better. (Old Man thought it might have been the food, or they might have adapted to the changeless dark, but he did not say anything).

On this side of the village, Brown said, we used to follow the road that angles up. Then there is a bridge where we took another road. A small road, Brown said.

Well, it's an adventure, Old Man said. As if they had not had adventure enough!

As they were loading up the carts they had found, Brown wondered out loud how people had lived before food came in cans. Doesn't food grow, he asked? The girls looked at him, then at each other.

Girl said, once we had strawberries growing behind the house.

Missy remembered eating chestnuts somewhere that had come from a tree.

But, food won't grow until there is sunlight again, Old Man said.

The girls looked doubtful. They sat down on the ground, dry now and dusty. No one said anything, thinking. Remembering a world that was so far behind them that it seemed unreal now.

What happens, Girl asked hesitantly, if we cannot find food?

Nobody had an answer.

They ate sparingly that meal time. And it seemed longer until Old Man decided to open some cans for another meal. They all said they were not very hungry...

Eventually, they picked up the things they wanted to bring with them when they left the village. Food; of course, and some clothes, good shoes. They dragged their feet, but after walking for a while they got a rhythm that bound them together. Old Man and Brown each had a backpack and pulled a cart. Missy and Girl had backpacks, and together they pulled a child's red toy wagon loaded mostly with clothes. Old Man still had his staff. The girls had asked him where the staff came from, but Old Man did not have much to say about it. He just found it, he said.

Something had changed in their being together. Perhaps they all felt they were the only people in the world; they had to rely on each other. They were a family: circumstances had forced them together.

The first bridge they came to was not the one, Brown knew. Maybe the next. The next was a bigger bridge over what must have been a river, although now there was only a trickle of water far down from the level of the bridge. They rested, ate a good meal in what might have been a park. There were three wooden picnic tables with benches attached. Three fire places, two of them smashed, one of them used, perhaps not too long ago. There was scorched wood that was usable. They made a fire with a match from the collection of matches Old Man had stuffed deep inside in his backpack. He told the others, We must learn to make fire without matches. They talked about that for a while, but were too tired to think very hard about something so strange. They slept, close together. Old Man wondered whether he should stay awake? Stand guard? But, they had not seen other people, and no animals for a long time. He fell asleep sitting against a tree, the children around his feet.

When they woke up they sat for a while, not speaking.

I had a dream, Old Man said, with a slight smile. I dreamed I found people. Other people.

Were they alive, Girl asked?

Oh yes!

What did they look like, the others wanted to know.

Well, they were... Old Man could not remember. They were dirty, he said. And there were three of them. And tired. But, the more he tried; the less he could remember of the dream.

They wandered around the roadside camp. Old Man watched them observe the ground, behind trees.

They found some empty cans, and a plastic sack, too dirty and smelly to explore further.

They were listless as they began to walk again. They found the "small road," after crossing the bridge. Brown was quite sure this was the one. Unpaved, dusty, narrow. The four started up and immediately found that Brown's cart had small, thin wheels and was hard to pull through the dirt. They talked about it, then worked out that Old Man could pull the smaller cart because it was harder to pull, and Brown would pull the larger cart, and Girl and Missy would help pull. Even with all four now pulling it was hard work, the road got steeper, curling this way and that, always climbing.

When they rested, and had eaten sparingly, Missy said, what if the old woman is not there, or does not want us?

Nobody said anything for a long time. Finally Girl said, But she will want to see us...

But, Missy said, maybe she is dead, as all people are.

Old Man convinced them that it was useless to talk like that. We'll see, he says. Maybe we'll find other people higher up the mountain. And perhaps it will be lighter?

As they trudged on, Old Man kept thinking. He had a hard time not talking out loud as had been his habit. What are we doing going up a mountain? We should have gone south. But, how to tell what is south? Goats and chickens! If the old woman had them before the Dark, now they would be dead anyway. Food was their most pressing need. They could not continue to eat from cans. They had to look for food that grew. But, how to find food, even if they could recognize what was food? They could not eat trees. They were now in forest. The trees look alive perhaps. But, what had been growing under the trees was dead-looking. Berries. There must have been berry bushes. How long had it been since the sun shone? How long the Dark? It seemed forever.

The path came to a wet spot on the ground. They stopped, only too glad to be able to rest. They looked where the wet must have come from. A little way off to the side there were green rocks, and water bubbling up from the earth. A tiny stream of water meandered away and down. They tasted the water, and it was sweet. Girl thought it tasted like lemonade, which made all of them laugh. Not exactly lemonade, but it was very clear, not like the dark water they had had for so long now. It was as water had been "before."

Unanimously they decided to make camp here to rest. They made a little fire. After eating and drinking their fill of the pure, clear water, they talked softly.

Maybe there are bears here, someone said. Or Coyotes.

We have not seen any animals anywhere, Brown said.

Girl inched closer to Brown, I'm afraid of bears, she whispered.

Old Man said, Most animals are more afraid of us than we are of them. Curious, perhaps, but why would they... He did not finish the sentence.

Missy said softly, My father had a gun.

After a long pause in which no one said anything, Brown said in a flat voice, My father killed himself with a gun. No more guns,

Old Man agreed. Never again.

They woke up to what could almost be a voice, or a song. Could it be? Were there still birds here? They listened spellbound. Then the sound faded; it must have been far away.

It came from there, Girl said, pointing up slope. Old Man stood up, staring in that direction. Then Brown stood up staring also, and the girls.

Old Man said, It almost looks like the sun coming up there.

The darkness was lighter: there were colors. Blue? No, red. Dark red, maybe purple.

Girl cried softly, I don't know colors, she said. Only dark.

Missy put her arms around Girl's shoulder, Sure you remember colors. Red and blue. It was you who found the green tree! You dreamed of that colored sweater, remember?

And those stones by the water are green too, Girl said.

Now it seemed there were other noises too. Little rustlings, the wind through the needles of trees. Yes, there are other noises now.

Brown had wandered off, came back with some sticks, sat down, tried rubbing them together this way and that. Isn't that how they made fire? When he rubbed them long enough the wood did get warm, he thought. Old Man walked off, to explore, he said. When the girls got nervous, he decided not to go far, and call frequently, so that they knew he was near.

The little spring continued its soft sound, unbroken. Where does that water come from?

Under the ground, of course, Brown said. There must be a lot of water there. Well, yes, Rain soaks into the ground and stays there and sometimes it bubbles up again.

They were thinking about that. The water is so clean, not black like rainwater.

They were ringed with mysteries, not least the light that now definitely seemed to be getting lighter. Old man came back with some strange looking white things. Mushrooms, he said. He did not know whether they could eat them. He remembered that many mushrooms were poison. They passed them around, smelling them. The mushroom quickly wilted and looked very unappetizing.

Old Man, why does water come out of the ground here? And why is it clear?

He answered slowly, hesitantly, Because the water from the sky has ash in it. From the burning.

What burning?

Well, he was not sure either, but he thought it was from all the towns and cities that had been burned, and the earth itself maybe,

And people, Missy said. Her dad had told her that the black was dead people, that they breathed in the ashes from dead people.

All people had burned, Girl said seriously. All of them, everywhere, she said again.

Not everywhere, of course. We did not burn, and the people in our village did not burn. They got sick and died.

Or, they killed themselves, said Brown.

Old Man brought the talk back to the water, The water from this little spring has been in the ground a long time and now it comes out clear.

They were still again.

They did not want to move from the little spring. It was peaceful. The slight bubbling of the spring was a soothing sound. And to have clean water was such a treat. It definitely seemed to be getting lighter. Old Man watched carefully. He was fairly sure that he could see differences between day and night. According to his observation, they had been at the spring three nights and two days. They had discovered quite a few green trees, and green moss around the little spring, and even green on some otherwise dead-looking bushes. Old Man remembered colors, and day and night; he thought what a marvel it would be if that came back. To see colors again! To know that there is a sun that still shines on the earth! He consciously suppressed the thought, but it kept coming up.

The children were asleep, or dozing. Old Man got up quietly, and walked a little way in the woods. Brown woke up, softly asked Old Man where he was going.

Old man said softly, I'm just going for a little walk. You stay with the girls. Will be back soon.

As soon as he could no longer see the children, he realized he had better make sure that he would be able to find his way back. Searching through his pockets he found a ball of string. He smiled: for a long time he had picked up pieces of string and wound them around in a ball. Now he could use the pieces of string to mark trees and branches. It was easy to walk under the trees, there was not much undergrowth, and the ground was level enough. Here, he could talk to himself again! What are we doing? Where are we going? How many days, or weeks, can we last in this wood, away from places where we could find food? We should be looking for food. We are not hungry but that is only because we have become used to eating very little.

He thought he saw something through the trees, white, almost shining. Walked in that direction. Something lying on the ground. A skeleton? His first thought was: at least there are still animals to eat the flesh of dead people. The skeleton looked clean, bones only, no shred of clothes or meat. He did not know enough about human bones to know whether the skeleton was whole, except that it was obvious that one of the legs below the knee was missing. The skull and



jawbone were lying on their side. What we used to call our last remains, he mumbled to himself. A reminder of the inevitable end. Should I bury it, as was our human custom? The tomb of the unknown human, he said out loud. He moved one of his feet. The soil was soft. It would be easy to take some handfuls of soil and leaves to cover the skeleton.

A soft voice broke into his thoughts. He looked up, surprised, into the eyes of what could be a small coyote. The coyote sat quietly by the missing lower leg, looking intently at Old Man.

Well hello, you almost look like a little dog I knew when I was a boy. Your nose is different.

The coyote showed his teeth, made a soft noise.

Yes, and you have more teeth than the little dog. You're not afraid of me, are you? I don't know why I am not afraid of you, but I'm not. Perhaps I cannot be afraid of anything any more after what happened. Do you, Coyote, know what happened? We, humans, destroyed our world. Not very smart, eh?

As Old Man was talking, he slowly moved closer. The coyote hissed a little, showed his teeth, and shuffled back, keeping the same distance. But still sitting up.

What do you eat, Coyote? You look like a young pup, maybe there is a mother coyote somewhere who feeds you? Or, are there enough dead people around after all this time? Are there live animals around still? We have not seen much life in these woods.

Because you make too much noise, a voice answered.

A talking coyote? I have a good imagination, but even in my imagination coyotes don't talk. They sing, though.

Of course, the coyote does not talk, you fool. Who are you, what are you seeking here in these woods?

Old Man looked where the voice came from, and saw what perhaps could be a human shape against the dark between the trees.

The children call me Old Man, he said. We came here, to find a woman who lives here, according to one of the children. The boy had a dream of finding this woman, and the girls also had dreams of someone who gave them food. And a sweater of real colors, he added with a smile.

And you, the almost invisible person asked, did you dream also?

Oh yes, I dream often. Usually about people, finding people, or being with people. But, where I come from, people are dangerous. I run away. I walked and walked. Then I found the children.

And you take care of the children?

Well, perhaps. We take care of each other. The boy who dreamed, who is he?

He lived in the little village below, Rock-something. He says his father took him here before. Before the Dark. And you? You are the woman who lives here and has goats and chickens?

Hah! Is that why you came? To eat the goat and chickens? The goat is dead. This coyote has chosen to live here. He has no back legs. Mutation. You know what that is, Old Man?

The woman had moved closer. Old Man could see her clearly now. She was not old, but thin, as everyone was, of course. The most striking thing about her was her hair. He had seen other people with hair, of course. But, they all had other symptoms, strange skin color, bumps where there were not supposed to be bumps. Scabs, oozing wounds. He shut off his memory of the early days. The woman's eyes sparkled, even in the dark that was becoming lighter.

Yes, I know what a mutation is. No back legs? How does he move around?

This little coyote pup, or perhaps now adolescent, has normal back feet, but no legs. The legs are inside the body perhaps, or what would have been legs. He gets around. The mother came to visit. Oh, a long time ago. At the beginning. She ate the goat, trying to stay alive when having to take care of this little monster she birthed.

Is there still enough wildlife then? We have heard only a few little noises now and then. Perhaps rats, I thought. Enough to allow coyotes to survive?

Coyotes have always lived on small rodents, and, yes, they are still around. Or, at least enough. Maybe mutated also, who knows. It's getting dark, you had better go back to your children, you who are a child yourself.

Old Man looked up, surprised. Getting dark? There are days then, and nights?

Didn't you notice? It's late afternoon now. Can you find your way back, she asked with a sneer?

Yes. Yes, I can find my way back. And the skeleton? I was going to bury it, hide it.

Why hide it? It's not the only skeleton around this place. We've had other visitors, but none as alive as you seem to be.

The woman disappeared in the murky dark between trees. The little coyote still sat there, looking at him. Somehow he knew that he would not be allowed to cover the skeleton.

He found his way back by following the little bits of string he had tied on branches and bushes. What would he tell the children? What could he tell?

Brown was awake, the girls curled up. Their little fire had gone out. Old Man panicked, he did not want to use more of his few remaining matches, hidden in his pack. Maybe they would have to do without a fire. Brown looked at him questioning, he shrugged his shoulder. Nothing to say. Carefully he reached out to the ashes. Ah, a hot ember, the fire was still alive. He went back under the trees to gather some dead wood. A small fire, he reminded himself. Just enough to keep it going.



chapter three

*Another man! He's not the first man who found this hide-out, but the first who says he comes looking for the woman who lives here. The other ones happened on this place. He travels with children, that's a new one! One of the children remembered a woman who lived in these mountains. There were so few visitors before; even fewer welcome visitors. There was someone, though: Sunrise. Did he have a son? Guess so. Sunrise had a washed out wife, pale, at least next to his shiny dark. The kid remembers? Why do only men come up here. Are there no women who survived this idiocy? Too many men. All of them skeletons now. What did this man say his name was? Old Man. That's not a name and it does not fit him. He does not look more than thirty. Something about him... His eyes. Not exactly sloping eyes. Maybe something else in his face. Cannot place him. Not from here certainly. Hah! Sunrise could not have been from here either. Yet, he knew this mountain, the rocks, the trees. Old Man is taking care of kids he said. Three of them. I can't feed four more people! Why come here? Have to think.*

*Hmm, the coyote pup follows Old Man. He's smart enough to stay hidden. Is he? He moves better, smoother. Guess you can learn to walk on two feet. Of course, he really has four feet, except that the back legs are barely long enough to lift his rear end off the ground. A silent coyote, has not sung yet. Not much to sing about maybe. His ma used to sing, Not any more. We don't want to attract visitors. The coyotes help keep them away. Must tell them not to feed on these new people until I have seen them and can decide what to do. How can I manage four more people? We don't have space, and no food. Or, not enough probably. The Ancient One has a root cellar with an amazing store of preserved food, even meat. Maybe she has more somewhere. Must dig around maybe. She's my first priority. I want to keep her alive, she knows too much about how to live in these mountains. I am learning, but she has more to teach me. How did she live, all by herself? With a goat and some chickens. She said she never went down to what she called "the bad world." The world of Man. How right she was. She made it so far, what's her secret? Maybe no secret, just good genes, a simple diet, and a healthy life style. Wonder how old she is? She says eighty. Of course, everyone who has survived the Dark looks older and gaunt.*

*I sense the big coyote nearby. Must be getting close to home. Funny word, "home." My home; for now anyway.*

*Hey Mother, you all right? Oh, don't worry, your little boy is exploring. Yes. You can smell that, can't you? He is with other humans. I want you to stay away from them, for now. Until we have learned more about them. Maybe they can be useful. Food, yes, but maybe more than that. Wait, hear me? Yes, we're all hungry. You can hunt tonight, maybe you find snakes, rats, mice. Yes, they are coming back. I saw a bird today! No, not very big, but young. Oh, there's the young one. Hey, tell your mama not to go near those people. I want to learn from them first. Yes, they're mine for now. Of course we're all thinking about food, you're not the only ones. But it's getting lighter. Soon plants will grow again. ... I know you cannot eat plants, but plants attract little animals, and you can eat those. Ma, the Ancient One, she's all right? Asleep. Yes, people sleep a lot, certainly when they are old, and hungry.*

Old Man had no trouble finding his way back to the spring. He decided to leave the pieces of string, so that he could find his way back to the skeleton, and talk to the woman again. The children were asleep. Of course, they're always asleep. Unless we are walking, or eating. Old Man noticed that it was darker now than earlier, perhaps the woman was right; day and night are coming back. That would make a big change in their lives. Imagine having "days" again, and nights! Old Man fed a little dry stick into the ashes. The fire came alive again.

Brown looked at him, without getting up from his fetal position, curled around the girls. He did not ask. Old Man debated what he would tell the children. Looking at Brown, it occurred to him that he should stop thinking about "children," Brown was getting to be an adolescent, as was Missy.

Met the woman who lives here, he said softly.

Brown opened his eyes wide, sat up. Missy said something, then sat up also, rubbing her eyes. I'm hungry, she says, Old Man pointed at the little spring, as if to say, drink first.

Yes, I met the woman who lives on this mountain. We talked.

Did she remember me, Brown asked?

I don't know, perhaps.

All of a sudden he could not remember much of what was actually said. Brown and Missy looked at him, questioningly.

Finally Brown asked, Was she friendly?

Well, she was not unfriendly. I think perhaps she worried about having to feed four people. The goat was eaten by a coyote. There was a small coyote with her. The little animal sat down the whole time, by her feet. Not moving. Maybe it couldn't move; it did not have back legs.

They talked for a while about the little coyote with only two forelegs. Why, the young people wanted to know. Old Man tried to explain "mutation."

But, don't we have our own food, Missy asked?

Yes, of course, but how long will that last? We must find more food, and the kind of food we have been eating can only be found where people used to live. Not here in the mountains. Perhaps we should think about other ways of finding food.

Like in the old days, Brown said, getting interested. Hunting. And setting traps. My father knew about those things. He lived in these woods. Not here I think, but somewhere like here. That's how he knew the old woman who lives here.

But, the woman who lives here is not old, Old Man said. She has long dark hair.

They looked at each other's heads. Brown's hair seemed to have grown the most. It was at least an inch long. Old Man still had soft, fuzzy white hair, but perhaps more of it. Missy felt her head: more hair, but spotty, only in some places.

Girl woke up then, saw them all looking at and feeling their scalps. She reached up and felt her own head. Soft, dark hair; it was growing in again at least.

Brown said he noticed that it was definitely darker than some time ago. Maybe the Dark is changing, he said.

Old Man repeated what the woman had said about days coming back.

Girl said, Well, if it is "night" now, why don't we sleep?

They decided they were not that hungry, and after they had all rinsed their mouths, wiped their faces in the tinkling water, they settled for sleep.

Old Man's last thought before he too drifted off, was, at least they don't smell as badly as when I found them

It was not long before they settled down to sleep,

Girl moaned, first softly. Then louder. Suddenly, she sat up and vomited. Her stomach had been empty, what came out now smelled strong, and looked slimy, in long threads.

They felt sorry for her. They had all experienced nausea and vomiting before. This seemed different, though. Missy brought some fresh water to rinse out Girl's mouth, but she was not finished. She was gagging, obviously in distress.

Did Girl eat something that we didn't? They looked at each other. Not that anyone could remember. Missy, tentatively, she played with the water in the spring. Maybe there was something she put in her mouth?

The dry heaving continued until Girl was so tired she could not even do that any more. She slumped, cold sweat on her forehead. She felt cold. She was shivering, but too tired and almost too weak to do that. Missy held her in a close embrace, stroking her head, it's all right Girl, you'll be fine again in a while. Just relax. Go to sleep...

Old Man carefully put a finger tip in the water and tasted it. They had all been drinking that water, and it tasted clean and good. Could there be life in that water? Some worms, or some other slimy thing that might be poisonous? If nothing else a reminder that their vague dark world held innumerable unseen dangers. Nobody slept very much, Missy continued to hold Girl, Brown and Old Man sat a little apart, each in his own thoughts.

A long time later it definitely seemed lighter. Missy let go of Girl, who fell sideways with her head down toward the little drip from the spring. She did not stir, did not breathe. Girl was dead.

It was Brown who spoke first. What shall we do? We cannot burn the house, as my dad did when my mom died. When my dad killed himself, I left him, moved to the school. Not really a school, of course, but... he left the sentence unfinished.

They had no tears. All of them were reminded of the dying in the little village, one after another they had all died, except these few children. The dying continued. Maybe they thought, who's next? Probably they did not think at all.

Shall we bury her? Not so close to the spring, we might want to come back here. How to dig a hole? Girl was not big, but still, they had only their hands to dig with.

They did not touch the body, sprinkled some dead leaves from the forest over her.

None of them wanted to eat. They did not want to drink from the spring. Old Man found an old water container that had some water in it from some time ago. They sipped.

Finally Old Man said, Come, we walk up the road. Maybe we'll find the woman who lives here. He did not want to go back to the skeleton where he had met the woman, but the road—no more than a path now—probably would lead to her house. Brown talked about an old woman, but the woman he had met at the skeleton was not old.

The coyote who had kept watch over them during what now could be called the night, carefully approached the corpse of the little girl. Food! She had been careful not to show herself, waited patiently until the three humans were out of range, then approached. Sniffed. Yes, definitely dead. Before even taking one bite it is essential that she move the body to some nearby bushes. The humans had sprinkled some leaves over the girl, but that of course hid nothing. Then, when the body was safe, she would run back to get her pup and share the feed with him.

Before she could run back, however, she heard the voice of the woman: Don't eat until I have seen it. I'm coming down. The pup will be with me.

How can that woman talk in my head, the coyote wondered? Humans never talked to us before. She knew that she had to obey. Not even a nibble! She sat, not patiently, twitching. Her flipping tail making unnecessary noise.

The woman stood in front of her, the pup behind her, inching slowly to sniff the food.

Coyote knew the smell: this person must have eaten some very poisonous mushrooms.

Oh, the spring. The man had said they were camping by the little spring, and perhaps mushrooms had started to grow again. Hmm. The flesh would be safe, though. The coyotes can have most of it. Some I shall take with me.

She got her knife out of one of the deep pockets of her skirt.

You can have the rest, she said to the coyotes. But don't leave any signs. What you don't eat, bury. And remember where you bury it.

Did you see which direction the humans went? The mother coyote looked up the road.

The woman disappeared into the woods.

The three walked listlessly, dragging their carts, always lighter. Old Man had thought he would propose they consolidate into the one with wider tires, but they had formed a sort of

rhythm pulling silently up this trail. Surely, this was not a road; no car could have driven up here. Brown?

Brown looked back at Old Man.

Is this the road your father drove to the woman who lives here?

They halted. Brown did not say anything for a while, then, No, it could not be, could it? Maybe we walked up. I was a boy then, he said, unaware of what he was saying, as if, now, he was no longer a boy. I would ride on my father's neck when we went camping. He turned aside; I don't remember.

They sat down, discouraged, tired. Too much, too much.

Suddenly, the woman Old Man had seen before stood in their midst, as if materializing from thin air. So, Old Man, these are the children. Thought you said there were three? Where's the other one?

Old Man was silent, looking straight ahead.

Missy looked at the woman, She died, she whispered. She died, she died.

And now, the woman said. Where are you heading?

Brown looked closely at the woman, You are not the woman we visited. A long time ago. She was old.

Maybe she died too?

Old Man stood up, facing the woman. Probably we lost the way. I thought you were the woman we were looking for, but it seems you are not. I don't know why we wanted to find the old woman. Goats and chickens, he said vaguely. I don't know, Brown dreamed of her, and the girls— He stopped in mid- sentence. It seemed something to look forward to, perhaps, he said lamely.

The three felt they had come to the end of a road. Nowhere to go. They still had food, and water. But, somehow, Brown's dream had been something else. A place, a hope perhaps? Old Man could not imagine any more what they had been looking for.

What do you carry, the woman asked?

Some canned food, some water. Warm clothes. Not much.

All we could find in... where we came from, Brown said.

Missy nodded, We looked everywhere.

You have weapons, the woman asked?

Weapons? Like guns? No, said Old Man with emphasis. Never again. No guns.

Brown said, My father killed himself with a gun.



The woman looked at Old Man. You're not from the village, are you? Where do you come from?

Old Man looked at his feet. Very softly he said, From everywhere. I have been everywhere. I've seen too much.

But, where did you start, where were you born, the woman insisted?

Far away. West. I've gone east all my life. Until now. From an island to another island, and another.

From nowhere to a city, to a bigger city, to a very big city, and to smaller and smaller towns. By boat, by plane, by car, by train, and walking. Always walking.

What were you looking for?

First, I was looking for life. Then, for another kind of life. For most of my years just fleeing. Until now, in this dark forest. I think I cannot flee any more.

After a long silence the woman said, thoughtfully, How long will those cans last you?

Old Man said carefully, When we left this morning (did I say morning?) I looked at what we had, and figured we could last fourteen days, maybe more. We're not very hungry any more. I'm not sure we have "days" yet.

I'll take you to the Ancient One. Probably the woman Brown dreamed about. She may let you stay for a while. We'll see. The Ancient One's goat was eaten, and the chickens. But, there is some food there. And shelter. Perhaps the Ancient One will remember this boy who thinks he is a man now.

Did she smile?

As they got ready to follow the woman, Missy said, Girl dreamed too, she dreamed that she got a sweater, made from real wool, red and blue. That's what she dreamed.

Well, yes, there is wool there. I'm not sure of the colors, but perhaps enough for a sweater. Do you need clothes?

Old Man explained that they had gathered clothes in the village, thinking that it would be colder in the mountains. Probably they had enough. We carry water, but only enough for a few more days (it feels natural to say "days" again!). We did not trust the spring after... When we left there.

There is a good spring where we're going. Follow me. We'll follow this path until we turn to go the Ancient One's place.

The Ancient One, as the woman had referred to her, sat in a rocking chair, outside the cabin, slowly rocking, singing to herself.

What have we here? A troop. A troop of people. The world did not end, then. Who are you, where do you all come from?

She got up from her chair, limber enough, she did not seem that old, although her hair was snow white, her face wrinkled. But she stood up straight.

These people came to find you, Ancient One. The boy, who now is a man, dreamt of you. Apparently, he and his parents visited you. Before. This man's name is Old Man, although he is not old. The girl's name is... what is your name, dear?

Missy whispered something. Brown spoke up, We all have new names. Now we call her Missy. And I am now called Brown.

The Ancient One looked closely, and said, speaking slowly, Sunshine, Sunny, no, Sunrise! Your father was Sunrise?

Brown admitted that was indeed a name people called his father.

Yes, the Ancient One said, how could I forget. Your father was a mountain man. He was probably raised around here. And you, now calling yourself Brown, you're the only one who survived.

It was not a question, but a statement.

Your father was a good man. He helped me when I first came. Oh that is long ago! Years. Ages! Sunrise built most of this cabin. Yes, he did.

And you, Old Man, where are you from?

Old Man repeated his story: he had come from far west; it had taken him most of his life to end up here. From island to island to island, and when he finally got to a very large piece of land, he found a big city. He had fled ever since, always heading north and then east until he could no longer tell direction when the world darkened.

Now the sun is coming back, Ancient One said with emphasis. The sun is coming back. I was sitting in my chair pretending I was sitting in the sun. Bringing back the sun is what I was doing. What do you think of that?

And you, girl, who gave you the name Missy? That does not sound like a name for you. When I get to know you, I'll give you a name that fits.

And you've met the Visitor, as she chooses to be called? That's not much of a name either. She helps me now, as Sunrise helped me when I first came. Sunrise? Or, Sunshine? No matter. He was dark, and he glowed like the sun, she chuckled.

She sat back in her chair, starting to rock again, rhythmically. It comes around. A man. Now this boy who is almost a man. It comes around.

chapter four

*What have I done? Two men and a girl. One girl is not going to live long. But the men. They're survivors. What to do with them? There is something about him who now calls himself Old Man. His bloodline is interesting. The structure of his face, his whole being. Not from here. The other, Brown... well named that one, probably native. Indian, they say here. The Ancient One may know. She knew his father. Strong. I think he can learn the talk. Both of them perhaps.*

*They must eat, of course. Something more than the food locked for who knows how long in metal! How can they survive such an insult to Life?*

*Isn't that why I have come? "The Visitor." Hah! Not for long. And then? I thought the Ancient One was the last one. She's too old to have offspring. First see whether they can learn the talk. No, first is whether they can remember. Or, must I teach them? I am no teacher! What am I doing, talking to myself in circles? First, of course, feed them! The four-leggeds are all right for many days. The two-leggeds must be fed.*

The new arrivals sat leaning against the Ancient One's cabin. It was colder up here, and, yes, it did seem lighter. They could see colors again, albeit faded colors. The Ancient One dozed most of the time. When she woke, she sat up straighter, and, seeing Brown, said, Tell me about your father, Sunrise, What a lovely man.

He killed himself, Brown said. With a gun, a rifle.

The Ancient One seemed surprised, then smiled, Yes, that's what he would do. And your mom?

She died before him. Of the sickness. My dad burned the house down with her.

The Ancient One chuckled. Yes, yes that is Sunrise. He saw true.

Old Man had followed the little interchange, looked at Brown. Said to himself: that one is all right. He has iron in him, he's seen it all, and survived. His eyes are more alive up here. Strange place, this. It's a nothing place, of course. Tiny cabin. How are we going to sleep in there? There is more than the cabin. The mountain itself is here. Solid, hard, very much the earth. Maybe what some people used to call a Power Place. As if some lines come together here.

He looked up, saw the Ancient One looking at him very intently. She seemed to nod, as if say, yes, you're right.

Old Man continued his interior monologue. This Ancient One belongs here. The other woman doesn't. Visitor. What does that mean? We are visitors too. In a way the Visitor seems to be in charge, and the Ancient One lets her.

Brown, leaning back, looked to be asleep, but he was wide awake, although he kept his eyes closed. He felt almost as if he could hear voices. He listened carefully; he heard animals. Not thinking, exactly, but talking... Two animals, a mother and son. The mother urging the son to do something. Eat more to make him strong. His mother had also said that to him, Eat, to make you

strong. His mother who burned with the house. He wondered whether the Ancient One was a mother. No, too old; of course. But maybe before? He could imagine her as a mother, stern as his own mother had been, but caring. He always knew his mother cared deeply. What she did, she did because she cared. Because it was right— whatever “right” is. Or was? He remembered his mother at the beginning. Before the Dark. How mad she had been, throwing things, dishes, spoons. Not at him, or his dad, but at those stupid assholes who... She never said whom she was mad at, but she was very, very angry. His dad tried to calm her, You knew this was coming, he said, over and over. Of course you knew. It was inevitable. His mom never argued with him, but she would burst out in tears. How could they, how could they, the idiots! And then, she had reached for Brown, who was Chuck then, and almost crushed him in a fierce embrace. The children, the children, she wailed.

Then, suddenly, Brown/Chuck remembered an argument, or an ongoing disagreement his parents had over many years. He had never understood what or whom they were talking about, but they had disagreed. His mom was mad that his dad did not “do” something, and his dad tried to tell her why he could not do that something. Because he was black, he said. Then his mom would say, But you are no blacker than I am. His mom had insisted, you’re Cherokee, or... No, Cree, his dad would say. Cree and Black. Then his mom would say that was nonsense, he was a jumbled mess— he remembered those words, “a jumbled mess”— as we all are. Look around you, she had yelled. Lily-white they are, but they are Irish and German and Polish, Russian, whatever else. Scandinavian, his dad had said. Fin, she said.

As Brown thought about it now, it was as meaningless as many other disagreements he had learned not even trying to understand. He smiled to himself then, remembering how much his parents had loved each other. And him. And, as he remembered, he also recalled that it was his mom who had screamed. His dad had withdrawn inside himself. Brown knew about that, he too knew how to do that.

He opened his eyes and looked into the eyes of Visitor woman who stood in front of him as if she had watched him for a while. He could almost hear her say something to him, but not with his ears. He looked down, could not look into her eyes. More clearly than before he heard the animals, now crunching bone, eating. They, the animals, were full and sleepy. The mother kept saying to the boy, Eat more, even if you’re full, eat more. As his mom used to say. Eat more, to get strong. The animal mother said, Eat more, then your back legs will grow stronger.

Old Man, who sat on the other side of the door to the cabin, had watched Brown, and now the Visitor. He felt a tiredness he had not felt for a long time. Tired of running, always running. So tired! He did not want to get up any more.

Visitor woman looked at him, and made a gesture with her head. Old Man pretended he did not know what she meant. But of course he did: follow me. He hesitated only for a second. He was too tired to... whatever it was she had in mind for him. He got to his feet slowly, and casually moved in her direction. Visitor moved away into the trees. Old Man followed.

You saw that, she asked? Did you hear what Brown said?

No, but it looked as if he were remembering something unpleasant, stressful. Probably something from before. His family?

You never met his father, Visitor asked?

No, I met Brown only a few weeks ago. Or perhaps a month, hard to tell when there is no day and night. I never knew him Before. I don't know him now. But he's a good kid, you know. Very strong, assured of himself somehow.

Do you have memories of Before?

Old Man was shocked by her rudeness. How can she ask such a question? Of course, he had memories, but none that he cared to relive, let alone share with her.

I'm not curious, the woman said. I don't want to know. But you remember?

Yes.

Then you know what happened.

What happened? A string of things, one leading to another, happened. All of it foreseen, and inevitable.

One thing led to another, and then the whole world fell apart. No single person can know what "happened," he said, his voice strong and forceful. It is not what "happened" he said, with pain in his voice, but it is who made it happen? We, all of us. All of us, all of us made it happen.

Without a word Visitor and Old Man sat down on a fallen tree. Lifelong conditioning made him look before he sat down, catching himself: no more ants, or snakes, no...

Finally the woman began to talk. First so softly that Old Man had to strain to hear the words. It is important that I know something about your background, she whispered. The threads, the lines, make no pattern. Do you know what I mean? Where were you born?

That is the easiest question to answer, Old Man said. I was born in China. But who my mother was, nobody knows. She died giving birth to me, I was adopted by a Chinese couple, both doctors. My birth mother had appeared at their clinic one day, while already in labor. My mother, the doctor, spent many hours, in vain, she could not save the woman's life. My mother—who I call my mother—thought my biological mother was Russian, or perhaps Bulgarian. My father, adopted father, thinks she was Arab or from somewhere in Central Asia. My biological father is impossible to trace, of course. When the first Crash came in China, my parents (adopted parents, but I know no other parents) fled first to Shanghai, and from there to an island, and from there to other islands, eventually, they reached Guam. I was three or four, I don't remember China but I remember a little of some of the islands, and the boats. My mother died in Guam, shortly after we got there. There was some question whether my father could stay, and of course he could not practice medicine. He worked in a chicken farm, I remember that. Then he died, when I was perhaps five or six. For a few years, I stayed at the chicken farm where some of the workers took care of me. One woman made clothes for me. They too were refugees from somewhere else.

When I was maybe ten I hid in a small coastal freighter that went to some of the islands of the Central Pacific I was discovered, thrown overboard. I found a piece of wood to hang on to, and washed ashore on Pohnpei. I was not the only one who tried to go east, of course. Many people from Asia tried, one way or another, to escape the chaos. I must have been twelve or thirteen when we finally landed on a beach in Oregon. There was a group of us, Chinese, Indonesian, Islanders, two very dark men who said they were from Africa, but they spoke Indonesian, probably from one of the Melanesian islands. We were a sort of family. Traveling south and east, helping with the harvests in California, then Arizona, New Mexico. Always fleeing the authorities, farmers, other workers. Our family was reduced to three, then two. I survived. I almost starved to death in a cave in Arizona. I learned to hunt with stones; I made a sling shot. I began walking north. A woman found me by the side of a road, perhaps it was Utah. She took me home, washed me, cut my hair that had grown down to my back. She fed me and talked to me. I had not heard human talk for a long time. It took me a while to learn her talk. She spoke Ute. She refused to speak English. She taught me about living. And then, when the Dark came, she died. I walked north, although it was hard to tell what north was without a sky. I have never told anyone this before. I have never talked this much before...

The woman listened intently as Old Man talked, in bursts, and bits and pieces, weaving the story of a life. Yes, Visitor thought, he is a survivor.

Old Man looked at her, and said, And now I feel I don't want to run any more. I am tired. I am tired of running. Tired of fleeing. There is nowhere to go. I can die here.

Have you ever dreamed of your mother, the woman who gave birth to you, Visitor asked?

Oh yes. I dreamed of her as a child. When we were in Guam, I must have been four, or five then, I dreamed of her. I still remember. My birth mother talked to me. I saw her face. I remember thinking when I woke up, who is that woman? I know her, but I don't know her. She does not look like me, but I am like her. Even now, every now and then, she talks to me. Tells me to go on because there is something I must find or do, perhaps. Always the same, Go on, keep looking, you will find.

Old Man who had sat hunched over, straightened suddenly, and looked at the woman, the Visitor. She looks like you, he said. Perhaps a little. The same eyes. She was darker, but of course I don't know. I have never seen her.

Does she still tell you to keep on looking, Visitor asked?

I have not dreamed of her for some time. I'm tired of looking. All is dead, everything is dead.

And you are alive!

Not much.

Did you see dead people?

You ask strange questions, you who call yourself Visitor. Yes, of course, I saw dead people. Nothing but. In cities people shot their guns randomly, or to kill other people. Kill, kill. Dead and wounded people everywhere. Dog packs roamed around eating dead people and probably also the wounded. Then cats. Finally, no dogs, no cats, and few dead people. They burned houses, trees, whole cities. They burned anything, and everything that would burn, and if it did not burn right away they soaked it in gasoline. Or bombed it. Oil tanks, whole refineries exploded everywhere, I guess. All that black smoke! Our fancy civilization burning. To make light, they said. Or stay warm. I don't know why. Only in the small towns and villages I did not see dogs, and few dead people. Maybe rats ate them.

Or Coyotes, the Visitor said. Old Man looked at her. Girl? Probably.

After a long silence, Old Man got up, walked a few steps, turned around, The first law of Life must be to eat.

And the second law, the woman asked?

Procreation probably.

Visitor woman also got up, No, she said, eating is not a law. It is built into bodies, we must burn calories and use enzymes and other things to live. The body does not care where food comes from. Some people get calories from the air they say, or sunlight. Why not; plants do. The first law of Life is that everything is connected to everything else. That must not have been built in, because humans forgot that, or thought that law did not apply to them.

Slowly they walked back to the cabin, Old Man dragging his feet. Tired. So tired. Almost at the cabin, Old Man spoke softly, You look like the mother I see in my dreams.

The woman did not answer, or perhaps she had not heard?

There was food that was not from a can. Some kind of soup with what seemed pieces of root, and other, unknown things, in it. Brown ate two portions when the woman urged him on. Even Old Man ate heartily. The Ancient One ate hardly at all, and Missy said she was too tired to eat. In the chill of what now could be called night again, Old Man curled up under a tree. His last thought: safe here, the coyotes are not hungry.

In the morning— yes, a visible morning— Old Man found Visitor woman looking for medicines to give to Missy, who was listless and thinner even than before.

What happened to healers, Visitor woman asked Old Man over her shoulder?

You mean doctors? They were all in the big cities, close to hospitals and other buildings they needed to practice their craft. That's what they said. We had to come to them.

He sounded cynical. The woman added with what could be a smile. Not very good experience with doctors, eh?

No experience at all. I never saw one professionally. I was very fortunate: I was never sick. No, of course, I've been sick. I could never afford a doctor.

Visitor stood up. You mean, sick people had to go to the cities and then had to pay much money? Where have you been, Visitor woman, that you don't know that?

I was a nurse, she mumbled. I saw everything from the wrong side. Now I know I was a machine, a robot. Half my time was spent writing, filling out forms, recording notes. BP, pulse, temp, measurements, numbers. Everything I did had to fit into the system. Only occasionally was I able to see a person. You know what that means? I asked about healers. Did you ever meet healers who knew how to heal people? You must have, she almost whispered, questioning.

Yes, I've known healers. The Ute woman was a healer. She knew herbs, plants, and she had the touch.

Visitor woman sighed, Yes that is what we need now! The touch. If I ever had it, they trained it out of me. Now, all I can do is feed you. Then she turned around. Come, she commanded, and bring Brown. We have to talk.

It took Old Man a time to find Brown, who was behind the cabin, staring at some plants that seemed to come out of the ground. Brown, come with me, Visitor woman wants to talk with us.

They went to the same stumps; Brown stood.

The woman looked from one to the other, said nothing at first. Then she took a deep breath. That girl is dying, you probably know that.

Finally Brown said, in a very soft voice, Aren't we all? Dying?

Yes, perhaps. Old Man is tired and wants to die. You too, Brown? You want to die?

No, haven't thought that way. Everyone has died. My mother died from the sickness. My father could not take the dark. All the people in my life are dead. The Ancient One, she is dying too?

Of course, we all die, but perhaps not quite yet. She has things to do. As you two do. Yes, Old Man, you too. You think you have run far enough, but perhaps not.

Old man said, looking away, Who are you, woman?

A visitor, she said, like you. I came here. I was drawn here. Old Man, why did you come here?

Old Man shrugged his shoulders, Why? We had to go somewhere and Brown had a dream. Brown what did you think we would find here?

I've been thinking about that, Brown said. Why did we come here? There is no food here, and that is what we should have looked for. In another town, and another town. But canned food runs out. How can we feed ourselves? Here there is no food, I can see that. Yes, I had that dream. We all talked about it. I don't know why, where else would we have gone?



## Earth Renews

The woman said, very carefully, as if she were choosing one word at a time, When daylight comes back, plants will grow again. And animals will come back to eat the plants. And we eat plants and animals, if we give back to the earth. That is how this planet works. Life needs life. We are dependent on all other Life. Plants get life from the sun and from the soil, and the many life forms in the soil. Animals eat plants then their excreta go back into the earth. A closed circle. When the sun comes back, and it is beginning to look as if that is happening.

But, Old Man said, that circle takes a while to get going again.

Probably not, the woman said. The cycle is still there, just interrupted. If the sun comes back regularly, plants will come back and animals. And the circle will close again.

And you, Visitor woman, can you wait for the circle to close again? Can we? I notice you do not eat when we eat. Don't you eat?

She smiled. You are observant. Yes, I need to eat, and I do. And yes, we may have enough time to wait for this planet's circle to close again, if we are very careful with what we have. Your cans help, but would not be enough, of course. There are other sources, she said with a deep sigh.

**chapter five**

There were days and nights again. Everyone felt different now that it seemed that the sun was coming back, and the planet was getting back to normal. There was much discussion about what season it was. The Ancient One thought it felt like Spring, but Visitor thought it must be Fall. In other words, it will get colder. Perhaps snow again?

Missy became more aware and talked again. She ate what was set in front of her several times a day. Frequent small portions.

Brown looked at Visitor woman, when she looked at Missy, and he knew that despite appearances Missy's days were numbered. He felt much better; he took walks in the woods. Exploring farther and farther from the cabin. He had a good sense of location, no trouble finding his way back to the cabin of the Ancient One. He found more mushrooms, some faintly glowing in the daily brightening daylight. He developed a way to test edibility. First, he touched the surface of the cap very softly. If it felt the least bit slimy, he stopped testing that kind of mushroom further. If the surface were smooth, and not slimy, he took a tiny crumble of the rim and tested it on the tip of his tongue. He did not actually taste, but some other sense in him developed. He "knew." He thought about how to take some back to the cabin. Not in his pocket, or even in his hands. He needed some natural substance to carry the mushrooms he thought edible. Once he found an old bird's nest: that was perfect but too small, and too shredded. That reminded him of his mother's baskets that she wove with swift fingers from grasses and branches. He could not find any grasses, but he was able to find some semi-soft stems of plants that could be woven into a sort of cage that held a goodly collection of mushrooms.

On one of his forays, he heard footsteps. Without thinking he hid behind a large tree. A person! A woman, it looked like, dressed in rags, but the rags could not hide her emaciated arms. She cradled a bottle in one arm, and, as if she were blind, felt in front of her with the other arm. She made some noises that could have been words, but so blurred that Brown could not make sense of them. The woman stumbled, fell down, the arm holding the bottle held out, trying to keep the bottle upright.

When it seemed she was asleep, or perhaps unconscious, Brown carefully approached. The smell told him that the bottle held liquor. The woman was drunk. Not knowing what to do, he walked back to the cabin as fast as he could.

Visitor woman was the first person he saw. Breathlessly he told her about the woman. Visitor asked, Did she have hair?

The question surprised him. Yes, matted and filthy, no particular color, but yes, she has hair.

Let's go before the coyotes find her, she said. They ran most of the way.

On the way, Brown told her he thought she was drunk. Visitor woman stopped abruptly. That's a problem, she said, as if speaking to herself. Alcohol makes it worse. Makes what worse, Brown asked.

Visitor sat down and said, Come sit with me.

What do you know about the Dark, what brought it about?

War, my dad said. Brown shuffled his feet in the dead leaves. And one of the teachers had said “nuclear winter,” which has something to do with too many nuclear bombs, or whatever they called those big bombs.

Yes, the Visitor woman said. All that, and a lot more. One thing set off another, and that set off yet another horror. Humans broke, they went crazy, they did not know what they were doing, perhaps. And in the middle of it all some crazy people also spread sicknesses in the air that circles the planet. Some of these diseases were designed, deliberately created by people, made to be lethal to selected populations. For instance, there were new, “made” diseases specifically aimed at populations that had largely been inoculated to infectious diseases, and other diseases designed to affect populations that used alcohol excessively. So, alcohol makes some of these diseases lethal. That is why this woman is probably dying. You and Old Man have escaped catching these diseases. So far, at least. We must be careful until we know.

Brown did not say anything.

She got up, motioned Brown to lead the way.

When they came close Visitor stopped, and motioned for Brown to stay back.

You mentioned that your mother died from a sickness. What were the symptoms?

Brown had to think back, which he did with great reluctance. I’m not really sure, he said. She could not breathe. Yes that killed her, my dad said. She could not breathe. That is why he burned the house, I think. Because she had a bad sickness and he did not want me, or someone else, to get it.

And your dad? He did not get the sickness?

I don’t think so, but he was very quiet, did not talk. He said he could not live without sunlight. Some people called him Sunshine, you know. His name was Sunrise, but people said Sunshine. That was not his real name, but he liked Sunrise, or Sunshine. He said he would teach me to hunt. Another time he said that. He did not say anything that day. Except Sunshine, Sunshine...

After a while Visitor woman said, And you never got sick?

No, I was lucky, I guess. My dad told me, before... Brown stopped mid-sentence. Then he continued, He said that I was lucky because I had never had shots. They had trouble getting me in school; I think, because I did not have the shots. Kids told me that was stupid, because shots made you not get sick.

Yes, she said. That is true. All those shots were designed to prevent people from getting certain diseases. But, the diseases that were let loose in the air were specially designed for people

who had been inoculated. Your dad was right, probably: because you did not get those shots, you survived.

She looked at him with that almost-smile on her face, and said, You are special, you know. You are very special.

They had almost forgotten about the woman who lay perhaps fifteen feet away. Now they looked. Her hand had let go of the bottle, which had tilted and spilled most of what was in it. The Visitor bent over, lifted an eye lid, felt for a pulse in her neck. She turned to Brown, She's not dead yet, but she will be. Soon.

She looked around, studying the trees. She looked closely at some trees. When she found a tree she liked, she said, Brown, we must put her up in that tree. See that fork where two fairly large branches go out and then up, we have to get the woman up there. She answered Brown's unspoken question by saying, I don't want the coyotes to find her. They don't need food now. Come, help me.

Brown climbed the tree and together they managed to get the woman up there, straddling the two branches, with her back to the trunk of the tree. They used some of the many shawls she wore to tie her to another branch, higher up. After they had done what they could to fasten the woman to the tree, they sat down to rest before going back to the cabin. It was getting dark.

And the bottle, Brown asked?

The Visitor woman thought for a moment, Yes, bring it. I can use it. We should learn to do without those things, you know. Glass, plastic, metal. We're on our own now. This is a very different world. There is much to learn that we forgot because we thought it was forever behind us. We should have known that nothing is forever!

Nobody asked where they had been, when they came back to the cabin. Visitor went inside to prepare a meal, she said. Brown went in the back where he studied the plants that were coming out of the ground.

During the next few days, the people in the cabin began to adjust to sunshine. Even mild sunlight, through a haze, was blinding to some. They had not had sunshine for what probably was almost a year: nobody knew for sure how long the Dark had been. When, at last, one day the sun was visible, and the next day, and the day after that, then it was possible to calculate that it must still be winter, but close to Spring. The Ancient One was right! The Dark began a few months after the Chaos, which began in midsummer. So the Dark had lasted at least a year. Or two years? No way of telling.

Brown, often accompanied by Old Man, ranged far exploring the woods. First, they checked on the woman-in-the-tree, who had died probably the night Brown and the Visitor had moved her up there. Strangely, the body did not seem to decompose. A few days later it was obvious that there must be some climbing animals that were beginning to feed off the corpse.

In their explorations the two men (a man and a man in a boy's body) found no trace of Girl, but they found several skeletons, most of them disturbed, or scattered. They found no skeleton as complete as the one Old Man had seen, where he first met Visitor woman.

The green behind the cabin shot up with amazing speed. Only the Ancient One knew what these plants were, but she would not say. She retreated more and more in her senility, smiling and sometimes giggling to herself.

Missy perhaps was holding on; she did not get better or worse from one day to the next. She ate a little when it was put in front of her. Visitor gave her little tidbits all through the day.

The days became steadily brighter; so bright; in fact, that the men were almost blinded when they suddenly came upon open spaces in the woods. Trees were beginning to get leaves; evergreen trees definitely seemed to get greener and thicker. Every now and then they came upon a clearing where the sun shone brightly.

On one of their wanderings, Old Man and Brown came upon Visitor woman who had gathered a bag of mushrooms.

These mushrooms are good, the woman said. A source of protein. Not very good, but good enough for now.

Is that what we have been eating, Brown asked?

Well, yes, whatever I could find.

Visitor had been preparing their meals. The men had not thought much about where the food was coming from. It was good. Tasty and apparently nutritious. They were feeling much better than when they first came.

Have you found many growing plants, she asked?

Yes, many plants grow again. But, I am not sure yet which ones we can eat. My mother taught me, but I have forgotten so much, Brown said wistfully.

Yes that is one of the things you must learn, finding food and knowing what is good and what is to be avoided. And how to take care of important plants.

My mom grew corn, Brown remembered. We had to know what day to plant, and then we weeded around them. And perhaps my mom did other things, I never knew what she was doing. I like corn, he said.

Do you know what tribe your mother was, the woman asked?

She said she was mixed up, when people asked her. Her father was full Apache, but her mother was part Cree, part Sioux, and maybe Cherokee. From all over, she used to say.

And your dad?

He was also mixed up; my mom said. He was born on a very small Caribbean island. His mother came to this country when she married a white man, but that was after my dad had been born. I don't know who his father was. My dad always said that his father came from the stars! His name was not really Sunshine, and some people in our town called him Bloke. Because he had an accent, they said. I never knew what they meant by that; I don't think he had an accent. He always said, "I don't mind what they call me, as long as they respect me." People were a little afraid of him, I think. He was big and very powerful. I guess they respected him, Brown mused.

The woman looked in a far distance, it seemed. Yes, it is the mixtures that seem to survive, she said. She shook herself, as if she wanted to wake herself up. Important, very important that you learn about plants. Animals too. Oh, you have so much to learn in this new world. And it will be a while, perhaps all your life, until we know whether you're the last of the species, or the first of a new try.

She turned her full attention to the men. You two are still dazed, not quite awake. Perhaps you have not come to grips with the new reality you live in.

She turned to Old Man. You have, perhaps. Do you know, can you grasp how the world has changed? She put her bag of mushrooms aside, changed her position to be more comfortable, looked at Brown, then Old Man, said: This is what we know. South of here, for thousands of miles, there is enormous destruction. Not only of cities, but of rivers, lakes, mountains that have been deforested. Huge areas are poisoned and will remain radioactive for generations. There probably are people who are still alive in some isolated spots, but whether they can move, or whether they can survive, I don't know. Yet. That's why I was careful when you came. I did not want to bring sick people to the Ancient One. She would not care perhaps, but I did... She went on, I imagine that other parts of this planet are similarly destroyed, deforested. It is now warmer all over the planet, but some people think it will be colder soon. Perhaps much colder. Who knows? We'll have to see.

Old Man asked, very softly, how do you know?

It's a long story. All real life stories are long when we live it. I was a nurse. Moved around a lot. Learned from different doctors, and perhaps even more from other nurses. And, as I became a better nurse I was asked to work more. And I also hated my jobs more, she added in a sort of aside. One time, when I had a double shift, or maybe forty-eight hours... don't even remember. Except that I was exhausted. Had a small apartment then, in a large city. I ate something, I remember, drank coffee, but went to sleep without even taking off my clothes. When I woke up it was night. First I felt strange, did not know where I was. Had strange dreams that have not quite left me. Then I heard a friend call my name. Calling me. Nobody in the apartment, I checked. Called her on the phone. "Finally," she said, "have been thinking of you for an hour. Worried about you," And so on. I don't think I said much. I was thinking about how I had heard her call. After that I found that I heard other people often. Not really "heard," it wasn't words. Don't know how to say what I hear, or think, or know. A few days later, nights really, I had another dream. That dream stayed with me a long time. In the dream, a person from somewhere else had

gotten into my body. Those people knew that our planet, Earth, suddenly had started broadcasting all kinds of energies into space. I think they meant electricity, or radio and television, or bombs: that kind of energy. They came to see. Sounds crazy, eh? I thought it was crazy, too. But, apart from the weird dream, I learned that sometimes I could sense what people's intentions were. Animals too. I never said anything to anyone, of course. Then I discovered that all kinds of people have the ability to hear, or talk inside, as I call it. Most often they don't even know that they do it. She laughed. You know, a friend who I told this unlikely story, said, "Oh, that's not weird! Don't you know dogs and cats can sense our intentions? Other animals, too, I'm sure."

When the Chaos came, I ran. What I picked up from other people was almost unbearable. The panic, the fear, anger, rage. People were really crazy, you know! So I fled my city, first in my car, then had to leave that, of course. I walked, and somehow I found the Ancient One. Her first words were, "Hah! You took your time, lady! I was expecting you earlier. Good thing you're here. You're the first visitor I allow to stay!"

I told her my name, of course. You haven't seen her when she was her old, wild self. She shut me up. "I don't care what your name is. Old names no longer work. You're a visitor, and I am ancient. I call you Visitor; you can call me Ancient!"

Old Man asked, And you think there are other people who can talk inside?

Yes, I know for sure; of course there are. During the long night—what you call the Dark—I sat outside that little cabin, reaching out to someone who might still be alive. First, I could only feel the fear and confusion, a cry, desperation. Then, occasionally I heard a voice. Often, someone who was dying, she said sadly. She looked Old Man in the eyes, Haven't you ever heard someone inside, saying something to you?

He shrugged his shoulders.

Brown spoke up, I have heard you, Visitor, a few times, perhaps. I'm not sure. I thought I heard what you said, but you weren't there. Visitor smiled, Yes, I've tried to reach both of you at some time. Now that we are more, here, it is easier to talk out loud. During that long time of Dark I would call, in my mind, Anyone out there? Anyone still alive out there?

Long silence. Visitor looked down, shuffled dead leaves with her foot. Reached down to look at what looked like another mushroom. Picked it up, smelled it. Held it out for the men to look at. This one is very poisonous, she said. Remember it well. It will kill quickly.

An even longer silence.

Finally, Old Man said very softly, At least that is a natural poison, not the kind we made.

Brown stood up slowly. Old poisons, new poisons... The sun is back; plants and trees are growing green. He sounded much older than his fifteen, sixteen, however many years.

Old Man and Brown looked at each other, and when they looked back to where the woman had stood she was gone.

Days and days of light. Nights of dark, but no longer that endless Dark. Brown studied plants. Some had now grown quite big. He would feel a leaf, a stem. Take a little nip, tasting. He remembered seeing his mother do something like that. Taking a tiny little piece of a plant on her tongue, her face screwed up, she would concentrate on getting all the taste, and perhaps more. Who is this plant? Edible, not edible? Medicinal? One of the most prolific little plants produced minuscule flowers. When lightly rubbed, the leaf and the stem had a taste that reminded him of something. What? Ah, toothpaste! He had not thought about toothpaste for a long time. He chewed on a little piece of stem. Yes, it left his mouth feeling fresher. Almost absentmindedly he took a small leaf and rubbed his gums on the side that had been sensitive for some time. His gums had not really hurt, but for some time he had been aware that he could feel them. Rubbing them with this leaf made his gums feel better. He studied the plant again, carefully. Must remember this, he told himself. This plant has some good qualities to do with mouth, gums, teeth perhaps?

Old Man had continued his ranging all over, sometimes without Brown, who now preferred to stay closer to the cabin where there were more plants. One day Old Man was not back when it was quite dark. Brown felt uncomfortable. Could Old Man have gotten lost? Maybe he would show up late. He asked Visitor whether he should go looking for Old Man.

Visitor obviously had heard Brown's feeling. No, she said, of course not. It is too dark anyway. And Old Man goes his own way. He may come back here, or he may decide to go somewhere else. He did not say anything to you, she asked Brown? No, he never said he was planning to go away. Wouldn't he have taken some stuff with him?

Maybe he will be back tomorrow.

The next day Old Man did not show up, nor the next after that.

The third day Missy died. Brown had not seen her around, when he thought about it. She had been in bed, in the cabin's only bedroom probably, and he had not been inside the cabin for some time. He had found what he thought was an abandoned shack where he had found some gunny sacks that made a good enough bed. The Ancient One, in one of her lucid moments, had stroked his hair and said, The way your hair looks, young man, you fit the goat house you're sleeping in.

Visitor woman told him Missy had died. How shall we bury her, or burn her?

The woman said she would take care of it.

Brown continued to study his plants. There were more plants everywhere now. Many trees were showing green leaves. But his thoughts were scattered. He missed Old Man; he missed the walks they took.



Now there was only the Ancient One, who was usually invisible, and when he saw her she rarely seemed to be aware. Visitor woman called him for meals that were eaten outside, in silence.

Brown felt a vague, listless despair, What am I doing here? Why am I here? But, where else would I go? Is there anywhere else to go? Why should I leave? Or, for that matter, why would I stay? His dreams had become more vivid, albeit stranger as well. He had dreamt of his mother, without seeing her face. Those dreams seemed like lessons, most of them over his head. He did not know what she was talking about. Except one thought that recurred, remember everything is connected to everything else. She also talked about plants, saying things like, you must learn to talk with plants. Ask them and they will answer. He knew of course that one cannot talk to plants, but during his daily study of the plants growing all around now, he sometimes would ask, Are you edible? He would taste a leaf, or smell the roots of a tiny plant that had come out of the ground when he touched it. He began to understand how they grew, what each kind of plant liked: full sunshine (which still was hazy, but brighter each day it seemed), or shade, sheltered by other plants or trees, or by itself in the open.

Some small creatures were back also. At least two kinds of worms, some beetles, flies. And he began to understand how they all needed each other in some way. They were a close family.

And you are part of that family, a voice said. He looked around but did not see anyone. A woman's voice. His mother's? This was not a dream, he was wide awake, middle of the day. He got up from his low position, walked around to see who could have said that. Maybe Visitor, but he did not see her.

Maybe it was his imagination, but it sounded too real to be imagined. The more he puzzled, the less certain he was that he had heard a voice. Maybe it was in his head, not his ears?

That evening, when he was eating an early evening meal with Visitor woman, he asked her whether she had gone out, and talked to him that morning.

You heard me then, she said. Yes, I talked to you, but I was in the cabin. You heard me, she said again. You've had dreams, haven't you?

Yes, Brown admitted. Dreams of my mother.

Did your mother talk with you?

Yes, it was like lessons. And most of it I could not understand. I could hear her clear enough, but I did not understand what she wanted me to know.

Oh, you probably understand much more than you realize.

Brown found it difficult to concentrate on the discussion. His mind was full of conflicting thoughts and feelings. The woman sat across from him, yet it was as if he heard her from a distance. He did not want to hear what she said, but could not deny that she was talking to him.

In you, she said.

Yes, that is what it felt like. Inside me.

Silently she moved away, went into the cabin. But he still heard her. Yes, you hear me, she said. Hear me, hear me, hear me, hear me, like an echo. Brown closed his eyes, as if that would shut out the woman's voice inside.

He dreamed again that night. Now it was not his mother but Visitor woman who talked to him. Something about... No, he could not remember. It had all blown away in the morning.

He went in the back of the cabin to check on his plants, but could not concentrate even there. Wandered off. Walked without seeing the trees. Saw some little animals scurrying. He knew he was being followed, shadowed, by the coyote. He caught a glimpse of the animal every now and then. When he stood still, he did not see her. He sat down. The coyote showed itself, sat in front of him, watching him seriously.

How do I talk to a coyote? Hello, friend. Where is the little one that has the short back legs, eh? A second later the little one peeked around his mother's haunches, then sat next to her. They sat in silence. Peaceful. Watching each other. No, not watching so much as just being aware of each other. You are there; I am here.

Brown's mind calmed. He did not think; he did not even feel. He did not know how long they sat there, the coyotes and he. When he felt his stomach growling, he stood up leisurely and found his way back to the cabin. Brown and the Visitor woman ate a meal again. He thought to himself, I don't even want to know where she gets the food she feeds me. She smiled at him. When it was completely dark she spoke up, Old Man is coming back soon.

Brown did not ask how she knew that. He already knew. Old Man is not alone, she said, inside his head perhaps. Yes, he nodded. He knew that, too. That night Brown dreamed a new dream, of a new person. In the dream he almost knew her name, As happens in dreams, he heard the name, but it did not penetrate into his awake awareness. Old Man and a woman. And more. Two women? Animals? Brown woke up feeling refreshed, and wide awake, looking forward to this day: the day when Old Man would come back with whomever or whatever he brought with him.

**chapter six**

Brown knew that Old Man was close, someone was with him. No, maybe two people, or one person and... ? Brown felt uncomfortable knowing things he could not know. But there was no escaping what was in his head. He did not go far from the cabin, stayed near. He was not sure why, but he felt unsure of his actions. He studied his plants, some now quite healthy looking. One or two were in bloom. Without any intention he smiled when he looked at those brave plants, blooming when the sun had only recently pierced through the haze. And there were insects again, too. He had not seen bees, but there were other small buzzing insects. Maybe fruit flies? No fruit yet, what can they live on, he wondered?

Visitor came out of the cabin, looking for him.

Come, Brown, don't you hear them? Old Man is near. They are exhausted. We have to help them. They set off at a brisk pace. Visitor carried the whiskey bottle of the drunk woman who had died. Probably water, Brown thought. She seemed to know where she was heading; Brown followed in her footsteps. Nothing was said.

Old Man and a tall woman carried something between them. They stood still, swaying, not walking any more, but obviously careful with the burden they carried in a sort of sling between them. The woman was taller than Old Man, and Old Man was not short. She was broad shouldered, haggard, as everyone coming from the dead world. Brown could not help noticing that she had hair! It was dirty, tangled, but he could see that it was white, and thick, reaching below her shoulders. Her face was dark. Brown could not help staring at her. A beautiful woman, he thought, and then realized that he had never before really looked at people. With a shock he thought, I am a man!

When Visitor and Brown approached, Old Man tried to say something but seemed to have lost his voice. Visitor took charge. She lifted the bundle and sat in on the ground, very carefully. She reached out to Old Man, and helped him sit down, handing him the bottle of water. Drink half, she said. The other half is for your companion. The white-haired woman sat down, leaning against a tree. When Old Man had drunk almost half of the water in what seemed one gulp, he handed the bottle to Brown, who brought it to the woman.

She smiled, Thank you. You must be Brown. I am Rock. Her smile got wider, That is not my old name of course, but your Old Man called me that. I like that name. Rock. She took the bottle and drank all but a little, which she handed back to Brown who carried it to Old Man.

Visitor had opened the bundle the two had been carrying. Another woman, curled up as a child, tightly hugging her knees. Her face was wrapped in what might have been bandages, but now were little more than dirty rags. One of her eyes peeked out from between the rags, and looked piercingly at Brown. She made some noise, but Brown could not hear words. Visitor woman turned to him and said, Brown, you remember the little spring where you camped, a long time ago, before you came to the cabin? It is not far from here, over that way: she gestured through the trees. Take this bottle and fill it, carefully, and bring it back as quickly as you can.

Brown set off with the empty bottle, quickly oriented himself. He knew these woods well by now. He found the little dripping well and carefully filled the bottle, first making sure there were no poisonous mushrooms nearby. He ran back.

Visitor woman, sprinkled water on the bandages on the woman's face, as she carefully loosened them, meanwhile talking softly to the curled up woman. Better to get these off, you'll feel better with them off. We'll take care of you. Relax. Yes, we'll look at your arm too, and the leg. Slowly she peeled layer after layer from the woman's face. Oozing wounds, scars, pieces of skin hanging by a thread. Her face was a ruin. Brown wondered what had done that. Very softly Visitor woman answered his unspoken question, Rats, rats ate her face!

The woman asked for water. Visitor woman gently dribbled water from her fingers between the woman's damaged lips. When the bottle was empty, she handed it to Brown. He heard her ask to refill it again, although she had not spoken out loud. He ran both ways this time.

It took four more trips to the little well before the woman's face, arm and leg had been cleaned, and Old Man and Rock had each had a little more water to drink. Visitor took one end of the sling, and motioned Brown to take the other, and very carefully they carried the curled up woman between them to the cabin. Old Man and Rock followed. It was afternoon when they reached the cabin, where they carefully laid the woman in the only bed, propped up with pieces of wood, softened with tired pillows and a rolled up blanket. Visitor went to the little kitchen (a sort of lean-to added to the cabin), busying herself making broth for the travelers, and for Brown and the Ancient One, if she cared to eat.

Old Man found his place under a tree, outside, and went to sleep even before he had finished eating. Rock found another tree and was asleep almost before she had made herself comfortable. Brown helped cleaning up. He wanted to ask questions, but knew that now was not the time.

Visitor turned to Brown, Have you found any plants that make one sleep, she asked? He was surprised, thought about what he knew of the plants he had observed so carefully. Perhaps, he answered. But, of course, he knew that he had not studied enough. He had found some plants that might be used for other things, but sleep? Or pain, Visitor woman said. Unasked, a picture came into his mind of the bark of a tree he had seen. He had touched and talked to that tree; it had felt cheerful to him, light. The bark was whitish, but there was also a lightness of spirit, he felt. Without saying a word he left the cabin, and went to the tree he remembered. Not a big tree, but, looking up he saw very light green leaves: definitely alive! He held the trunk of the tree between his hands, and let the tree talk to him. He had a thought, the bark, boiled in water... He knew it would taste bitter, but it would soothe pain. To his own slight surprise, he asked the tree permission to take a little of the bark. And, almost as if the tree had said, yes, a sliver of bark came off in his hand, and then another.

Visitor boiled the bark, gave some of the tea to the woman, still curled up, but not as tightly as before. A short time later she was asleep. Visitor woman came outside. It was dark, but the moon was visible through the haze.

Brown sat with his back against the rough cabin wall.

Thanks, Brown, that helped. She is asleep, perhaps the first sleep in some time. You did well, Brown. But, he said, I didn't do... I don't know what I did... it just...

I know, it came into your mind. What you did was to allow it to come into your mind. You were willing to listen to what is hidden inside you somewhere. And you allowed yourself to hear the whisperings of a tree. That is good work. That is probably what we need now more even than food.

For many days Visitor spent almost all her time with the woman without a face, changing dressings, cleaning wounds, and slowly helping the woman to come out of her tightly cramped position. Brown had to get more bark, and they tried poultices of other leaves. Some worked better than others.

Old Man, Rock and Brown spent those days together. Slowly, bit by bit, Brown learned where Old Man had gone, what he had found: desolation mostly, burned down towns. No people. Very few animals. But, he had seen birds flying again. Then he had come to a larger town, or city, where he had heard a commotion, and arrived just when a pack of large rats were attacking the woman, and Rock was trying to chase them away throwing rocks (that is where her name came from). The rats had finally left, but had done great damage to the woman's face, the arm that she had used to protect her face, and one leg. Rock and the woman had met somewhere during the Dark. The woman had helped Rock find water and food. She apparently knew the town better. Rock had walked there from "far away" she said, without being specific.

Old Man knew that the best thing would be to bring the woman to the cabin. He had miscalculated the amount of food, but, more important, the amount of water they needed. When Brown and Visitor found them, they had not had any water for almost three days perhaps. Maybe two whole days, Rock said. But, enough to make them very weak, having to carry the faceless woman very carefully.

As the days progressed, with peace, enough water, and the food that Visitor woman provided, the travelers relaxed. The woman healed miraculously, but too slowly for her taste. She stayed inside.

One evening it rained again, as it did many evenings. A light drizzle that provided enough moisture for the growing plants and trees, but was not hard to shelter from. The two men and Rock were sitting quietly. Suddenly Rock said, You know, I don't even know her name. We must have been walking together for weeks, but we never called each other by name. She was the only other person in the world for me, and I for her. We probably both thought that there were no other people left. She never said much, which was fine with me. I don't say much either. When she heard herself, she looked up and laughed. Until now that I have an audience! And the strangest of all is that you two are the first men I know who can listen. Yes, that's true, she said when Old Man was about to interrupt. All the men I knew had to have the first and last word. They were incapable of listening. They never heard what I said. They knew it all.

I don't know anything, Brown said. I am learning. I wasted years in schools, when I could have learned how to read plants, and trees!

Rock smiled. Then she turned to Old Man. I sense that you know much, but you don't talk, do you? We hardly said two words to each other walking here. By the way, how long did we walk? How many days, if you want to count days again?

I did not keep count, Old Man said. Taking a deep breath, he added, I have seen many things, and they all add up to very much the same. People are the same everywhere when you look at them from the bottom.

The bottom of what, Rock asked seriously?

The bottom of... the world, society. When you're down, people step on you, wherever you are. I did best when I was away from people.

Why then did you rush to help us when the rats...?

Old Man shrugged his shoulders.

Why did you help us kids, Brown asked with mild surprise in his voice? You could have let us die. We were almost dead then. I remember when you came.

After more than a few minutes Old Man said, maybe there are bottoms below the bottom of the world.

It was many days, perhaps weeks, before the nameless woman could walk again and move about. Her face was still partially bandaged, and her one elbow seemed locked. She could talk, slowly, although it took effort to understand words because part of her lips had not healed well. On that side a few teeth were showing; she could not close her mouth. When possible she sat outside in the sun now. The Ancient One had given her the use of the one real chair that she possessed. In the cabin were other things to sit on. Brown made a sort of stool from wood he had found and a few nails, hammered in with a rock. The Ancient One had grabbed his arm and said, You are a true son of Sunrise; the first thing he did for me was make a bench for me to sit on. I was young then and could sit on the ground, but he insisted that I sit on a little bench, not any fancier than what you have made without the tools he had. She stopped, as if listening. Then turned around, looking to the back of the cabin. Brown, she exclaimed! Did you ever look under the cabin? At the back of the cabin there is one corner that rests on a big rock, which leaves an open space under the floor. Sunrise left a box of tools there. Maybe they are still there.

Indeed, the box was there. Rusty shut, but when the men finally managed to open it, there was a wealth of tools. A good axe, two saws, some hammers, all kinds of nails, and tools neither Old Man nor Brown knew the use of. Most of it seemed in good shape, preserved inside the rusty metal box! Brown and Old Man spent days sorting out what there was, carefully putting it back neatly. Old Man said, We can probably find more such tools and nails in nearby towns and villages.

One evening, after the meal, the group sat around a little fire; almost a daily ritual.

Visitor said, Now that we have tools we might think of adding to the cabin. Obviously, when it gets colder or wetter we need more shelter. Brown still slept in the goat shed that was barely big enough for him to lie down in. Old Man and Rock had made very primitive shelters from branches and dirt under trees that gave some protection. The nameless woman slept in the bed. Where the Ancient One and Visitor slept nobody knew, but both of them were doing well enough, obviously.

It took many days of talk to come to some unanimous beginnings of organization. Rock had building skills. Brown studied his plants and trees. The nameless woman was still recuperating, and it was not clear how much she would ever be able to do,

Visitor said that she, all of them perhaps, should stay here, when the discussion had somehow veered to whether this was a good place to be, or whether they should find another place. Nobody could think of a reason to go anywhere else, anyway.

Old Man had the most traveling skills, Visitor said. If he wanted, he could go and find some medical supplies that were badly needed. Visitor explained in great detail. Stay away from drugs, any drugs. From now on we must learn to do the best we can without all those chemicals. Some very sharp knives, needles and thread, scissors perhaps, those would be most useful. And pieces of white linen, or other cloth that could be washed and used again. None of that throwaway stuff, Visitor declared., We cannot afford waste in our new world. She also vetoed books. Too heavy to carry, and most of the information not helpful. We must learn from the beginning. She added thoughtfully, I am even hesitant about steel objects, knives, needles. Hammers and axes. Sooner or later they will rust and dull. Then we will have to find tools in our environment. Better to adapt now.

Rock and Brown talked about adding a bigger roof to one side of the cabin, and perhaps later they could make walls.

While Old Man was on a foray to find a few necessities in Brown's village, without much fuss Rock moved in with Brown in the goat shed. It was a squeeze, but it obviously worked. Rock was tall; Brown was growing still, and soon would be taller. Age difference, obviously, was no issue. They liked each other's company.

Old Man returned a few days later, laden with medical and surgical supplies and a few other things he had been asked to bring back. Visitor laughed. For someone who has never visited a doctor in his life, you certainly know what is important!

He confessed that on his previous foray he had seen a basement somewhere with medical supplies. He had gone back there and found boxes of stuff that seemed unbelievably complex. Many of the medical and surgical supplies required electricity: useless now. Then he found a section that said "emergency supplies." First Aid boxes had too many things that were not on Visitor's list, so he looked further and came upon one large box that someone had handwritten on

“for a desert island.” He had taken what he needed, left the rest. Then he had gone to the general store, where he found more matches and some string. I like string, he said with a smile.

As the nameless woman improved, she began to walk again. Her left leg was scarred and painful, but she practiced daily, and consistently. Rock moved beside her, offering her elbow if the woman wanted it.

A few days later, when the woman was sitting outside on Ancient One’s chair (where was Ancient One? They had not seen her for a few days) Rock said, Isn’t it time that we gave you a name? Now that you are part of this strange family, we should know how to refer to you. Do you have a name, or a choice? The woman had trouble speaking, there were sounds she could not make with unhealed lips. She seemed to rehearse, and then she said one word, Rats. It sounded perhaps more like hats, or hw-ats, but they all understood what she meant.

Not a very pretty name, Rock said hesitantly, but...

Not thewy ‘oman, she answered.

Without flinching Rock looked at the ruined face, You are right, not a “pretty” woman now, but you are tough, strong. Rock’s voice was strong and emphatic. This Rat strong!

For the first time Rock told them the story of the rats. They were big rats. As big as a tomcat, or a small dog. White, pink and white. With red eyes. Voracious! They seemed to eat all day long. They constantly fought with each other, bit off ears and tails, legs, and when a rat even sat down, three or four others were on it, and in no time devoured it. They must have been a mutation. I first saw two the day before, Rock went on. An ordinary black rat, hugely swollen, was in the middle of the street, convulsing. But, the convulsions were caused by two white rats who could not wait to be born, and ate through their mother to get outside. And as soon as they had eaten their mother, they turned on each other. One finally ate the other. Even then, barely born, they were almost the size of ordinary rats. The next day there were three. First four, until they ate one. We walked not far from them, and the rats ran to us. One jumped on me. I immediately brushed it off with a stick I carried. Two of them jumped on the woman; I should call Rat now! Rock shuddered. It took me no more than ten seconds to beat them off and smash them, but by then they had already done their worst.

Old Man said, Yes, I saw two of them that day. They ate each other as I watched. I’ve never seen anything like it. They were each chewing and gobbling the rear end of the other. At least they won’t reproduce. That’s a mutation that is not viable!

Visitor, who had listened from the doorway, quietly remarked that most, probably almost all, mutations are not viable. Only the few that are marginally viable will last long enough to mutate again. We don’t know how long some parts of this planet will remain lethally radioactive. This new world, she said with great emphasis, is indeed new! It is not the same planet. We have to learn a new Nature from the beginning.

And we, Brown asked?



## Earth Renews

Will humans mutate? Yes, of course. All humans are offspring of an endless list of mutations. We won't know for some time whether the planet can sustain Life, as we knew it. Or perhaps new kinds of Life. Of course, the earth will heal and Life will manifest in all its varieties again, as rich and colorful as our old world was.

Brown said, But we? Will we survive long enough to have offspring, and will that offspring survive?

Visitor laughed. Who knows! But that is nothing new. Life has always been fragile, and yet tenacious. Life is part of this planet, not something added to it!

**chapter seven**

Visitor and Old Man were sitting in what they had come to think of as their “talking place.” This time Old Man was sitting on the log, Visitor sitting on the ground, her back to Old Man. Answering Old Man’s question, she began, First let me go back a little. When I got here, it was already dark, I don’t know how many weeks, months, I had wandered. Always looking for food, water. No other people. When I came to these woods, it was as if someone called me. Or this place called me, I don’t know. Most of my life I lived in apartments, in cities. I did not know how to walk in a forest. I ran into trees, I fell. I was hungry, thirsty. When I first saw this cabin, vaguely, in the dark, I thought of some story that I remember from childhood: something about a witch, a dark forest.

Then the Ancient One stepped out, she came straight to me, and said, Ha! Visitor!

I cannot imagine what I must have looked like. It took me a long time to get the knots and burrs out of my hair. My clothes were rags. One shoe had lost a heel; the other had no toes (and they had been expensive boots I had found somewhere by the side of a road).

Then Ancient One said, What do you carry?

What do you mean “carry?” I carry myself, and can barely manage that.

No guns, the old woman asked?

No, of course not.

I’ve had other visitors, Ancient One said. All men. Even before, they used to come here. They always wanted something. Or, they were on their way somewhere important. And most of them carried guns, and knives. They probably got lost, or eaten by animals. Enough of them died around here. Now you come here. A woman!

Visitor turned around, looked at Old Man, who was staring in the distance. I did not feel welcomed, at first. But, I was too tired, too empty, to move. The old lady (that’s what I called her then) took care of me. She fed me, brought me back to life. She kept calling me Visitor. I remember telling her once, I have a name, you know.

I don’t want to know it, she said, resolutely. You are Visitor.

Old Man looking down, said, Have you figured out what drew you here? And what seems to have drawn the rest of us to this place?

Yeah, I’ve thought about it. I had a lot of time to think, you know. The Dark was long and lonely for me, and I did much thinking. About my life. About people. Who we are, really. Are we that arrogant species that trampled everything in its path to... what we used to call “progress?” She grimaced. What drew us here, perhaps, is what very ancient people used to think were lines of power, or energy. I read books about “power points” on the planet. Of course, I have no idea what drew us here! But, it feels “right,” doesn’t it?

Old Man smiled. Yes, you're right. I'm getting used to feeling good about myself, about other people. I catch myself smiling, even!

And you, Old Man, do you understand Man? You've known humans in many different places, you've traveled. What is "human?" You must have known fellow humans who did unspeakable things to you, or who considered you... what? Less than they? I have become very curious about humans, Visitor confessed.

Then she changed the subject. Do you realize, Old Man, that one of the reasons we feel so good about each other is that we somehow can reach inside, and hear the other? No, I don't mean with my ears. But, I feel I can sense something inside you that is good. Sometimes I can talk to Brown, when he is not near, but he hears me. We knew when you and Rock came here after rescuing Rat. Those inside things, I feel, are what is different about us now. The woman who now calls herself Rat, she too can hear and talk inside, you know.

Then Visitor repeated what had become a refrain almost, Everything is related to everything else. Those mutated rats; they too are part of what Life is now on this planet. The poisonous mushrooms are part of Life. And Brown and Rock are part of all Life, no different, no better.

I have come to think of humans as "those who can lie."

Silence.

Then Old Man asked, where is Ancient One?

She died, Visitor woman said in a flat voice. She lost the will to live; she told me she had finished; she left her body. Her body is suspended, ready to sustain you a few days, or weeks.

Old Man gasped. You mean... ?

What did you think sustained all of you these last weeks, months? There have been no animals to eat, no eggs, no milk, no cheese, not even plants. Only dead food in metal containers, sufficient grains, and a few dead humans. In the old world didn't you take blood from each other? It was done by people in white coats, and it was called transfusion. You thought, modern science, aren't we clever. You took organs from one person (usually, but not always dead) to put in someone else who could pay. Not all that long ago you "owned" slaves. Humans have almost never hesitated to kill or maim when they called it a "good cause." The good cause now is survival, taking in enough calories and protein to keep the body going until food grows again, and animals come to eat plants.

Old Man whispered, I shouldn't have asked. But, in truth, I knew.

Brown had come upon them a few minutes earlier. He stood back in the trees, now he stepped forward. Yes, I too knew. I've known since the little girl died from eating mushrooms. And then, the woman who was drunk. I also noticed that dead bodies don't disintegrate, or perhaps slowly.

Visitor said, Very good! You are an excellent observer! For some reason maggots and some other organisms have disappeared from this new world. Or perhaps just set aside for a while.

Days after, the small group sat around a little fire. In the flow of days, they had drifted into a custom: to reflect and sometimes talk at the end of a day. Days had become longer, and lighter. Plants grew, bloomed, a few were beginning to grow fruit. Many trees in the forest had greened, although some species of trees apparently died during the Dark.

Rat was recovering from her injuries, even her face looked better, less inflamed and puffy; her remaining eye was clear. One arm was still bent unnaturally, now from scar tissue that pulled. In time, with massage and gentle exercises she would regain full use again.

The little fire crackled and spit. There was an abundance of firewood now, but the men, who had assumed the collection of dead wood, were careful to keep the fire small, feeding it only small pieces of wood. All of them looked at the flames, leaping and jumping.

Old Man commented, None of us here obviously contributed to the rape of the earth or to the avalanche of humans in the last century, or two, or three. He looked around him, looked at Rock questioningly.

No, I've not had children. Never wanted any. Never met a man I wanted children from. She looked sideways at Brown, who sat next to her, reached out and gently held his hand. Until now, perhaps. Look at us. A few people around a little fire. Who are they? Native earth people, trying to accept that they live on a now virtually unknown planet.

Rock heaved a deep sigh. We knew for years and years that we were on the wrong path, but we did not know how to change. We never learned how to change ourselves. Or change our expectations, perhaps. Or the whole everything, she said with a shudder. From birth we were conditioned, kept apart from reality. We were locked into a world of false expectations.

Rat said, dreamily, The only species that can lie to itself. Suddenly, Brown sat up straight, listened. He interrupted, saying, There is another person coming. I told the mother coyote to leave her alone. A child, I think. Old Man, will you come with me?

Without another word, they left the little fire. The moon was now bright enough to see by, except where the forest was dark with foliage. Both men seemed to know where they were going. The coyotes, the mother and the son without back legs, stood a few feet from a young boy— no, a girl maybe. Standing tall, with a staff that she held in front of her. She was thin, of course, but other than that, she looked remarkably healthy and energetic. She had dark black frizzy hair that stood out from her head. Long limbs, an almost regal bearing. She talked to the coyotes in a soothing voice, not angry and certainly not afraid. Brown and Old Man stood still, watching the scene. The girl looked as if she could take care of herself. The staff was held horizontally in front of her chest, and she seemed to know how to defend herself with it, if needed. The mother coyote made soft noises, but seemed hesitant to go any closer. The young animal sat on his haunches, as usual. He had grown some, from when the men had seen him last, but obviously his back legs had not grown out. When the coyotes became aware of the two new arrivals, they slunk back into the forest.

The girl looked at the men. It's good to see two live people, have not seen any for a while. And you two look not only alive but healthy. Is this your... is this where you live?

Brown spoke up, There are a few more of us. Come, it's not far.

Do you have water, the girl asked?

Yes, spring water, clean, Old Man answered.

I have food, the girl said, gesturing to the backpack she carried. And, she took a step back, I can take care of myself. I've learned to keep men away!

Both of the men smiled, but did not respond.

Did you just happen to come here, or did you look for something here, Old Man asked.

The girl looked at him, then at Brown. It took her a long time to gather her thoughts. Finally she said, I came from very far. South, mostly south, I think. Something in me urged me in this direction. For the past... (she counted, drumming fingers on the staff she still held in front of her)... for the past many weeks, I have not seen any live people. I was beginning to believe that I am the only one still alive. I had a bicycle in the beginning, and rode on back roads, avoiding highways and big cities. Maybe a week ago I got to an area where it seemed a war had raged. Everything destroyed, houses, trees, roads. Still smoking and smelling bad. My bicycle could not handle the torn up roads. I left it. I decided to walk a while and see whether... maybe there might be other people still alive? I can go back and get the bicycle.

The men looked again. The young woman—definitely not a girl! —seemed so assured, so self-contained almost. As if she did not need others. Yet, she was friendly and almost trusting. Strange...

Oh, but you're welcome here, Brown said. We probably have enough food. He stopped abruptly. And water, Old Man added.

When they got back Visitor had gone inside, "to make tea."

Rock said to the new arrival, Welcome, I am now called Rock. Do you have a name?

The young woman smiled. I've had many names. Names that were given to me, nick names that I sort of grew into and then out of. Since I have not seen any people—live people that is—for a while now, I don't think of myself with a name any more. I would answer to Hey You, or You There. Anything!

Brown said, I think your name is Alive.

She looked at him and smiled., Yes, I like that. A beautiful name.

Alive looked at Rat, who had been studying her.

My name is Rat, she said. It's who I am now.

She noticed that the young woman, Alive, had not flinched when looking at her face.

And I am Visitor, as she stepped out the door of the cabin with a flat board, laden with an assortment of cups, a handful of herbs, and a kettle of hot water. Let's all sit around the fire and warm our stomachs with our local specialty: pine needle tea.

Old Man put a small but dense piece of wood on the fire. Brown moved aside a little to make space for Visitor.

Alive fitted in from the beginning. Visitor wanted to know what she had found to eat; she seemed so healthy. Rat wanted to know whether she had seen any mutated rats. Brown asked about trees. Rock wanted to know where she was from, originally.

Oh, that's too long ago. I don't know. I began my wandering long before the end. I had a car then. Oh, you know, the usual story, I am sure. Everyone here must have run from somewhere to somewhere else; and eventually we all arrived here. Food... I got very good at finding food, for some reason. Water was my problem. I lugged around bottles and other containers until I dropped. Then, here in these woods, I found little springs.

Old Man had not said anything..

Alive looked around the circle, studying each person in turn. It is so peaceful here. Is this real? I mean, we all know that the world ... how to say it? ... has changed, certainly. I've been afraid for my life for a long time now. I've fought for my life, I have hidden, run, perhaps killed. Maybe I'm just too tired to care any more. I give up. Finally she said, You know, I haven't felt so relaxed for years. Almost a feeling of coming home! I sense I am around friends although I don't know any of you. I'll get to know you.

She smiled, looked at Old Man, saying, Starting with you.

Nobody said anything for a long time. The fire uneven, sometimes thrusting a flame high in the air, then almost dying, making little noises as it shifted. There were no other noises in the night.

Rock spoke softly, You know, none of us is as we seem, perhaps. Before I came here I had lost all interest in how I looked, the struggle to stay alive was too fierce. Yesterday I found a piece of mirror in the cabin, and hardly recognized myself. White hair! I only knew myself with unruly black hair. My skin does not seem to have bleached, so now I look like an old negative of a white person.

Old Man said, But at least you have hair!

Rock smiled, but did not react to the interruption. She reached a hand to Brown, who sat next to her. Brown looks like a boy, or perhaps a young man, but he is a man. I know, she said with conviction. A kind and special man.

They sat around the fire until it burned down. As they found a place to lie down, suddenly the moon shone brighter. They looked up. The haze seemed to have gone all of a sudden. There was a change in the air. Old Man said, A storm is coming. They were too sleepy to worry. Even

Brown and Rock had stretched out under a tree instead of going into the shed that once housed a goat. Brown's last thought before falling asleep was, we have not finished the addition, the added roof we were going to build.

As if to assert that the planet was still seeking a new balance, another storm followed the first within a day, the second one lasting for three days. Then four, five, more? Nobody kept track of days. Storm winds from the north, then from the west, perhaps from the south, then back from the north again. Trees crashed. It rained rivers. The chimney and part of the roof of the cabin blew away.

When the winds finally died down, and the sun shone through a clear sky, without the haze they had become used to, the first priority was to eat something, to fill growling stomachs. They had water enough during the storm, but making meals had been difficult, almost impossible. Visitor and Rat declared that they could not make a fire with wet wood, but they found enough edibles hidden here and there to satisfy the first hunger.

During the storm Brown had tried to protect some of the plants he grew in back of the cabin with his body, but to no avail. Nothing was left. Perhaps it was too early to tell whether the roots of plants had survived the onslaught. Hopefully, plants would grow again quickly.

Clouds! There were clouds again. But different, Old Man thought. These clouds were long, thin strips of clouds crisscrossing. That must mean different winds at different altitude, he knew. But, he could not remember ever seeing this kind of tapestry. The higher layer—if it was higher; hard to tell—moved faster than he had ever seen clouds move. He guessed from west to east. The other, perhaps lower layer moved from northwest to southeast. The higher layer dark gray, the lower pure white, as clouds used to be, “before.”

They busied themselves rescuing what could be rescued of the cabin. The walls seemed strong: they still stood. A section of roof shingles had blown away. They found a few of them, but not enough to cover the whole roof again. But they found something else. Not far from the cabin, a little higher on the mountain, two trees had fallen toward each other, their branches strongly intertwined, about ten or more feet above the ground. Brown, who had found this arch first, studied the trees and thought that perhaps both of them were still sufficiently rooted to continue to grow. If they could get another tree to fall into the joint, they would have the frame for a shelter big enough for all of them. After much circling around the nearby trees they found two saplings that were young enough to bend. They searched the cabin for rope, or chain. They did not find anything, until Visitor remembered, that Ancient One once had shown her where, under the cabin, odds and ends from the making of the cabin had been stored. They dug around, and soon found disintegrated cardboard boxes but the nails in them had survived intact. There were several good ropes and at least thirty feet of heavy chain.

Attaching ropes to the saplings was quickly done, then stretched to the junction of the two fallen trees. The group decided to make solid walls on three sides, leaving the south side open. With the saws they had found, they cut trees to length, stacking them horizontally, the corners fitted as the cabin walls had been made. The women caulked between the logs with moss and

dirt. They went only about four feet high for now; enough to make at least some protection. A tarp was draped as a temporary roof. Later, when the saplings had grown toward the junction of the large trees, they would build up the walls, sloping into a roof. Then they would have a large lean-to, strong, and probably providing sufficient protection from the worst winds and rain.

Nevertheless, each of them realized that the tarp and the leaning trees would not be enough cover for another rain storm, if it came soon. They found other nests where they would stay more or less dry in another rain storm.

After some discussion the group decided that three of them would go to the village where Brown had come from. There was a clothing store, he remembered. They probably could find enough warm and protective clothing to last them a while. Eventually... ? They must learn to hunt again, perhaps, and cure animal skins? They had not seen any animals, except the two coyotes, and even if they could be killed their skins would not be much use for anything.

Old Man, Brown and Rock came back laden with bundles of clothes, blankets, more tarps. They had found a cart which the three of them pulled up to their new "home." Hopefully, the tarps would be large enough for all of them to find shelter. They had a celebration that night. Blueberries were now abundant, and more mushrooms. Some potato plants had survived, and they had been able to harvest six almost full- sized potatoes, one for each person.

After the meal Alive suggested they each tell a little about themselves. She had come last, and did not know much about any of the others. They looked at each other, who would start? Rock leaned over and touched Old Man on the knee, Why don't you start, Old Man?

After a long silence, Old Man said, Frankly, I don't know where to start. I'm not even sure this is a good idea. Most of us have gone through something that cannot be talked about, we had a life before, and now an entirely different life. I know, rather than tell you a sort of autobiography, I'll share with you what I am thinking now. This afternoon as we were lugging that stuff up the mountain, I imagined who would wear which of the sweaters we brought, and I thought about how to attach the tarps, realizing that we should have brought more rope. We brought some, but probably not enough. And of course underneath all my fleeting thoughts there is that question, how are we going to learn to survive in this new world, without relying on things from the old world. There will be a time that we cannot raid stores for ropes, or clothes, or matches. I think about that a lot.

He looked at Rock, as if to say, now it's your turn. 40

Okay, as we were struggling up the mountain this afternoon I was feeling very blessed. I have met two of the nicest men I have known in my life. You're right about the old world being gone, and we need not think about it. That is a piece of our past that we can drop. But, of course, who I am now began in that old world. As a person with the "wrong" skin color, in an all white world: my father was white, a professor, very famous; my mother an African princess. I don't think she was a princess. That is what my dad called her. But she certainly was regal.



She took a deep breath. When I was twelve, we went to visit my mother's family in Africa. A huge family. The whole village and many people all around there seemed to be family. They did not like me. My father and I were shunned. But kids are curious; I know now. They giggled when they saw me first, but then they came closer, and we communicated somehow. Children find their own language. I had just started to grow tall and skinny, but the black kids were just as tall as I was, probably taller. We did not see my mother much. My father was mad, kept making biting remarks. I've had a lot of time to think about that month in Africa. Now I know that my father was mad because he was no longer the big wheel, the center of attention. My mother was. There were ceremonies where she was dressed up with beads and different color cloths. The kids told me that she was now "installed," I think is what they meant. I was allowed to see some of it, but my father was not. He kept saying that we had to get back, he had a meeting, or some other very important thing. He always had "very important" events. I never found out what happened, but he and I came back to America, and my mother stayed.

Rock was still for many minutes, before she continued. Three years later she came back, but in secret. She stayed at a hotel. When my father was out of the house, she came to see me. That was hard! For three years my father talked about her as if she were the worst criminal in the world, and of course I was her daughter, so he treated me as if I were an outcast. I did not know how to relate to my mother when I saw her again. She cried a lot, I remember. That made me feel terrible. Then she told me that if I wanted, I could go back with her to Africa. I would have, probably. Until she said, "You won't have an easy time in Africa as a mulatta." I asked her what that meant. A half-caste, she said. Half white, half black. I remembered how the kids had laughed at me at first. I ran away from home shortly after my mother went back to Africa. Of course, my father had me found. Several times, until he put me in a convent school, which was like a prison. Perhaps it was a prison. I don't know why I am telling you all this. I'm sure you all have stories like mine. Now I am Rock, and that is all.

She sat back, arms crossed across her chest, knees up to her arms.

Nobody said anything. Then Brown put one hand on her tightly locked arms.

The fire crackled. Old Man put some branches on.

Tears were running down Rock's cheeks. I'm tired. How about you, Brown. What were you thinking as we walked up the mountain?

I was thinking of when I first came here, when Missy and Girl were still alive. And how I felt then. I was a boy, getting to be a man. Now I don't feel a boy any more.

Rock, who sat next to him, turned and kissed him on the cheek. No, you're not a boy, Brown. What a man you are! And darker than I... that sounds racist, doesn't it?

Brown looked at Rock with surprise, then his face relaxed and he smiled, touching her lips with one finger. Maybe you made me a man, he said?

Everybody laughed, or giggled.

Brown continued, looking around. Do you realize we are all “happy” he said? Isn’t that strange? I’m also thinking, and thinking a lot, about the many things I have learned in such a short time. I know plants and trees in a different way than I ever knew. I cannot think how to explain what I mean, but it is as if now I can talk with them, and we tell each other who we are. I can hear the coyotes. I mean I can hear them talk to me. They don’t have much to say, but now they say they’re hungry. They’re always hungry! We too perhaps, but we’ve gotten used to being hungry, I guess. Oh, and when we were in my town—we used to call it a town, but probably it was a really small village—I knew where to find stuff. I cannot imagine how I “knew,” but I did. In someone’s basement, in that little store, in a shed of another house. Yes, I feel a different person. Maybe my mother was like this. She always said, “You don’t see. Why don’t you see?” Now I see.

Everyone looked at the little fire that was shrinking rapidly. Old Man reached behind him, got another log making the fire blaze up for a few seconds. They looked at Visitor and Rat, who were sitting closest to the remains of the cabin.

Visitor spoke, slowly at first, Why don’t we end here. Rat and I will tell our stories later. Rat still has some trouble talking as you know. But she is healing remarkably well. Very well, in fact. We are tired. Tomorrow perhaps?

**chapter eight**

The next day it rained again, but lightly. People hung around the shelter, repairing clothes and shoes. Old Man was trying to repara a rope that had split. Brown was out with his plants that, after the series of storms, had come back seemingly overnight.

Old Man asked, Do you mind getting a little wet, Visitor?

She smiled, Rat and I were going for a little stroll anyway. Same place?

Old Man nodded.

When he came to the clearing, Old Man put some pine needles on the stump: Maybe a little dryer to sit on? The two women had brought a piece of old tarp to put over their heads, but since it was almost dry now, they draped it on the pine needles and sat down.

Old Man paced, until he found a rock that provided a seat, although he had to balance himself carefully. These last days, weeks, whatever, I have been doing a lot of thinking, he began.

The women settled, readied themselves to listen for a while: Old Man, obviously needed to talk.

He continued, seeking for words, images, The old world is so far back in my memory, he went on, that I rarely think of it. But when I did, during the rains, I remembered things like telephones, television, computers, airplanes, cars, roads. Stores, super stores. Packaged food, clothes from China, oranges from Brazil. What happened? How can all that just disappear? Like it never was. And, at the same time, I realized that my life now works much better than it ever did, then. I never had time to do much thinking, in that old world. Especially toward the end. But in my childhood also, I guess. I was always scheming, where to go next, where to flee, where to hide, how to escape. Now I think about how we can improve the shelter, I've even thought about how, or where, we are to find food. But, it's not sressful. I know I can think about that tomorrow.

He looked at the two women, quietly sitting on a tree stump, arms around each other. You know, I have never lived in a family; this is the closest I have ever been to so many people. It's a thing I must adjust to.

The women sat quietly. There was need to talk.

It was Old Man who broke the warm silence, One thing I am curious about, Visitor. That inside talking and hearing you do: I don't doubt that you do it. Brown seems to do it, too. But, what is it? How do you do it?

Visitor, in a very neutral voice, Rat does it too, of course. And, I'm sure you have the ability. I've come to think that it is mostly a matter of letting go. Letting go what, Old Man asked sharply?

Letting go whatever barriers you, we, all of us had. We were conditioned, by our society, the culture, to distrust—and therefore ignore, throw away—anything that was not measurable,

visible, “real,” as we used to say. We were taught not to be aware of what we were experiencing inside. Our look was always out.

Rat added, in her hesitant way, through lips that were almost normal, but not yet as flexible as they should be, When you cannot speak for such a long time, your awareness goes inside. You must know that! You’ve been alone, haven’t you, Old Man?

Yes, sure. I lived in a cave, by myself. I never felt alone, because there were animals. I got to know mice, a little snake that came to visit now and then. Some bigger animals.

Did you talk with them, Visitor asked?

He laughed. Yeah, I talked to them; talked to myself!

But they understood, didn’t they?

Old Man did not answer right away. I don’t know that they understood. Sure, something was shared.

Yes, I accept that. You mean, you can do that with people as well? Visitor and Rat talked almost simultaneously, Of course! We are the same species. Doesn’t it make sense that if we can communicate with dogs we should be able to communicate with each other?

For a long time nothing was said. All three were thinking their own thoughts, feeling their own feelings. Perhaps even feeling their neighbor’s feelings?

Visitor began to talk, so quietly, that it was a few minutes before Old Man realized that he was hearing her. Of course, Rat and I have talked about this. Oh yes, with words. The inner hearing, or talking, is not good for understanding abstract concepts. One of the things we concluded was that in the old world our thinking was so... programmed, that we were forced to see the world as we were taught to see it. Our whole thinking: the way we were taught from childhood, to think, to categorize. All of that was fixed in our society. When you consider, the whole of our civilization was based on a few basic assumptions about what “reality” is. We were almost forced to think that the planet was just a thing. Everything was a thing, an object. And we thought of ourselves, our kind, as “owning” all of it. We could do with it what we wanted. Reality was only what you could touch, or measure, or count.

Except, Old Man interrupted, all the many religions.

Ah yes, Visitor said. But even the religions reinforced the idea that we were special, different from anything else on this planet, or even the universe. And because we were so special, we could do whatever we wanted to with the things around us. In your travels, Old Man, you must have known some native people? They did not see the world as we did! They lived in a world they were an integral part of. The natives of this continent used to say, All My Relations, meaning all that was around them was related to them. Animals were their brothers, plants their cousins. No native people ever imagined that a person could “own” land, sell it, buy it, trash it. Land, too, was part of us. But we, in the West, destroyed all native cultures. We had to. They

threatened our way of seeing ourselves, and the native way of being-in- the-world threatened our entire civilization.

Which turned out to be a house of cards, Alive's voice sounded from the trees. Rock and Alive had gone for a walk, when the rain stopped, and had come upon the three sitting in the clearing.

Now they were five. Old Man stood up, but Rock and Alive both refused to sit on a "pointed rock," preferring to stand, leaning against a tree. Old Man, too, was tired of sitting.

Alive picked up the thread at the end of the conversation she had heard. Yes, she said, I could feel something different about you two, looking at Visitor and Rat. Something strange, but the strangeness made it easier for me to feel at home here. Even before the Horror, I found it hard to trust my own kind. She looked at Old Man with a smile, Yes, even you, Old Man. The two of you (she looked at Visitor woman and Rat) felt so comfortable. I felt a deep sense of calm in both of you. Very comforting. I slept when you were gone to the village, she said to Old Man. When I woke up, I made a sort of list of the things I miss; things I wished I had done in the old world. Things I wished I could do over. But, as someone said, that old life is so far past that it has become irrelevant. I am surprised that I am still here. I thought surely I should have died, with all the millions, probably billions of others. Why me? All of us think that, Old Man said.

Except Brown, Rock said. He is completely now.

That evening, after a lazy day, they made a little fire again, Rat had made the pine needle tea. Everyone was relaxed. There had been more potatoes, and some nuts that Brown had found. A good meal!

Visitor seemed deep in thought, looking in some middle distance. Rat said, with a grin, She is talking with someone far away; don't mind her. They are trying to determine whether there is a pattern of survivors so far. And...

Now Rat too had that faraway look.

Old Man whispered, Do you notice how her speech has improved in just a few days? Amazing.

Finally, Visitor turned to face the group (almost as if she had hung up the phone, Alive thought). The only pattern that we have seen is that apparently people who were of very mixed backgrounds may have been more likely to survive than people not mixed: white people, pure black people, did not do too well. Too early to know, people are still dying everywhere. Now from a new disease. Nobody knows what it is, or where it came from.

How... Who did you talk with, Rock asked?

I don't know a name, Visitor said. But, I can hear or listen to two people, one far away, the other over there, pointing south.

They let the fire die, and almost reluctantly people sought out their favorite nest to go to sleep. The two women went to what was left of the cabin. Rock and Brown in the goat shed. Old Man

and Alive looked at each other. Alone or together? Alive grimaced, I think I shall sleep alone for now.

It must have been Fall, a time of great storms: thunder. Lightning, strong winds and torrential rains, lasting days without letup. More parts of the cabin came down, and the beginning of their structure crashed. Many more trees toppled. The little spring behind the cabin became a pulsing fountain. Even here, high up on a mountain, water accumulated in every last hollow and, as it rushed down the slope, it took away trees, branches and top soil.

It took all the engineering skills of the people (not thinking of themselves as The Family) to make the root cellar under the cabin stay dry enough to keep the food hidden there from washing away.

The structure of the cabin mostly survived (Your father built it! Visitor reminded Brown). They hauled downed trees and branches, repaired what they could, while adding space that now included the root cellar. The stove and chimney were still working. With what tools they had, and found material, including the tarps from the last trip to the village, they made a larger dwelling that had enough of a roof to keep them dry.

Then it began to snow. Temperatures dropped to below freezing and stayed there while it snowed more. The snow heaped up around the new cabin, and when they realized what excellent insulation that was, they busied themselves to heap up more snow on all sides.

Hope the roof holds, Old Man said. Brown suggested reinforcements here and there. They had made a livable shelter, and they had more than enough fire wood to keep a fire going. And there was the little spring. Food was the problem. Old Man offered to make another trip to the town where he had found Rat, but they unanimously decided that was too risky, and they did not have the right kind of clothes and snow shoes to consider such a trip.

It remained cold. The days got shorter, nights longer. They were on strict rations now, avoiding hard physical work if possible. They began telling stories. They drew straws: Rat drew the shortest. She had now healed enough so that her speaking voice was normal.

I don't know where to begin...

She looked at Visitor, Where do I start?

Let's not make rules. Start where you feel most comfortable starting. We all had a life "before." Except you, perhaps (smiling at Brown). We've already decided that our lives "before" are so far back that they are not relevant any more. I lived in a small apartment in a large city. Not the city where you found me, Old Man. I had a good job, made good money as computer programmer for a large corporation. Not exciting work, but it left me enough time to travel here and there. Traveling was my hobby. That's how I discovered the north woods and fell in love with them. I learned that I felt safe, easy, when there were trees around. She looked at Brown, You probably understand what I mean. There's just something about trees, big trees, that... I don't even know how to say it properly. I relate to trees! I discovered that if I stood with my back

against some trees—evergreens, particularly—I felt energy from the tree flowing into me. It was as if trees charged my batteries.

She looked into space. A long pause. Nobody said anything.

When things began to fall apart... Let's see. Yes, I remember one indicator. The power went out for five or six days. I could not work; computers did not work any more. No communication, no traffic. If it had lasted any longer more people would have gone crazy in that big city. Of course, we knew that things were falling apart before then, but few people realized how serious it was. There were three wars all at once, or maybe four? I lost track. It was getting harder to make ends meet on my income which did not go up very much at all. I remember sudden shortages of food and things like paper. Milk and eggs. (Wish there were some chickens left!)

Everybody laughed.

And cows: milk and cheese! How good life was then!

Rat continued, The corporation I worked for went out of business. Probably they went bankrupt, or they had themselves outsourced. There were rumors, but nobody knew what happened except that all of us were suddenly without incomes. I had some savings, not much. I knew that things were getting worse, so decided to leave the city and go find myself some trees.

I got in my car... I loved that awful little green car!

What kind of car was it, Brown asked?

Rat laughed. I did not really “love” it of course. It served me well until the end, when there was no more gasoline. Heck, there wasn't even money then! I drove all over, as the wind blew me. I felt very free. Found out I could live on very little money. I would sleep in the little car; had taken out the back seat and slept with me feet into the trunk. I ate from markets, in diners. Sometimes people invited me in. Maybe you remember the highways—“freeways” we called them—were already broken up, or jammed with traffic? And even the back roads were crazy. But, where I was, on the West Coast, there was a spirit of free roaming for a while. Until that changed when... All right, you all know what happened. Panic. People were killing each other. I had to abandon the little car in an alley. I got out, on foot, just before that city burned. The craziness had begun.

Old Man interrupted, I don't think any of us know what happened, we only know what happened where we were. But what set it off?

Oh, Rock said impatiently, who cares what set it off? Collapse of our society, that's what happened. Maybe the world. All that counts is that we survived—so far—and we are here...

Rat continued without referring to the interruption, At first, I found it hard to accept. The craziness, I mean. I had always thought that people would be calm and caring when chaos descended, but I was wrong. It was as if everyone went crazy, insane. Shooting each other, throwing children, even babies out of tall buildings. I still cannot believe what I saw then. Maybe

it was just that city. Perhaps in other parts of the world people behaved differently. We'll never know. Anyway, I escaped that city. And the next.

Then walked. I kept moving. Avoiding cities, small town to small town. Until I came to... where you found me, Old Man. The place of rats. Mutated rats. (A deep sigh) I'm skipping the time of the bombs, and all that. I'm not even sure they were bombs. Things exploded, fires everywhere. Maybe factories, I don't know. Like everyone at that time, I was in a daze. I was hiding in a shed with two other women. One of them got sick, then they both left. Many people got sick with diseases. Eventually, I walked on paths into a forest, which was half destroyed. I had already noticed that there seemed to be no more dogs and cats anywhere. I saw no birds. But rats, and probably mice, were everywhere. And, as we noticed here, bodies no longer disintegrated very fast. Is there an explanation for that, she said, turning to Visitor? I don't know; probably some microorganisms may have been affected by the darkness or perhaps by radioactivity, or a combination of all the poisons that were released all at once.

Everyone was deep in their own memories when the evening ended. For the first time they huddled, hugging, holding each other, for warmth and comfort.

A fierce sun brightened the old snow. No new snow had fallen for some time now, but it remained cold. Now the snow evaporated. Old Man and Rock went out on their almost daily chore to get fire wood. Not hard to find. So many branches had broken off in the storms, trees had fallen: these branches were now frozen dry enough to burn. Rock was trying out what she called "snow shoes," clumsy webs made from sticks and green branches. Old Man wore boards tied under his boots, looking almost like very short skis. Both the snow shoes and the short skis did not work well at all. The snow by now had some hard packed paths from previous trips. Elsewhere the snow was powdery and loose, blowing in the light breeze.

One of the boards Old Man had tied to his boots, had come off, so that he was now limping, one foot sinking in the snow deeper than the other. They laughed like children, almost hysterically. At the same time both of them stumbled, almost falling, reaching out to each other, bursting out laughing. Lying in the snow, in each other's arms, Rock whispered in Old Man's ear, I never thought I would ever say this, but I really love you! Then she laughed even louder, In fact, you are the second man I am saying that too! Just last night I whispered in Brown's ear. What is happening to me? Bigamy?

Old Man said, seriously, No, it is called polyandry, or perhaps biandry? But that is probably not right either, after all we are not married, and you are not even married to Brown.

Heavens no! I never want to get married. I'm not the marrying type. But, before all this—if that is vague enough—I did not even want anything to do with men. Thoughtfully, she added, How come the only two men who survived the Horrors are such good people?

Old Man smiled, and then laughed, softly. In my entire life nobody has ever called me "good" before! And this is really ridiculous, you know. Smooching in the snow when the temperature is... whatever it is, but certainly freezing. Yes, my world has surely changed. I have a new name, and I'm among people who accept me without asking stupid questions. Who love me. I'm going



to cry... No, I don't feel like crying: tears would freeze to my eye lashes. Then, looking Rock deep in the eyes, he said softly, I found I can love too. I never knew that.

They sat up, but did not move from the snow. Rock looked at him and said, You have such a big heart, I cannot imagine that you have not had girl friends, or other people who loved you. How could that be?

Yes, girl friends, sure. But, usually girls who had been pushed and pummeled worse than I. Being with a girl was a little comfort in a very uncomfortable world. And, for years, many years, I avoided people, shunned close contact with anybody.

But you're smart! How come you did not figure out how to get out from what you call the "bottom?"

Yes, I tried for a few years, and found the people on top much worse to be with than the people at the bottom.

Rock said, Do you want to make love?

Here, in the snow? Too many clothes...

Rock laughed again, Oh, I learned how to make love in a very tight spot: in the goat shed, with Brown.

I'll show you. We'll keep each other warm.

Old Man: But I have no protection!

Don't worry, I just had my period. Come on...

Alive was sick. Visitor was obviously concerned. Another disease that spreads through the air? Or had she carried a disease with her from before she came? Alive was listless, did not eat, although Visitor and Rat insisted that she drink as much water as she could. The third day she could drink some broth. Alive had one whole day of almost constant sneezing. The other women looked at each other: allergies!

Rock said, But then there must be pollen in the air that comes to us from somewhere else. A good sign. Apparently in other parts of the planet there are plants in bloom! Alive slowly recovered. The women took turns to stay with her and feed her water and broth. Alive was getting some color in her skin again.

The weather continued to improve. The snow evaporated further: in many places soil was bared. Brown studied tiny molds and mushrooms that came up despite the cold. One, in particular, caught his eye: a bright yellow fringe that grew on the shade side of trees. He remembered seeing something like that before. It seemed to talk to him. It was not a poison, he knew. It might even have some healing properties. He ate some. No bad effects. He brought some back to Visitor, who, after testing it herself, added it to her famous broths.

Then, one day, it rained. First it looked like snow. It was snow perhaps? Then it turned into rain. Small drops; then bigger. Then a downpour. The snow on the roof of what they still called their “temporary” shelter had evaporated before. Now the snow on the sides began to shrink and run off rapidly.

Spring, Rock said.

Everyone seemed to feel something different in the air.

**chapter nine**

Then there were days that Visitor and Rat went into seclusion, as they called it, in what was left of the cabin. Visitor came out to make meals, or Rat took over cooking. Their supplies had shrunk almost to nothing. The root cellar had saved their lives, but the previous Summer had not been very fruitful.

When Old Man asked what was going on, Visitor said, We are in touch with other people somewhere. It's vague, I cannot tell you much more than that. Apparently, there are other groups of survivors, and someone is calling. This is all new to me. And to Rat, she said as an afterthought. This is something new to me; I have to listen close to make sense of what I hear. It feels like somebody whispering in my head. I hear voices, she said with a cynical sneer. But Rat hears the same voice. So... ?

Rat said, we cannot even figure out where it is from. It could be just on the other side of that tree, or somewhere on the globe. I'm learning things I never even dreamed were real. But, when Kath... I mean Visitor, talks to me I hear it clear now. She talked to me when I could not talk, remember? And I tried so desperately to say something in return, and then she would put her hand on my arm and say, "Don't strain, I hear you clear!" And only then did I realize that all this time I had heard her clearly as well, even when she was outside.

Visitor said, Now it seems hard work. I don't think distance has much to do with it. It's not like telephone lines. I cannot think where this communication might take place. Rat and I have talked about it (in words!) and we think maybe we were wrong to think that "mind" is in our heads. During the Dark I thought a lot about that. Sometimes it feels as if Mind is outside, somewhere around the earth, maybe. Not like a satellite, but maybe a belt of something. What we call thinking, is tuning in to that band. And I connect with another through that band. Now, with that man who seems to call something like "Is anyone there?" I must fine tune my connection to his band.

And, Rat said, that whole explanation is too mechanical, or too old world talk. We know it isn't like that. Just a way of talking about something that cannot be talked about.

The two women laughed. Yes, Visitor said, Rat is right, of course. I don't know; we don't know. It's an adventure!

As if we didn't have enough adventures to last us many lifetimes, Rat stage whispered.

Old Man and Brown had explored more and more territory around what they still called "the Cabin," although the old cabin was now almost hidden behind, and within, other constructions, that looked less like human effort than a forest gone wild. They sat down on a knoll in a small clearing.

Old Man: I cannot figure out how long we have been here, but it cannot be very long. Was it a year? A whole year? You have changed so much! You were a boy when I met you, and now you are a man. And you are in your element, aren't you? I still feel strange. I am, reluctantly, getting

used to being with people who have no bad intentions. I know it., and, occasionally, I really feel it too. You seem to be at home, as if this is what you always expected. No, maybe not expected, but somehow you seem to be prepared for this marginal living, being hungry, having not enough clothes to be warm. And, when I thought of this a few days ago, I realized that you are probably the only one of us who had a good childhood, no particular traumas.

Brown smiled a little, and said, Thank you, I guess. Yes, I miss my parents, of course, but it seems so far away. That whole world is unreal to me now. Probably because this world has a realness, the old world never had for me. I can barely remember school. I think I was almost dead when you found me. Sometimes I think I had already gone away from the world. So, when you brought us food, and we ate and slept and got cleaned up, it was like a whole new beginning. And I do have a strong feeling of belonging here. These woods, the trees, I feel they are my friends, my family. I almost feel as if they talk to me. I think they do talk to me, and I talk to them...

Early one morning, Brown looked for Visitor, to tell her about a strong dream he had. He started talking without waiting for her to turn around. In this dream, I heard many people talk in languages I don't know. Calling me, calling us. They want us to join them, I think. They showed me where they live. They had gardens, and I think a lake, or perhaps the ocean was right there.

Visitor, who had turned around, smiled, and said, You have good dreams. Do you know where these people are who called?

It was hot there, said Brown with yearning in his voice. No snow, no cold. But far from here. Very far, I think. They... No, I don't know where they were. Is it true, then, he asked Visitor? Are there really people living somewhere, do you think? Far away... ?

Yes, I think you dreamed right. There seem to be groups of people that are calling to whoever can hear them.

Do you know where they are, Brown asked?

We, Rat and I, think that the man who is calling is in Africa. Crazy thought! But we both figured that. A man, Brown said?

Yes, he must be a very powerful man. He has a strong voice that certainly reaches far! Maybe not

“voice”; I don't know how to talk about this. He told us where he is. And I think he said that he knows of one or more other groups.

Brown opened his mouth to ask, but Visitor woman interrupted, Later. Old Man and Alive have already left, gathering mushrooms, she said with a sly smile. At least, that's what they said. Later, this afternoon or early evening, when everyone is together, we'll talk about what we have figured out. And, almost without pausing for breath, she continued, Brown, the corner of our shelter on that side has a big hole that lets in too much cold air. Could you find something to pack the hole, so that we can keep it warmer at night?

That evening it rained, a soft Spring rain that soaked deep into the soil, giving moisture to the deepest roots. Good for the trees, but too wet to sit outside, even around a fire. They made some space, moving sleeping pads made from dry grass and leaves, covered by rugs of many kinds, Old Man and Brown had brought up from the village on their last trip. The space forced them to sit very close together. All of them, by now, had heard of Brown's dream. He had shared dreams before. They had learned to pay attention to their own dreams.

Rat began. We have been in touch, I guess you call it, with people far away. Other survivors have clumped together, as we are doing. And this man is trying to find others.

Alive giggled, I hear you talking nonsense, and at the same time I know that, of course, you are right; you really did hear. And, of course, there are other survivors somewhere else. And of course they seek company. Maybe there are other places that draw survivors?

Why not, Visitor said casually.

Old Man looked around, said, I think we are fortunate. Yes, lucky. I cannot remember ever being with other people and not finding something wrong with at least one of them. Here, I feel wonderful being with you. We are like family!

And there are other families, Rock said. Perhaps even larger groups. Tribes, how about that?

Rat went on, This man is in Africa, we think. He says Africa. South of the equator. Maybe the southern hemisphere had a shorter Dark. They are calling whoever can hear their call. Brown is gifted, he dreams about them. And Old Man does not want to admit that he hears something, too!

Everyone looked at Old Man, who grimaced. Don't embarrass me, he said. Yes, I have dreams; everyone does. But not like Brown. Give yourself a chance, Visitor said almost sternly. Then she turned her back to the rest of them, and said over her shoulder, What is in my mind now? She quickly moved her head to look at Brown, Not you, Brown, I know you can hear me. The rest of you, what is in my mind? Don't think, just say the first thing that comes up.

Rock spoke first, Food. I think you have food in your mind, or something to do with food.

Without turning around Visitor said, Very good. I had a thought about the difficulty of finding enough of the right kind of food here, where it has been so cold, and nothing much edible grows yet. All right, and what is in my mind now?

Old Man and Alive said, almost at the same time, Cold, snow, keeping warm. No, Alive said, Keeping comfortable, snug.

Visitor turned back, smiling broadly. Very good, all of you. Yes that is exactly what was in my mind. But enough of playing games. Forgive me, Rat, go on.

Rat shared what information they had about a group of survivors. "Many," whatever that meant.

Old Man snickered. More than a dozen people is bad. People get dangerous to themselves and others in crowds. Yes, I know, I've been in crowds.

Rat continued unperturbed, Hopefully, perhaps, humans have learned something from the last few years. Or three, four. However many.

Silence. Everyone deep in their own thoughts.

Rock spoke up, softly, quietly, Yes, I agree with Old Man. People in large groups are dangerous. In my experience people are dangerous. Here we are, six of us, and we've lived on top of each other for... what? Months? It was cold; we were hungry most of the time. And yet we never fought. I've been thinking about this for a while. How is it that we are so different from people as I knew them before? We haven't tried to cheat or lie. What is different?

Rat said under her breath, but just loud enough so that everyone heard, Those who are able to lie.

Visitor looked at Rat, one eye brow raised. You're right. That is how I thought about humans. But, when I learned to listen to others, not the words but what is in their hearts, really listen, then we cannot lie. Isn't that why we get along? We cannot lie to each other.

Old Man: I hear you say "we."

Because I feel "we," Visitor said. I know we are a "we" now, because our forced intimacy has helped us to hear each other, even without words. Whether we know that or not. Makes no difference. We know each other well, probably better than we ever knew anyone before. And we are so close that we cannot lie.

And you think a thousand people can learn to listen to each other, Old Man asked?

There was a time, in early human history, when people almost certainly could feel, hear each others' hearts and thoughts, Visitor said.

After another, shorter silence, Rat continued: the man we have heard most clearly is a very unusual man, his name...

Alive interrupted, Why do I think this sensitivity is a woman thing only? Men can have this special talent that you have?

Yes, why not? Brown does. Old Man, too, I think.

Somehow I thought, assumed, that only women could... She looked at Brown, then Old Man, and Rock. Yeah, I see.

Brown said in his quiet way, You were telling us who this most unusual man is. Yes, he is African. He was awarded a Nobel Prize but...

He turned it down, Old Man said.

That's the one! You knew! Can you hear him?

Wasn't he a professor at a university in some country in Europe? His specialty was strange. Two different fields that are not usually related, Old Man continued.

Visitor said, almost laughing, You, who think of yourself at the bottom of society, without much, if any, formal education, how do you know so much? He knew and studied the universe, and when he got too far "out," he realized he should study people, primitive people. Let's say a physicist and an anthropologist. Old Man, interrupting, one is abstract, nonexistent numbers, the other drawing diagrams of relationships.

Anyway, Rat said, yes, he's the one. He is in Africa, somewhere, we don't know where. He's a powerful man, his thinking reaches all the way to these frozen wastes, as he thinks of here. Not frozen any more, and not wastes. These are my words. He does not communicate in words! It seems that this man has organized a group of people in Africa. He is calling all over the world for survivors who might want to join him.

Visitor continued, He says, because they can grow food, and we haven't much here, we should—or might want to—join them.

Alive said, Why am I not surprised by all this? A few years ago I would have... I don't know what. Laughed probably.

Rock turned to her, Yeah, you're right, because that is what we were taught to think. But, I always knew that we hear other people. At least some other people. Maybe not hear with our ears, but ... Oh, I don't know, "have a perception" of what is going on in other people's minds and hearts.

Old Man, thoughtfully, people and animals always could sense intention. I would have died many times if I had not felt intentions. Dogs and horses feel intentions. Other animals too, I'm sure.

Brown added, Trees and some plants sense us, I know.

It was getting late, but nobody made any effort to move, or change position, or say much.

Brown reached out to Rock, who sat next to him. She reached out to Old Man, who reached out to

Alive, who reached out to Rat, to Visitor and back to Brown. Holding hands, feeling the energy flow, sensing, perhaps hearing with an inner ear. As happens when people sit in a circle holding hands, even without music or a drum, the circle begins to have a life of its own. They found themselves swaying gently, in complete harmony, to the rhythm of their heart beats.

It was Visitor who broke the circle. She raised her arms. They all followed, and when the arms came down, the circle of people broke: they broke out in laughter and tears. Surprisingly, Old Man thought later, no embarrassment.

Old Man said, as if to himself, I don't want to ruffle the waters of our feelings, but what are we doing, or going to do?

Visitor spoke softly, Africa is warmer, and there is food growing and probably animals to eat.

But, how are we going to get there? Even if we could walk to Africa, it would take a lifetime. Ten, fifteen thousand miles?

Rat said, They will come and get us. Don't ask me how. He offered to send someone to take us to Africa.

Pandemonium! They all talked at once, laughing, talking, giggling, rolling on the rough forest floor. Rock and Brown got up, moved away. They looked at each other, grinned. Rock said, Not me, I don't want to go to Africa! I've been there. And, Brown said, I belong here. I think we both belong here.

That night Brown dreamed of "the professor," as he thought of the man now. He had never seen his face—the television in their house had rarely been on—nor had he heard of him before, but now, in the dream he heard the man very clearly. In the dream they sat across from each other with a tiny round table between them, and there had been coffee, very aromatic coffee. Brown did not remember what they had talked about, but he woke up knowing that the professor not only trusted him, but thought highly of him. He lay awake for a long time, trying to recall any words. But, it seems there had been no words. He remembered the face across that little table. Not black, but a color he had never seen on a person, with a halo of white hair, wide mouth, twinkling eyes, a flat nose. The professor had looked small, much shorter than he was. Maybe only five feet tall? They had been sitting down, so it was hard to tell. Brown considered what he should tell the others when they woke up. Or maybe there was really nothing to report.

Rock, sleeping next to him, had a restless night. Brown looked at her white hair and dark skin. He thought her very beautiful. And very strong. She reminded him of his mother, who had that same independence, and a similar "rock" quality, that he associated with who now called herself Rock. His mother had definitely been a strong woman. Quiet, but strong. When he thought about his mother Brown always wished he had learned more from her. He knew that she could have taught him so much that now would be important, but his school in the city had taken all his time. He had been a good enough student. Without working hard he had made reasonably good grades, but he had always known that the words, heard and read, did not add up. The things he learned in school—was forced to memorize—never seemed to fit into his life. His mother had known that, he now realized. She had suffered for him, or maybe for what he would become. He smiled to himself, perhaps the Dark had come just in time to rescue him from that foreign world.

Rock stirred. She always knew when he was awake. Without opening her eyes, she reached out to touch his face. Said in a sleepy voice, Did you dream well?

Brown mumbled something.

Rock said, I dreamed, but I could not understand. Frustrating. Someone was talking to me, and I did not understand the language. I knew perfectly well what he was saying, but why all those guttural sounds and the singsong? Like overhearing an intimate talk between people that



you're not supposed to listen to, but you cannot help hearing anyway. And there were too many people around, all talking different sounds. They seemed happy, though, so it was a good dream.

Yes, Brown said with certainty, it was a good dream. I too dreamed of those people in Africa. Or, at least the man, the professor.

Rock sat up suddenly. Yes, I saw him too. He was in a corner with some other people. First, I thought he was a child. A little man, but with a strong aura. I don't really know what that word means, Brown, but he radiated some kind of strength. A firmness. He knew ... He knows!

It seemed all of them had dreamed of "people." Alive had dreamed of dark people on an island. Fishing maybe, she thought. They were going out in boats that looked sort of primitive, but the people knew how to paddle them in the water. They were going out fishing. And they danced.

Old Man said nothing all morning. Deep in thought. Visitor looked at him now and then. She was the one who saw the tears in his eyes. She said, so that all could hear, Old Man, would you help me today, I must get some more wood and find more mushrooms? When they were far from the cabin, they sat down. Neither of them saying anything.

Finally, Visitor reached for his hand and said gently, I saw your tears this morning.

Old Man looked away, then turned to her. Last night I saw my mother. I saw very clearly. Her suffering, her pain. I don't think it was the pain of childbirth. Another kind of pain. But she was awake, aware. She said something to me without words, but I could not hear her. I asked her who my father was, and she did not hear me. She was fading fast. I tried to hold on to her, ask her, but it was too late. She died. Again. A real nightmare. I cannot get the dream out of my head now. I keep wondering why we could not hear each other. And of course I still do not know who my father was. But, strange, I got a strong impression of my mother. The man must have been a good man, a very unusual man, strong, thoughtful. Nothing to be ashamed of, was the feeling I had. What do you think?

Visitor woman thought, considered. I would say that was a good dream. You feel that your father was a good man. You are who you are, now. You did not know either of your birth parents, and you had only a few years with your adopted parents. I have wondered how you could have grown into such a fine man. Perhaps you have suffered as much as your mother, in your short life that has been so rich with pain. Have you thought why you dreamed of your birth mother and father? Why now?

Old Man looked up surprised. Do you think it has to do with the man in Africa?

Or, with the fact that the world is not ending after all, Visitor said. You've been thinking that you had come to the end of your path, and now there is a whole new path for you. For us.

But, what would that have to do with dreaming of my biological mother?

Haven't you thought about your genetic background, Old Man?

Old Man actually blushed. Yes, I think about that. What if my father had been some kind of bandit or criminal who raped my mother? What if my mother was a prostitute? Not that I haven't known prostitutes who were good women. Circumstances... He did not finish the sentence.

After a while Visitor said, Old Man, let me share with you some of the things I have learned about people. I was a nurse, and I read a lot. Homo sapiens is so diverse that I sometimes think we must be several different species. Not only in appearance, but in character. Humans differ so enormously from each other, that I still do not quite understand what we are, who we are. But, one thing is certain, people are born with different potential, different possibilities. And then, you add very different opportunities. The old nature and nurture thing. Of course, it is not as simple as that. Humans, for the past few hundred years, had a tendency to simplify everything to the point where it became meaningless. You yourself are an example of a man whose possibilities are unknown, but whose opportunities have been hard, difficult, painful, and immensely varied. The fact that you have not only survived the hardships of your life but through it all have maintained, or maybe acquired, a great heart, tells me that your genes are worth spreading. The man in Africa calls himself Solomon, as you must know; his last name I cannot pronounce. He asked whether anyone from here would be interested in joining him, What could we say? Rat and I know that we here are all wonderful, strong people. We had to be strong, to survive what we went through.

Old Man twitched, Are you changing the subject? You've changed the subject two or three times already. I appreciate all you have said. I'm still thinking about my dream, and why I dreamed it. It was very real, you know. Dreams always feel real, don't they? I guess I should be honored, or flattered, that you consider me fit to father new humans: that is what you meant, isn't it?

They both laughed.

Visitor said, When Rat first told me that she thought of humans as people who can lie, I told her that to me, humans are people who can laugh, even at themselves.

**chapter ten**

Rain, rain, rain. Often, soft drizzle rain that soaked into the hungry soil. A few times fierce but short storms. After many days the sun came out hot and bright. The six—they thought of themselves as the Family, now—rejoiced. Their food supply was almost gone. They were all hungry, but sunshine made them forget their hunger temporarily.

Although Visitor and Rat continued their periods of silent concentration, the others spent time alone. Spring seemed to affect everyone differently, but all of them had a need to be outside, to move, to explore. They all sought reasons, or excuses, to go out, all in different directions. Brown studying his plants again, all of them coming up fast, and new ones emerging in the woods. Old Man came back one day with a staff, strangely like the one he had when Brown first met him: gnarled, bleached white, and strangely twisted. Brown had a sudden impression of a braid. Old Man caressed the staff, took it with him everywhere, even inside, never letting it get far from him. When Alive made some comment, he said softly, This staff is part of me; I cannot leave it. Almost as if I need it to touch my body.

Why, she asked? Does the staff makes you feel safe?

Yes, Old Man said hesitantly, safe and something else. It reminds me to forget the past. It reminds me of being Light. Silly, eh?

Why must you forget the past, Old Man? Sometimes it is better to just accept it and then go on from there.

Maybe that is the same thing? Not so much any more, but a while ago I was haunted by my memories: memories of when I almost died, times of hunger, of being degraded, or hurt by people. And those memories seem black to me, dark. Now I appreciate the sun more than I ever did. Now I know it to be a necessity of Life.

Finally, after three days Rock shook her dark moods. We're all worried about leaving here, isn't that it? I have this premonition, now that the days are longer, things are growing everywhere here. That man wants to take us away. I don't want to go to Africa! And, as she said that, she burst out in tears.

Brown immediately moved to her side, but she pushed him away. No, I must deal with this myself. You have been... All of you. I look at you, Old Man, Brown, Alive, Visitor and Rat, and the idea of losing any of you tears me apart. It feels as if all my life people have been taken away from me, and just as I am putting down some roots with a loving bunch of people, someone tells us that we should go to Africa!

Alive spoke up, hesitantly after Rock's outburst, It was a comfort to think that the old world was dead. I felt safe with the few of us here. Now it seems that there are others, thousands of others. I cannot face the idea that we will rush to get that old world back again.

Old Man said, Those who can lie, Those who can laugh, but also Those who can kill. And, I would add, Those who can torture their own kind, endlessly, for no reason. Yes, when I think of the old world I too think it would be better if Homo sapiens would not survive.

But, Brown said, what if there is, or can be, a new kind of human? That is what the professor says. He thinks we can change. We have changed. Those who survived have changed, he thinks.

Old Man stuttered, What does he know? He was awarded a Nobel Prize. Do you know why he turned it down? He said, he hadn't earned it; he did not know enough yet. Or, something like, he did not do the research, it was other people's research that he had reinterpreted. And now, after the Chaos and the Dark, he knows enough? And how did he get to Africa?

Brown interrupted, Because, the professor said that Africans had experienced chaos before we in the west did, they learned how to survive, despite odds that we, even now, could not imagine. That's how I understand what I hear, but I'm not sure. Perhaps I made that up. I remember my dad, looking out the window, biting his lips, thinking about what was happening in Africa. "My people," he said. And then, my mom would scold him, and...

Alive interrupted, gently, What is it exactly that we have to learn in order not to do as we did before?

Old Man, That's a long list. No more waste, no greed, no thinking that one group is better than another, or better than all others. No petroleum products and other substances we steal from the earth. No more machines, I would say. No weapons. I can go on...

And, Rock added, respect for another, and for all creation. We have to kill plants and animals to eat, but we must do that with the greatest respect and thankfulness.

Brown smiled, You sound just like my mother.

Alive, And those words Visitor always says: everything is related to everything else. I think about that often. I am related to these trees that survived as I did. I am related to each and all of you. I am daughter to the sun who we missed so terribly during the Dark. No, I think of the sun almost as my mother, who gave me back a new life.

Brown, I think of the earth that we stand on, and is our shelter and our food. Probably we are made from the same stuff as the earth, don't you think? We are children of the earth.

Old Man, with a deep sigh, said, And I am still scared of a thousand people.

Rat: I've listened to what you said. I'm too old for a move. I told Katherine (who you call Visitor) that I want to stay here. And if there is no food then I will die. But I'm not moving.

That night, after everyone was asleep, Visitor called Brown, careful not to wake the others: Are you awake? Can you wake up? You are needed.

Brown yawned. Then, wide awake, got up and joined Visitor, who sat in a dark corner of their shelter. Solomon wants to talk with you. When Brown did not understand, she added, The man in Africa, who you call the professor!

Yes, how... what do I do?

He clearly heard a voice, chuckling, Pretend we are sitting at that little round table, and you see me, as in your dream! Close your eyes, if that is easier.

The little round table and the coffee came back easily.

Do you see me, hear me?

Yes. I smell the coffee! We don't have any here, and before, my mom did not let me drink it.

Without any small talk, the man in Africa said, clearly in his head, Katherine tells me you don't have food.

Katherine?

You know her as Stranger (No, Brown thought, Visitor). Her name is Katherine.

Yes, she, Katherine, cooks for us. We don't know where she finds food. Maybe we'd rather not know. Have you hunted, the professor asked?

No, my dad (the professor heard "father") was going to take me hunting but the Dark came and then it was too late.

Brown realized he was putting words to what he heard inside. He heard something, he saw that little man, the round table. But, to Brown it was a dream, not conversation. When the man in Africa, (Solomon?) asked something like, "do you want to come here," and, "here, there is food," Brown understood the questions, but did not know how to answer. He felt embarrassed. The thought of leaving a place that was intimately familiar was too difficult to even consider. He tried to "say" something, but did not know how to.

The man talked. Brown heard, or felt thoughts, sometimes words, but not clear. Then, what he heard became a distant buzzing. He must have dozed, then slept again.

When it was almost light, Visitor (Katherine?) sat beside him as he woke up. Did you dream, she asked?

Brown rubbed his eyes. Yes, something about food. Oh, and that man, the man from Africa, he talked to me, but I could not understand much. Yes, he said they had food. Coffee! I remember the smell of coffee—he smiled—but my mother never allowed me to drink it.

Visitor/Katherine brushed hair out of his face. Maybe we'll find food here. It is so much warmer now, and things are growing well. With so much green, maybe animals will come back too.

Brown was fully awake now. You know, I hear some plants clearer than that man. His kind of talk is strange. I'm not sure what all he said. Only that we have no food here, and he has food. So we should all go there? And something he said about learning from simple people.

Visitor/Katherine mumbled, "primitive" he meant.

Old Man and Rat were arguing. Now that it seemed the species Homo sapiens might survive, was that a good thing? Old Man said he was not exactly proud of what his kind had done. I don't trust humans, Rat!

You trust me?

Yes! Yes, Rat, I trust you. I know you. I've known you when you were healing your wounds. I admired you for hanging in, never giving up.

That was Katherine, too. She always urged me on, You can do it, she said. You can do it. When I was not at all sure that I could "do" anything.

Old Man said, as if surprised at what he was thinking, I don't think I have ever known a group of people so intimately, as I know us. I wonder how I changed? I haven't forgotten my old life; I wish I could! But it is dim, way in the background.

I cannot forget, Rat said. You saved my life, you know. And, from what I hear, you saved Brown's life. It is that, deep inside you, that we love in you, Old Man. Admire!

They were children, Rat! How could I not help them?

Rat did not say anything for a long time, then she whispered, Old Man, why did you save us?

Old Man shrugged his shoulders, Automatic, Rat, automatic. An instinct.

Rat could not help chuckling, You may be dense at times, but your instincts are solid, and I think very human! Then she asked, have you talked with Solomon, that man in Africa? Old Man sounded irritated. How can I dream someone else's dream?

Rock went to find Brown among his plants. She took his hand, Can we walk a little way, she said softly?

After walking in silence, they found a clearing with two fallen trees. They sat down, close. What do you think, Brown? Do you want to go to Africa?

Brown did not answer for many minutes. Rock almost thought he had not heard her. He seemed absent-minded, looking far away.

Africa... why should I go to Africa? This is my mountain. I have lived here all my life. I was born a few miles from here.

He turned to face Rock and said, Did you know I was born in our house? My mother did not want to go to the city hospital. She said there were bad spirits there. People die in hospitals. She always said that. My father said that his forefathers probably came from Africa. But, he was from

the Caribbean. Why would I go to Africa? Then he continued with a strong voice: I've been thinking. My mother's people were from here. They found food here. Why shouldn't we find animals for meat and fur? My mother always said, this (this mountain) was a good place to live. Holy, she said. Good spirits. In my mind I have searched for animals, you know. I cannot explain what I mean, but in my mind I searched close by and far, and I've found some animals. I think deer. Many of them. And they are moving in this direction. I've been thinking how I could capture one. My father never taught me how to hunt (he sounded sad and disappointed), but I can learn. I don't like the idea of killing. There's been so much killing already. But we need food. One deer—the kind I've seen in my mind—would give us food for a long time. In my mind I've tried to talk to them as I talk with you, or with Visitor, who we now have to call Katherine. He giggled, looked at Rock. That's funny, isn't it? I talk about talking with a deer I have never seen up close.

Rock said gently, Brown, I believe you. I have no doubt that you really have that gift. Can you teach me?

Brown took her hand, I don't know how to tell you. It's really easy. Not thinking is the first part. I remember when I first talked with a tree. I put my hands on the bark, and felt... something. Almost like some kind of energy flowing under my hands. I tried to explain it as they taught us in school. Energy, like electric energy, or water flowing. The more I thought about that, trying to understand the science part, the less my hands felt. So I shook my hands: he shook out both hands by his side, strongly. And then realized I liked what my hands felt a lot better than what my brain was trying to explain. So I said to that tree, Hey tree, I can feel your strength, coming up from the earth, going out to all your branches, to the tiniest leaves high up. The tree did not have leaves at the time, you know, he said in an aside to Rock. And the tree answered. Not in words, of course. But I could feel, sense, that the tree was putting feelings in my hands, and suddenly I “knew” that the tree was making leaves. I did not think that, I did not figure it out. It just came into my head, so I feel the tree talked to me. I'm making leaves, it said.

He turned sideways and holding Rock's hands, said, The most important part is not thinking.

Rock was silent, then she began to talk, first slowly, searching for words, then it all poured out.

Yeah, when you started, I understood. I could feel what you were saying inside me somewhere. I know what you mean by not thinking. She laughed, You should have heard my father! “What, day dreaming again! Think girl! Use your head!” Then she put her hands on the tree they were sitting on. I don't feel anything, Brown.

Brown got up, reached out and helped Rock stand up, then walking to a large, solid tree, he said,. Here, feel this tree.

Brown! I can feel it! What a difference. Yes, I can feel the tree. I don't know what it is saying, but I can feel its energy.

Brown looked over his shoulder, Shh, listen!

Rock looked where Brown looked, started to say something.

No, don't talk, don't think. Just listen inside. An animal. Not close by, can you feel it?

Rock closed her eyes, heaved a sign. Listened.

It—no, she—just calling... Her son... Rock kept her eyes closed. Not a large animal. Sad. I think her son is dead. Yes that is what I hear, she said as she opened her eyes and looked at Brown.

It's the coyote. The little coyote that did not have back legs died. You heard her! Come we must go find her. Do you know where she is, he asked Rock?

I think so. I hear her so clearly. In that direction. Briskly, they walked.

The coyote was standing a few feet away from the little animal without back legs. It was clear that it was dead, lying on its side, mouth open, tongue almost to the ground. As Rock and Brown came closer the mother hissed and showed her teeth. Brown hunkered by the little coyote, laying his hand on its head. He looked up at the mother, talked to her. You've been a good mother, I'm sorry that your son did not live, but he must have had a hard time from the beginning, his back legs...

The coyote looked at Brown, stepped back and faded into the wood.

For the first time they heard the coyote sing, a sad song of mourning.

Brown looked at Rock, Now this is food.

Rock shivered briefly, but then nodded. We'll bring the little fellow to Visitor— Katherine— she knows what to do.

Brown said, It is time we learned what to do also. We must honor this little beast that gave itself to us. Coyote's song was fading.

Alive and Old Man were at the shelter. Alive said, I've always dreamed of living where it is warm. Hot. Sunshine all the time, fresh fish, beautiful people, singing and dancing. What a romantic you are, Old Man teased her. Haven't you heard any real stories about third world countries, as we used to call them? Cannibals, feuding war lords, hunger. Underneath their beautiful dark skins they're still people, greedy, selfish, cruel. Men raping women and killing other men.

No, Old Man, I don't want to believe that. What has all that greed and violence led to, eh? The Chaos and the Dark. Now we're starting over again. Give us a chance. I don't know how I have survived the last few years, or even before that (she shivered). Twice I thought I was dead, or dying. No, three times. But, there always must have been something in me that told me to go on living. Get up and walk again. Isn't that the story of your life as well, Old Man?

Yeah. I don't understand it myself. Kicked down, I got up, nursing my bruises or cuts. Healing in hiding, I called it.



## Earth Renews

And now, Old Man. When was the last time you were kicked, or bruised and cut?

Oh, I got smart. I hid all the time. I avoided people. I stole food. I ate rotten fruit in orchards. But you're right, here with the few people who survived—so far—I feel safe.

You want to go where there are other people? Unknown people, speaking who knows what language. Will they welcome you? Will they welcome us?

**chapter eleven**

White Cloud heard the coyote sing. He listened more carefully. One coyote? They live in families, he knew. As he listened more carefully yet, he could hear the sadness in the song. He had not heard coyotes, or wolves sing for a long time. Maybe this was the last coyote? Softly at first, then gaining in volume he answered. The coyote answered, but briefly, then went back to its sad song. White Cloud sat down, his back against a strong tree to give him life again. Why am I wandering in this empty world, he said to himself. No more coyotes. For how many moons now had he wandered here and there, first in a dark twilight, now in daylight again? For what? He had not found any of his people, or any people for that matter. Some plants and animals seemed to have disappeared as if they had never been. He wondered. He stomped his crooked staff on the earth, Hey Mother Earth, what happened? You sick? Yes, a great sickness. He felt it, This Indian should change his name to Dark Cloud he said aloud to the trees. Then he laughed, As if that would help the Mother heal. It would be a long time, he knew. Not in his lifetime; what was left of it. But, then he saw little ground squirrels playing. Eh, little ones, where have you been hiding all this time?

Suddenly he heard a voice. He shook his head. Pulled his ear lobe. A voice? His ears did not hear, but in his head he heard clearly. A man, a boy, calling. Not calling him. Just calling, searching.

White Cloud answered in his head. You, boy, where are you?

The calling voice stopped abruptly. Then, tentatively, Someone? A person is there?

A man is here. White Cloud stood up, his white hair flowing behind him well past his shoulders, the shreds of clothes loose around his emaciated body. But, he stood proud. A man stands here, he said again. I come, the boy said.

I meet you, White Cloud said, walking to where he knew the voice came from.

It was afternoon when they met. For a long time they stood, each taking in the other. White Cloud saw a man, a young man. Why had he thought boy? Tall, and thin but not emaciated as he knew himself to be. His clothes were a hodgepodge of old and older. The man had remnants of shoes on, clumsily tied with rope and string; White Cloud was barefoot, the soles of his feet calloused. Better than shoes, he thought to himself. He liked the face of the boy: open.

Brown saw an old man, straight and proud. He looked in the man's eyes, saw the twinkle.

Both men smiled and reached out their arms at the same time.

The old man said a few words, probably his name, Brown thought, but in a language he did not understand. Then, in a voice that seemed rusty he said, White Cloud, my name.

Brown said his name, pointing at himself.

White Cloud thought, Yes, he is brown all right. A dark brown, like some woods are brown inside. A good, strong nose, broad, the lips full.

White Cloud made some hand signs. Obviously, Brown did not know those. He said, the coyote called me. And then you called me? Not Indian, you?

My mother, Brown said. I did not know there were people he said almost apologetically. I was calling the animals, still far away, but moving this way. Deer I think. You saw deer?

I don't know what they are. These seem bigger than deer I've seen before. Maybe another name?

As he talked, White Cloud got a glimpse of the animals Brown was seeing in his mind. Ah, elk, he said. Suddenly, Brown realized they had been standing here for many minutes, not even sitting down, just getting to know each other. Come, he said, there are others nearby. Good people.

Food, you have food, White Cloud asked? And water?

Yes, we have good water. A strong spring, but not much food any more. That is why I was calling the...

"elk" you call them? But, we have enough to share. Come.

White Cloud walked slowly, but steadily, without stumbling or rest.

As they were getting close to the shelter, Brown realized he should call ahead to let them know that he was bringing a new man, an Indian. He called Visitor (Katherine!) in his mind. She answered almost immediately. Yes, I know, she said. We are all here.

White Cloud seemed to fold into himself when he saw five more faces watching him, smiling, talking. Someone asked him a question, another said something; his ears closed off confusing sounds. Even his eyes could not properly focus. He had not seen so many strangers, all at once, for a long time. Brown knew his confusion; he said, We'll go outside and sit for a while. He took White Cloud's elbow and gently led him away.

Where did Brown find that man, Alive asked? Old Man said the man must be Indian, somewhere in the north? Rock did not say anything, but she felt the confusion, and something else, deeper. Softly she said, That man has been alone all this time, years maybe. He has not met any other people for a long time. Does that mean there are no people left? So few of us!

Visitor (Katherine) said, I've searched for people now and then, and you are right: there are few of us. Not any nearby at least. There are some people who are very sick, dying probably, or starving. I can sense large areas where I cannot feel any life at all, not animals, not even rats, looking at Rat.

Nobody said anything. So few, so few...

That afternoon, when Katherine and Rat again had made a soup, with the last of the shriveled potatoes, some other things. White Cloud did not eat much, said even less. Brown wondered whether he was shy or did not speak much English. He did not eat much either, he noticed,

although he looked hungry. He felt responsible for the man. He did not know why, maybe because he was Indian, as he was. Or, at least half Indian.

They sat around a little fire in the evening, talking a little.

When there was quiet for a few minutes, White Cloud spoke up, I heard a coyote sing. I did not see it. I have not seen wolves any more. Maybe they all gone?

Rat, who sat on the other side of White Cloud, turned to him. You've come far?

After a short pause, Yes, very far. I don't know this place. I don't know where I am. I belong another place, far way. Yes, very far.

And you did not see wolves on your walking? Did you meet people?

A long time ago, yes, some people. All sick. A new sickness. He looked around, his gaze resting on the hair growing back on Old Man's head, and Brown's now shoulder length thick, dark hair. The no-hair disease, he continued. They die. All them die. The babies die; old people die. I don't die, still hair.

Rock said softly, and then?

I start walk. I walk. Away from the sickness. Long, long winter. Sun no come back for many moon. No moon. Maybe I dream. Long dream. Tired, I walk. I dream, I walk. Snow, no tracks. No animals. No food. Alive said, And now the sun has come back, and the moon. Perhaps animals will come back too. There is a coyote.

Brown said, in a strong voice, That coyote is the last. She sang a sad song, mourning her baby and mourning the end of coyotes. Brown shivered and hunched over, wrapping his arms close around his chest.

But, White Cloud said, now elk come? We go hunt? Yes, we go hunt. You teach me to hunt?

Yes. Yes, I teach. You look man, inside boy. But, then he corrected himself, No, you man, I tell hunt. He smiled and seemed to relax for the first time.

I never learned to hunt, too young when the Dark began and my father... my father died. And my mother.

I teach, White Cloud said again. Now rest. Then we hunt.

Then, an afterthought, he turned full to Brown, You pray? I teach you pray. Come.

They moved away from the fire. When they were out of sight of the fire with the few people sitting around, White Cloud explained that first you must call them. Brown had already done that probably. Then you must find where they are going to be. Then you talk to them, and talk to the spirit. You tell the spirit of elk that you are hungry, and that you need one elk, not too large, only a few people here. And you tell him you honor, you praise, you thank. Then you wait. You have knife?

Brown had to admit he did not. But Visitor, no, her name is Katherine, she must have some good knives because she always made their food.

Tomorrow we find knife. I teach you. Now sleep. And pray the call, the ask, the tell, the honor.

Resolutely White Cloud curled up between some roots of a large tree and dropped off to sleep. Brown looked at him, feeling... . He felt his mother might have sent this man to teach him to be Indian. Yes, he wanted to learn how to hunt and wished fervently that his dad had taught him. He thought of all the years of his youth that were wasted in school, learning things that were irrelevant in his life now. History, an endless list of dates and battles. Why should he know the names of rivers and places he would never see? Math, grammar. Nobody had ever mentioned plants, and how to learn from them. Nobody had ever said anything about hearing, talking, knowing inside. He shook his head, debated whether he would go back to the goat shed he still shared with Rock, but decided tonight he would sleep here, near White Cloud.

Old Man had not said much all evening. He had listened very carefully, however. He felt the thoughts, feelings of the little group swirling like the eddies at the edge of a stream. His last thoughts before dozing off were questions: who was his mother, his father? Would he ever know? Was it important?

That night, as previous nights, Katherine and Rat talked before going to sleep. Brown's seeing of the animals coming this way, finding White Cloud. That might make the difference: finding food!

The next evening, after a sparse meal, the group—now seven people—sat around a small fire again. It was becoming a regular ending of the day. There was a tension in the group that must be plain to everyone there. They were curious about White Cloud. Who was he, where did he come from, why did he come here? Rat and Katherine were absent-minded, stumbling around in their own vague feelings of unease.

It was Brown who broke the silence. Very softly, he introduced White Cloud again to everyone here, naming each one, and telling a little of his own story. He mentioned the village, not far from here. He, briefly talked about how he and two girls had been found by Old Man, who had given them food and water. We were almost dead, he said. If Old Man had not come at just that time, we would have died. Then, they had come to this place, where an old woman lived his father had taken him to visit a few times. Before, a long time before. Then, the girls had died, and later, the old woman. He had little to say about each of the others. That was their story. He mentioned their names again. Their new names he said with a smile. All of us felt that we had to have a new name in this new world we don't know much about yet

White Cloud spoke, equally softly. My name, White Cloud, new name. Old name gone. My people gone. Dead. I walk and walk. I meet a man, a woman, a child. They all dead. I walk more. In Dark I think maybe walk in circles, no? Then Big Sun come back, melt ice and snow. Then I hear laugh. I come here. Many walk, walk, walk I come.

He sat back, as if to say, I've spoken.

Alive felt she should tell her story. She had been the last to arrive here before White Cloud. She said her name, and then found she could not remember much of what went before. She looked around, surprised and afraid, I cannot remember! Then she said, I did not hear laughter, but there must have been something that drew me here. I had wandered, like all of us, and then... They found me. She pointed at Brown and Old Man.

Rock leaned across the circle but was too far to touch Alive's hands. I think all of us know that there is something special here. Maybe it is Katherine? She was here always, I think. Did she call us?

Katherine woke up out of her absent-minded withdrawal. Hmm? No, I did not call, but yes, this is a gathering spot. There are energies everywhere, energies of the planet, the mountains, rivers. And sometimes there are places that have special power. In the old world some people talked about power points, many ancient peoples knew about lines of power, and where lines of power crossed. Yes, I was here before any of you, but I too was drawn here just before the Dark, when the old world was shaking itself apart. The Ancient One was here then, she was glad to see me, maybe, but also suspicious. She had other visitors that, apparently weren't so nice. She had lived alone most of her life, I believe. But, the craziness of course reached here as well, and in the end she was glad for my company. Together we enlarged the root cellar and put as much food in it as we could gather then. And we defended ourselves. Everyone looked up. Defended? From what?

She did not answer the unspoken questions, but looked around the circle, acknowledging everyone with a look, a smile. She took a deep breath, and then continued, looking at White Cloud: I don't know how much Brown has told you about this little family, as we think of it. Rat and I listen inside, we hear other people's thoughts perhaps, or intentions. We thought—at least I thought—that it was something special, but now we know that maybe all of us can listen and talk inside.

White Cloud nodded, as if that were nothing unusual.

Before, in the old world, we never talked about such things. We would be put away, she said with embarrassment. But, then I found out there are others. White Cloud, maybe you and your people have known this all along?

White Cloud had leaned forward, listening to every word Katherine said. He nodded, Yes, he said. My people, we know, he said. We know long time, the noise of spirits in people. We know!

Katherine nodded. Yes, many people have known always. So-called civilized people were the ones deaf. They did not hear because they were deafened by the noise they themselves made.

Old Man spoke up, the first words he had said this evening. He spoke very carefully, You know, Katherine (I'm getting used to your new name), I knew that there is something about you, and Rat, that is strange, but now I must think that it is not strange at all. Brown, and now White

Cloud seem to think it is easy, normal, nothing special. We were so intolerant of anybody who was “different.” And that made us want to be like everyone else. I know, because I was different, I looked different I guess. Or behaved differently. But, whatever I did to be “normal” was never enough.

Silence. Everyone thought about what Old Man had said.

White Cloud broke the silence, Spirit good, he said. I know. I feel spirit. This woman good spirit. You good people. Not missionary, soldier. I know, I feel.

It was long after their meal, but nobody was sleepy. Rock stood up and said, I need some water. Anyone else? They all wanted water.

After they all had a drink, Old Man went on, and now what? We need something to eat, perhaps we need to find a place, or...

Katherine said, I have fed you. And with a crooked smile she said, And you don't want to know how. But we have enough, if we are careful, to last until we learn to hunt, now that we know that plants will grow again here. The Ancient One had a big garden, and chickens and a goat that fed her all those years.

Brown leaned back, I am tired. I cannot hear any more. I don't know what to feel any more. Maybe we should... Anyway; I'm going to sleep.

He quietly got up. Rock followed him. They walked into the dark of the forest.

The next evening the discussion continued. Brown, and now White Cloud as well, said that deer, or elk, were coming this way. They would go out and “hunt” one.

Old Man looked bothered. I am still thinking about that man who flat out told us—told you, Katherine—that there is no food here, and that we should all go south. Where it is warmer, where things grow. White Cloud spoke up, firmly, My people have lived much further north, and we survived, we always lived here. Plenty food! And we know how to make food for cold winter, and stay warm. This good place! Brown: What are we arguing? It feels bad to me. What are you afraid of, Old Man? I think we are arguing because we are all hungry. Can we wait a little, until White Cloud and I—and you too, Old Man—can find these animals that are coming this way? When we have food we can think better.

White Cloud laughed, This man he the most smart! We catch elk, food for all! Wait better!

In the following silence White Cloud shuffled closer to the little fire, coughed, and said, I understand all what you say. You speak truth. I listen. My people always listen others. After a short pause, he took a deep breath and continued, White man teach us to close heart. They tell one thing, do another. They say friend, then take land. We learn close off. Now open again. These woman speak truth. Brown, he open. Good people here. Soon, we find meat.

He sat back.

Alive, who sat next to Old Man, looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Old Man was hunched over. She looked at the fire and said slowly, but clearly, Old Man knows that you speak true, but it is so hard for him to let go. When you have had as much pain as he had, it is hard to believe that some people are good, not out to hurt you. I had to learn that also. I never before knew five, six other people that I could trust. I am learning.

Brown, his face shimmering in the flickering flames, I feel the pain, but I also know that this a different world. Maybe only a few people are still alive. We cannot afford not to trust.

White Cloud smiled, This man wise!

In the silence Old Man whispered, so that all could hear, And who is Solomon? What does he want? Katherine and Rat looked at each other. Rat sighed, We're not sure. He certainly can talk inside. He thinks of himself as a "throwback." I'm not sure what he means by that. I think it has to do with his skin color. But, he is extremely smart, as you, and we know (she looked at Katherine for confirmation).

Katherine added, He says he wants to come here.

Old Man: I thought he was in Africa? Come here for a visit? Or to stay? How can he do that? Rat said quietly, It seems he has access to an airplane.

A shocked silence darkened the group. Then they all talked simultaneously.

A plane? Planes, missiles and bombs: how we made endless wars, and destroyed this world? Do we have to go back to the same old shit?

White Cloud asked in almost a whisper, Who Solomon, who Africa?

Brown explained, a very big land, far from here, to the edge of this land, and then a large ocean and then Africa, very big.

And this Solomon, he come? White Cloud shook his head.

Old Man stood up. I have to sleep on this. A man comes all the way from Africa to visit? He has a plane...

Alive got up, reaching for Old Man's hand.

Slowly the others dispersed, each to their own spot in the woods. It was warm outside now, and most of the trees had full crowns of green.



**chapter twelve**

Old Man began before everyone was even seated, That man, Solomon, he talked to me last night. First, I thought it was a dream, so vivid! Then I woke up, and our conversation continued without a break. Not a conversation, he did all the talking. He has a plane. And a pilot. But fuel was a problem. They found some airplane fuel there, wherever "there" is. He tried to show me on a map, but I'm not familiar with all African countries; now there are no more countries, anyway. Solomon said that the pilot says we are too far, so he needs at least one stop between, and they haven't figured out how to do that. They don't even know where we are! Mostly he talked about people there. No, they don't have a thousand people, maybe not even a hundred. And they are scattered. Solomon has very strong ideas. Something like, he wants to mix up the surviving humans. He says that is better for the race (I hate that word, people always asked me what "race" I am. I told them I don't race). I wanted to ask why he did not leave us alone, let homo sapiens develop without plan or control. Then we would just go the same path and end up destroying ourselves again, he said. Well, maybe we should leave things so that we destroy ourselves now. Why prolong the agony? That man went on and on. He's smart, super smart. He showed me concepts I did not understand, about genetics and mutations. I thought I understood mutations. Like that poor little coyote pup. I told him about the pup who's now dead. He said that was a sport, not a mutation.

Katherine, You talked with him, heard him, and you don't seem surprised.

Yeah, I did not think about it until after. He must be powerful that man.

But, you must be powerful as well, Solomon had no problem hearing you, did he?

No. It was as if he was sitting right there, next to me. I never raised my voice. Not "voice" anyway.

You know what I mean, he said, irritated.

Alive said, I never heard you talk, although I could tell you were busy doing something in your sleep.

Quietly Brown turned to White Cloud, asked, Elk? They are close now. Not many, and they are very tired. White Cloud and Brown stood up, the others looked surprised, questioning. The two men walked away from the group sitting around the little fire.

Spear, asked White Cloud?

Nobody had a spear. In fact, there were no weapons of any kind, except perhaps a few knives. Rope? White Cloud asked? Yes, they found some stout rope, and Katherine got two knives, one a large hatchet, the other a very sharp, long knife. White Cloud nodded, good.

He and Brown walked off into the night. Their preparation for this expedition had only taken minutes.

We pray, White Cloud said after they had walked far enough from the group. Brown pointed, the elk are close. We can see them if we go just a little farther.

No, White Cloud said, here pray. He stood, looked around, found the leaves he was looking for, crushed them between his hands, gave a handful to Brown. Wash hands, he commanded. Now face, then clothes. And hair. Elk smell good, he explained. Brown looked closely how White Cloud rubbed his hands with the leaves, while he prayed, facing in the four directions, and the two. Asking the elk to help them. We honor the animals who are our brothers; we ask for life to sustain life.

White Cloud nodded. Elk come, he said. Slowly they moved further until they saw the elk. There were five. No, six. A bull elk, four females, one of them large, the others small, and a very small animal that looked as if it were still wobbly on its feet.

Not big one, White Cloud whispered, not baby, not mama (pointing to the female who kept her baby very close). He looked carefully at the trees, pointed to one: that one. He tied one end of the rope to the tree. Gave the other end to Brown, motioned him to walk behind that bush. Keep the rope strong, not too high, not too tight. Then he moved slowly until he was almost behind the elk he had chosen. He stood up slowly, in full view. Quiet, he did not say anything. Then he raised his arms, slowly, almost a dance. The mother elk saw him first. She made a snorting noise, looked at her baby, nudged it away from White Cloud. The bull elk raised his head, looked at White Cloud, seemed to hesitate, not sure what he should do, finally decided to follow the mother elk and the baby who now had moved, not running but walking as fast as the baby elk could go. The other three milled around, looking confused. One shied away sideways, another ran after the bull elk. The third looked at White Cloud who had now moved and made some movements with his arms, shooing the elk to the rope stretched out, but in the dark of evening not very visible. The young elk moved, stumbled against the rope, fell on its fore legs. White Cloud jumped on its back, reached around its neck and tilted the head up, exposing the neck.

Brown, you cut! White Cloud said softly.

Brown looked into the eyes of the elk, which looked terrified, its eyes bulging, trying to move its head, but White Cloud held it in a firm lock. Brown talked softly to the elk. We thank you, we honor you, don't fear, you will quickly go where elks go. He improvised, did not have any formula, but he somehow knew that he should not kill the animal as long as it was so panicked. Gradually the elk relaxed; its whole posture softened. It looked Brown in the eye, calm now.

With the long very sharp knife, Brown sliced its throat. It was so quick that blood did not gush until a few moments later. A quick and painless death.

Brown was trembling, tears in his eyes. I've never done such a thing, never imagined I would be able to kill an animal. With my own hands!

White Cloud had stood up as soon as Brown had cut, now came to Brown, laid his hand on his shoulder. Good, very good, White Cloud said. Brown know talk to elk. Good, very good.

Brown looked down at the young elk. How do we carry it, he asked?

Together, White Cloud said. First clean, then carry.

He showed Brown how to cut the belly. White Cloud reached inside to pull out the gut, which spilled in a steaming, messy and smelly heap. White Cloud cut here and here, leaving organs inside. Good eating! They tied the fore legs with the rope, then the back legs. With the hatchet, they cut a strong branch that they pushed through the bound legs. Carrying the pole on their shoulders they found a rhythm so that the elk did not swing much as they walked back.

The “family,” as Brown thought of them, were still sitting around the fire when they brought the elk. They all stood up, crowded around.

White Cloud said, Brown he good hunter! He know talk to elk good. No pain, give life for us lifes.

Katherine asked Brown and Old Man to watch as she butchered. You must learn, she said. Most animals have a basic structure that makes it easy to know where to cut. First she skinned the animal. White Cloud stretched the skin and pinned it down on the ground, some distance from the shelter. Now scrape, he said, as he showed Brown how to prepare skins, scraping away pieces of meat and other tissue, leaving only the leather. First scrape with something sharp, then with wood, or something soft.

The next day there was a festive meal, with the meat, both muscle meat and organ meat, and some of Brown’s greens.

Old Man remarked, This must be the first time in my entire life that I have felt so full!

White Cloud and Brown went on exploring trips far to the north and east. Rat had warned them that there were dangers from fallout, but that they probably would recognize these because nothing would grow there. Stay away from areas with nothing but dead trees, without grass or any other green. The two men found a few of such areas, where nothing grew except bilious green-yellow mold growing on dead trees. Bad smell, White Cloud said. Not touch!

They found tracks of other animals now. Some elk, and a bear, White Cloud said. He told Brown to be careful with bears, certainly when they might have young. Later on in the season bears were less dangerous, but always to be respected as very powerful and unpredictable animals. Brown learned tracking, and he learned about the habits of all his brothers, as White Cloud referred to animals. Brother bear, brother coyote, although they did not see any coyotes. And no wolves. Brown remembered there had been no dogs in the village, at the end.

When the meat from the first elk was almost gone, Brown and White Cloud brought back a small deer, and then a second, larger one.

Brown’s plants were growing tall in the area he called his “garden”. He had no seeds, nor did he try to move plants to be in neat rows. Each plant was cherished wherever it happened to have rooted. He learned which plants were good to eat, some that were medicinal. And in one corner

the potato plant came up, probably from a piece of skin the Ancient One had thrown away, now a year or more ago. He learned to plant the “eyes” to get more potato plants growing.

Rock and Alive experimented with the animal skins, learning how to make the leather softer without ruining its strength.

Katherine and Rat were busy preparing food, experimenting with preservation, smoking, drying the meat. Occasionally they talked with people far away. They had now heard from a few other parts of the globe, although what they learned was not very cheerful. There were new diseases that took their toll among small pockets of survivors.

Another reason, Old Man said, to tell Solomon not to come here. We don’t want him to bring us African diseases, and he does not want ours.

The effect of having an abundance of meat, and more and more green vegetables available, was astonishing. Everyone felt more energetic. They were more active, and made love more often. They did not tire as they did in the winter.

The women were acquiring skills preparing the animal skins. They made moccasins, vests. Rat wanted to make boots, but had to cut them down to ankle-high moccasins. There was a bustle and a glow to the place that was exhilarating.

The three men had worked out various strategies for hunting; now they were making spears. White Cloud was an excellent teacher!

In what the Family thought must be midsummer, Solomon came, with a pilot. They walked up to the group one late afternoon: an excessively tall and skinny man and a very short man. The tall man probably seven feet, very black, wearing ancient blue jeans that reached to his calves, and two shirts, one over the other. The other man was no more than five feet tall, dressed in what could be an overlarge shirt, reaching to his knees. He wore shoes, the tall man barefoot.

The tall man, the pilot, was introduced as Max.

Not his name, of course, but his name is unpronounceable, he is Maasai, Solomon said.

Solomon was the short man, a light brown, a warm ocher colored skin, straight black hair mottled with gray; lively hands, sparkling eyes, his words tumbling over each other.

Max is starved! Hope you have some food for us. We had a long walk. But we got here! Max will be going back to the plane. We left the other three at the plane, with almost all the food we brought. And water. We had not thought it would be so difficult to find good water on this continent.

The Family was still speechless. True, they had known people were approaching. Katherine and Rat had been fairly certain that one of them was the man from Africa. But, now that they were here, Solomon’s rapid fire talk overwhelmed the Family, when they had settled in, comfortably, for a rich and fruitful summer. Old Man felt invaded. Rock said to Alive “a hot wind.” Brown and White Cloud had slipped away. Rat and Katherine remained standing:

sentinels. Solomon reached in his pocket and showed them a small Geiger counter. This continent is poisoned, he exclaimed! Africa is better, at least south of the equator. Solomon monopolized the conversation, and the attention of almost everyone that day and the next.

The second day, “Max” walked back, leaving Solomon with the Family. Max had not said much; nobody had much chance to get to know him.

When they sat around the little fire again, Old Man asked Solomon, Tell us why you really came? What is your interest in our little group?

Solomon, taken aback, answered slowly, How can you ask? I’m concerned. For the survival of you. No food... He did not finish, because even in two days it had been very clear that this group of survivors had no shortage of meat, and enough other nutrients: most of the Family looked well-fed, healthy, and strong.

Alive asked, I’m curious how you learned this talking and listening inside (we have to find better words for it) you make it seem so simple. But, how did you learn?

Solomon laughed. That’s simple; I learned from people who had been isolated for probably thousands of years, who did not even know their neighboring tribes very well. High mountains, deep valleys. Many of them did this inner talk without knowing that they were doing it. No, they probably knew, but it was not something they questioned. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on. When I asked them, they could not tell me “how,” of course. You just did it, was what they said. As a scientist I needed words. One day I had a high fever (some jungle fever, probably). I thought I was dying! Suddenly, I realized that I could hear their thoughts. No, not “hear,” of course, I just knew. From that day on, it was easy. Like discovering something you’ve always known, but never knew you had. My wife—I was married then!—could not stand it when I knew what she was going to say. Furious! After that I practiced on other people. I learned hearing first, talking inside came much later. I knew people in West Africa who did this inside talking, and they thought talking was easier than listening.

Old Man said: So, it was something you learned, or discovered, when you were an adult?

Oh yes! I don’t want to tell my life story, but I was an orphan. Many Africans were orphans; both parents having died from HIV/Aids. Although, I never knew anything about my parents. I assume they died from the sickness. Anyway, I had to fight for my life when I was... I don’t know, three, or four? I stole food, ate things that were not food. Until some people adopted me. Then I had to fight to get an education. But, I always knew I had to fight to get what I needed.

He chuckled, Except for this inner awareness that just came to me. Perhaps I always had it, but I was too busy fighting the world, to look, or even be aware of an inner part of me. It took those Papua to wake me!

And why, Old Man, returning to his earlier question, are you here? To recruit us? You want to take all of us to Africa? Why?

Solomon, thoughtfully, Can you imagine what a three-, four-year old feels, experiences when there is no food, and sometimes no water? Day after day after day? You feel yourself fading, becoming smaller, almost invisible. At first, you feel hunger, tearing hunger, your stomach dominates your consciousness. Then there is a period when you feel no physical hunger, but a strong feeling of missing something. There were days, I remember, when I thought one of my arms had somehow evaporated. I could see it, if I took the trouble to look, but I experienced the arm missing. Those memories are very strong; they still motivate me. I got an education; many educations! Had a career; several careers. You know about all that. And more and more I got passionately concerned about what we, people, were doing. To each other, and, maybe even more important, to our planet. That's how I got into anthropology. The wrong branch of thinking, I realized after a while. I would have studied philosophy. But then everything fell apart. Now I am just as passionately concerned that we don't do the same stupidities again.

Nobody had anything to say. Solomon seemed uncomfortable with the silence: now and then, he would say more. Repeating, saying the same thing in other words. Then, he too was silent.

It was Solomon, again, who broke that silence. But now to Now. The most important fact of today is that this is a new world. I think of it as a new beginning, a chance to not make the mistakes we made before. I don't know how many people survived. Not many, I think. We, survivors, have to rely on each other. My whole life has been about surviving! Starting very young, when I fought to eat, at one of those times when Africans starved. I did not have one set of parents during my growing up years, but many. I grew up sometimes in orphanages run by missionaries of one faith or another. What I got as "education" was a most confused, meaningless mix of facts and fiction. Eventually, I was adopted by a family that moved to Brussels. I was accepted in universities, first in Belgium, then England. But, it was not until I lived with the Papua, when I was almost forty, that I finally learned who I was, could be. What a wasted life!

Old Man: I understand that. I did not get much formal education at all, but I always had a glimpse of who I was, or should be. But, I really learned from Brown and the people here. Yes, what a wasted life! What a wasted world!

The two men, Solomon and Old Man, had dominated the evening talk so far, now Rock spoke, Can we all play this game? I too have ideas about children, although I never had any. I've never wanted a child. Now I feel different. Maybe I would want a child now. I would raise my child, or children, to know their immediate environment intimately. Know every plant, every tree. I would want my children to have a father like Brown. Not "like," I want Brown to be the father! He knows animals, not as pets, but as people. I would want my children to that. And experience what is danger, what is beauty, what is edible and what is poison. Mostly, I would leave a child to find its own path. Allow, encourage the child to ask, for information or ask for help, but not "guide" a child. Stand aside.

Solomon interrupted, Are you pregnant? Is anyone pregnant here?

White Cloud spoke up, No more babies. I walk, see woman; I see two, three woman: no baby.

Old Man, very quietly, So, maybe we worry about nothing.

Rat: what do you worry about Old Man?

To tell the truth, I don't worry much any more. I've never felt so rich just living. When I think about it, as we are living now, I'm kinda proud of us. We survived! What I worry is that we make the same mistakes, go the same path that led to this! Airplanes scare me. People scare me. I cannot forget what I know of people and what they did to this world.

Solomon: I have the same memories, Old Man. I am older than you; I have more memories. But, what if we do have a chance to start over?

Brown said, Maybe this new world is for elk only, not for humans.

White Cloud had been sitting hunched over, now he sat up straighter, Elk we see not good, not health... they dead too.

Even Solomon had no reply to that.

**chapter thirteen**

Two days after Max left, Solomon suddenly stopped what he was doing, listened; acting as if he had cramps, holding his stomach with one arm, bending over, his head almost to his knees.

Max, oh Max, he moaned. He turned to the women who had rushed over, Max was attacked by a mad man! His arm... hurt, cut. First, a blow to his stomach. Max is not strong, only his legs are strong, he can run all day, covering much ground. It took us—I held him back—five and a half days to get here, and we did not rest much. He is back at the plane already. Two days! As he was approaching the plane, a man attacked him. He was close enough that the other three came out of the plane immediately and chased the attacker away. But, his arm is badly injured. He probably cannot fly. He cannot pilot the plane. The others are taking care of him now, they brought him inside the plane. There are beds. There is a good first aid kit.

Solomon was pacing, he could not stand still, holding his head as if it were about to burst, shaking, still in his oversized shirt. He spoke in two, or three languages that nobody understood, then switched to English again.

Oh no, the man has a gun! He is shooting at the plane. Holes in the plane. They are trying to talk to Max, they want to start the plane and fly away, but ...

He turned to Katherine, Rat, Rock and Old Man who were standing around. Anybody here know to fly a plane? Start the engines? I should have brought two pilots. The man is shooting at the wheels now. Oh, Max woke up, he's in pain!

Solomon bent over, feeling the pain in his own arm and stomach. Yes, Yes! He can tell the Guinée man how to start the plane. The Guinée man is a mechanic, I think. He is good. Max can tell him what to do. They've started one engine! The man with the gun running away.

Finally, Solomon sat on the ground, exhausted. He was still shaking his head, sweat on his forehead. His hands were shaking. His voice hoarse, whispering, They are flying, they're in the air. The Guinée man in the pilot seat, Max in the copilot seat, telling him what to do. Oh, Max is good! But he's hurt bad. His arm... The man had a knife. He cut to the bone.

After a pause, We never thought of guns. Does anyone here have a weapon?

They shook their heads, no.

In a country, where the law guaranteed that everyone could have a gun! We had some people in Africa who had guns, and other people had ammunition. Solomon snickered at the memory, They could never match the guns and the bullets. So, the first thing we did almost—after talking about food, of course— was to talk to the few people with guns, telling them to throw them far away.

Not even you, Solomon turned to Old Man?



No, I have an aversion to guns, even knives, from early childhood. My first parents, in Guam, were robbed more than once at gunpoint. And there were too many people hurt and killed by guns. And knives. Never had use for those kinds of weapons.

Solomon turned to Katherine, Did you have a chance to look into that man? I was too concerned with Max and the others. What kind of man was his assailant?

Rat answered, I had only a glimpse of him. All I could sense was anger, rage, blood-red rage. Blinding. And he was tired and exhausted. Starved too, I think. No food, no food.

Solomon was calmer now. He said in a flat tone of voice, Hope they can find a safe place to land soon.

The holes in the plane do not seem to have any effect. They are flying low, looking for a place to land. Katherine had gone to what she called the “kitchen.” What was left of her cooking place, in what had been the cabin. Here, drink this, she handed the cup to Solomon. You are faint.

I am in shock. I cannot believe that I did not foresee something like this. I should have... I feel responsible for Max. His arm is hurting him a lot. Cannot quite sense what it is that the attacker did, cut something.

Old Man said, a cut tendon is a most painful wound, but it can heal, although I think it takes surgery to reconnect the ends?

Solomon said, I think it is at the shoulder. Max is very tall, the man kicked him in the shins, Max bent over, then the man slashed at his shoulder. I think it is high up on the arm. His right arm. There’s nothing we can do about it from here, anyway. They are flying south. Or, maybe, closer to west, the sun is in their eyes.

Brown and White Cloud were now a smooth team of hunters. Occasionally, when they knew animals nearby, they would hunt. Usually coming back with more than enough meat to feed the Family, and enough to smoke, dry, or otherwise preserve for winter.

Now Solomon joined the hunting team, perhaps more to have something to take his mind off worrying about Max, than a desire to hunt. He did not have to be told not to talk. He had changed his white shirt for a darker shirt he borrowed from Rat, that still came almost to his knees.

That day they got another deer, small enough for Brown to carry alone. Solomon and White Cloud followed closely behind. Solomon asking questions. He discovered that White Cloud spoke French, more fluently than English. Solomon pieced together White Cloud’s story: he was born in far northern Quebec. As a very young child he had spoken French and the dialect of Cree spoken there. Something had happened when he was maybe seven or eight, the tribe had to move away. Some big development, perhaps a dam? In any case, they had to move away. The tribe disintegrated, a few people staying here and there along the way, others settling to a city. But, “before he was a man,” White Cloud had left his family and continued wandering. He had visited and lived with many Indian tribes of northern and western Canada. And, he added with a twinkle, White Cloud was only the last of many names he had. At birth, or maybe a year later—when it

was more likely he would survive. He had been given a secret name. His father had called him Francois. He had never liked the French name, so when he could, he had told people he was called One Cloud, because he always traveled alone. Then, somewhere on the west coast where he had lived for some years, he had taken a wife and made children, the people had called him Hunting Cloud. When he left his wife and children, they had called him Black Cloud. And now, he told Solomon, when the sun came back after the Dark, he had named himself White Cloud.

That was not told as a coherent story, Solomon had to recreate the thread from hints and sentences over more than an hour of talking and answering on their way home. White Cloud did not like talking about himself. But, Solomon was an aggressive and animated questioner. Solomon felt in his element, and the walk made him forget to worry about Max and the others in the plane, at least for a while.

As soon as the hunting party was back, he had to seek contact again immediately, They had landed the plane somewhere. Desert country, they could see far; no people seemed to be around. The small airport had private planes scattered everywhere, but they had found enough of a safe path to land. The airport had one small building that seemed untouched. Everything looked untouched, and the way the planes were parked made them think that people had left in a hurry, abandoning their planes where they were.

They were all resting, exhausted from the scare they had up north and the precarious flight. Max had been in the copilot's chair. The man from Guinée had learned to fly by doing. He had even landed the plane, Max was doing reasonably well, but now concerned that he had lost the use of his "spear arm," as he called it. Not much pain, probably because of the pain killers they had found in the first aid kit. Guinée had taken charge. He was a capable, albeit ruthless man, Solomon knew. There were two passengers, who had wanted to stay with the plane. Their ability to talk and listen inside was minimal. One was a Polynesian (or at least part Polynesian) woman who had been on vacation in Egypt when it all started, and had eventually found her way south until she found Solomon's group. The other, who seemed to be the woman's lover,, was African.

Solomon was beginning to fear that he could be stuck here in the north. What if he would not be able to return to Africa? The thought was so appalling that he could not think about it rationally. It was obvious that the Family was tight, a close group that had acquired an identity. He felt an outsider, and, more importantly, he deliberately maintained a distance. He had not planned to stay. He had to get back to Africa! Beyond that, he could not think.

When the hunting party returned with the deer, the members of the Family smoothly fell into the roles that had developed, each knew what to do: skinning, cutting out the few parts of the carcass that they would not use (except as fertilizer), butchering, cooking, preserving. White Cloud was the expert, he walked back and forth, lending a hand where he was needed.

Solomon asked, Do you all live, sleep, in the same place? Open to the weather? This cabin is not much for six people!

Rock turned from her scraping of the latest skin, said, You miss a bed? A bedroom? A bathroom, a toilet?

Alive looked up from her job, We've forgotten about those things. We're pleased that we can keep dry! And now that we have pelts, we will be warm in winter.

Solomon looked at his feet, I need another pair of shoes.

We all do. We're learning how to make moccasins. White Cloud is teaching us all those new skills. Solomon tried to make himself useful, but obviously the rest of them had done cleaning and preparing of skins now many times before and knew just what to do. He went off by himself. Worrying! He announced he was going for a walk. White Cloud looked up. Moi aussi, me too. Behind his hand he said to Brown, Little man no safe; maybe, protect. Bad man, shoot pilot, come maybe?

Nobody had thought about that. One by one they stopped what they were doing, looked at each other, until all of them realized that, yes, it was not impossible at all that the man with the gun (guns?) might find them. Or some other desperate soul with the old world's weapons. What could be done? What would have to be done?

Katherine broke the silence, First we finish all we must do to do honor to this deer, then we talk. Go ahead, Solomon, don't stray too far, keep your eyes and ears open for danger closer by and let the crew of the plane sleep for now. Yes, White Cloud, go with Solomon, and be sure to look for berries. I've seen a few blackberry bushes here and there. You must know what to look for. Before it began, there were dozens of different kinds of berries, almost year 'round.

When they were alone, Solomon turned to White Cloud, and continued his interrogation in French. But, White Cloud was very emphatic, Enough! Tell me your story!

In addition to what I told all of you a few nights ago?

Do you have wife? Children?

No, and no. Fortunately, I think now. And you, White Cloud?

Yes, wife and children. Grown children now. Perhaps wife not living any more. Or children. They lived

Vancouver. Now?

Solomon pounced, Maybe you should think about coming to Africa with us. We certainly could use your skills and knowledge.

They stopped, faced each other.

White Cloud seemed to think of an appropriate response. Africa? I belong here. As I told you, before I was a man, I ran away from being forced out. Now you want to move me from here? No, Solomon, this is my land, the land is me. This tree—White Cloud walked over to an ancient spruce, touched it—this tree, he is me. I am this tree. He scuffed the needles, clearing a patch of

black, moist forest soil. Pointing, he said, That is my skin, my blood. I go Africa, I die! The next day, Brown and White Cloud were coming back from another successful hunt. A fairly large deer of a kind they had not seen before. White Cloud thought it looked like caribou, but they had rarely come this far south. It was heavy; the men had to rest often.

Brown said, White Cloud, when you told Solomon of the beginning of your life, you said you were given a secret name. Are you allowed to tell others what that name is?

White Cloud smiled a deep smile, Brown, my son, yes, to you I can tell my secret name. You will forget it, and not mention it to others.

It was not a request but a statement. Brown took it as a kind of oath, that he would never tell anyone about White Cloud's secret name.

My secret name, translated in your language, is He-Who-Decides-Sun. He-who-decides, in my language, is one word, and it can mean a leader, or giving leadership, or, it can mean, being decisive. Or stubborn! Sun in my language can also mean light, and of course day.

Brown was trying to put those ideas together into a something that would fit the person he knew.

After a while White Cloud laughed softly, Secret names are a riddle. Maybe not meant to be understood with ordinary thinking. There have been times I dreamed about He-who-decides-sun night after night. Every dream, every night different. The best I can do is that I know I am a wanderer and seek the sun. That is why I came so far south, you know. In the far north we are accustomed to very long winters with many moons of no sun. What you call the Dark at first did not seem unusual to me. But, it lasted too long to be an ordinary winter. And, I needed food. And I needed other people. That is one thing I have learned in a life of wandering, often usually alone. People need other people. We are social beings.

Brown looked up in astonishment. White Cloud had never talked so much, and in such perfect English! It was as if a whole new person came to the foreground. He had to revise his image of White Cloud. Not a wandering Indian who taught him the old way of hunting, but a sophisticated, educated man, who also knew hunting the old way.

It is you who are the riddle, Brown said, not your secret name!

Ah good! Remember that, Brown. Everyone, all people, are riddles. And often, usually, they themselves don't know the answer!

**chapter fourteen**

Solomon, Rat and Katherine were huddled close, under a tree, late afternoon. They were trying to get a clearer picture of where the plane was. The contact with Max had been brief. Max said that the Hawaiian woman had massaged and straightened the fingers of his “spear arm.” Now he felt he was healing. The Guinée man had disappeared, or, at least they could not see, or hear him. Guinée was very good at closing off, they learned.

Solomon sat back, leaning his side against a tree, If only we knew where they were! Somewhere southwest from here, but where?

Alive, who had been standing half-hidden in the shade, took a step closest, and said, I know the Southwest. Can you show me where they are, what it looks like? Perhaps I can recognize it...

Rat smiled up at Alive. Yes, wonderful idea. When we can get Max again. Solomon can show you: he’s the best talker, or we should say, “sender.” We, pointing to Katherine and herself, are better at listening.

They relaxed, dozed. Peaceful afternoon, some insects busy buzzing, far away sounds of Brown and Old Man talking while they were doing something with the axe.

Rat sat up first, and then almost in the same moment Katherine and Solomon. Listening intently. Suddenly, Alive could see what they were seeing and hearing. A small airfield, with maybe a dozen small private planes, neatly tied down. No people in sight. Max saw from the cockpit. Alive commented, It looks like a flying club, or a country club. Are there mountains nearby? There must be. I don’t see clearly enough. It is blurred. Is that me, or is there a haze in the air over there?

Nobody answered.

Abruptly the view changes, as Max moved his head. An ultralight lands at the other end of what was left of the runway. No sound, though the door and the little sliding panes in the cockpit are open. The ultralight smoothly rolls to the little building. A sturdy, compact man unbuckles his safety harness, walks to the door. Guinée stands just behind the door as the man opens it. He rears back, quickly recovers. The two men talk. Amicably, it seems.

Alive feels a brief sense of unreality, very aware of the people here, in the north woods, who are witnessing something that is happening far away. The picture is inside, and outside she hears birds, and other wood noises. With her eyes she sees trees, and the other three in deep concentration. She closes her eyes, in order to be less confused by two impressions that do not go together.

Guinée and the man are laughing. The man motions for Guinée to follow him around the little building and around the back. Max cannot see where they went. Waiting, wondering. The two men come back, hauling what looks like a fat garden hose rolled on a frame on wheels, attached to a hand pump. They walk to the ultralight, unrolling enough of the hose to reach the tank behind the seat of the little plane. The man shows Guinée how to crank the pump a few times

vigorously, then slowly and steadily. Guinée pumps while the other fills his tank. He lifts his arm, stop! Then they fill another portable tank, lashed to the frame. The ultralight pilot turns the wing around, straps himself in, starts his putput engine, and is off. In the air almost immediately. He looks back and waves at Guinée, who waves back. When the ultralight is out of sight, Guinée rolls the hose cart and pump to their plane.

Suddenly, Alive is alone with her own thoughts and impressions again. She opened her eyes. The others were sitting back, relaxing. Alive asked, What did Guinée and the flyer talk and laugh about?

We don't know, because Max did not hear them talk; just saw them from the plane. Max cut contact, he said he was busy now!

Alive asked, Who is Guinée? Is that his name, or, what is his name?

Solomon, breaking the intense silence, says, I don't know his name. Perhaps he has no name, or cannot remember it. He was in shock when we first found him. All we could find out about him was that he originally came from Guinée, West Africa. How he found himself where we are, nobody knows. He is a miracle mechanic, does not say much but is strong, and I trust him as a fine human being.

Alive said, as if to herself, quite an impressive man.

Rat reached over and touched her hand, You're smitten, eh?

Well, yes... maybe... who wouldn't be?

Katherine smiled, The strong silent type!

Solomon looked at the three women, I must be missing something, what are you so cozy about? Solomon, you are so much into far seeing and talking and hearing that you don't see the trees around you. Or the people!

That evening, when they sat around a little fire again, they talked about the day, what each of them had accomplished. They joked about the rich food Katherine had made.

Rock, dreamily reaching out to the flames, I hear us purring!

Light laughter. Yes, we're a hardworking family, resting after a good day's work.

I feel an easy kind of love, Rat said; the kind of love we did not have much of in the old world. Not a passion that eats up, not possessive, but accepting.

Brown looked around the circle, looked each of them in the eye. Isn't this normal?

Old Man, Katherine, Solomon, as one, protested. Solomon said, Maybe now, but it definitely was not

“normal” where I was! Then he said in a very small voice, And you even accept me, a stranger. And a strange stranger at that.

Old Man, I thought I was the strange stranger!

It was still light—the sun does not go down until evening, this far north—when Solomon was contacted by Max. He was feeling better, he said. They were filling the tanks of the plane, as they wanted to leave as quickly as possible. The ultralight man had told Guinée that this airfield was in a high radioactivity zone. Now that they had fuel they must leave as quickly as possible! The man had also mentioned that they were in Colorado. The four had discussed what to do, where to go. “High radioactivity” did not sound good. The Hawaiian woman had decided she wanted to get back to Hawai’i, one way or another, but did not want to fly. The other man (Max thought of him as “the hopeless romantic”) did not know what he wanted. Guinée was determined to come back to get Solomon. Max wanted to go back to Africa as soon as possible. So, they had decided to fly west, to the coast. And from there back up to where Solomon was.

Solomon explained how they had found this plan, on a highway. For some reason it had landed, and then had been abandoned, or perhaps the people who flew it had been sick and died. But, the plane must have been there for some time, the doors were closed, although not locked. There was air in the tires and fuel in the tanks they discovered. The plane was a private jet, the kind used by drug- or weapon smugglers. It had extra tanks: it could fly long distances without refueling. It had a large storage bin, underneath the floor. In the cabin were two rows of big seats that could recline to make reasonable beds. There was a small but complete galley.

They had taken off, Guinée was now flying the plane. He, Max, was sitting in the copilot seat.

Solomon had been narrating the contact, then suddenly interrupted himself, and said, aloud, Max! There is a Geiger counter in the plane. You can check on the levels in the plane. Solomon thought for a minute, then said, I think it is in a drawer next to the little sink in the galley. Ask someone to look.

Max reminded him that they were now in the air, so it did not much matter.

Solomon said, probably not, but I would like to know that the cabin, or any of you, is not dangerously radioactive.

Katherine said, do you know whether we are radioactive? Here in the woods? 74

Solomon, very subdued, You are right. There are so many things I did not think of. I am quite ashamed of myself.

But, it was a daring undertaking to fly here from Africa, Old Man said. I still am not really sure why?

Daring perhaps, I’ve always been quick to act. Now it is proven again that when it comes to thinking of possible pitfalls, I am not very good.

But you never really answered! Old Man said indignantly. You said a lot of things, but I still am not quite sure that I know what brought you here.

To be brutally honest, Solomon said, I wanted to take all of you back to Africa. We need people like you. I felt that when I had contact with Katherine and Rat. I was right about that. We need people like you. And, he said as he leaned back against a log, I also know that you don't need us.

We are learning to live here, said Brown. Africa would be a big adjustment for us. For me, certainly.

As if this new world is not a huge adjustment, anyway!

But why us, Rock asked? Because we are westerners, even though some of us are black, or part something colored?

It was Brown who first heard (felt?) the faint child's voice, far away, searching, probing, "are there any people left?" Instinctively he answered, with as much force as he could put behind that inner voice, Yes, we are here!

The faint voice was silent. Or, Brown thought, perhaps he had imagined it? After all this time, who could still be out there? Well, yes, the man with a gun; of course. But this was not a desperate, angry man. This was a child. A child who had survived? He turned to Rat and Katherine, who were working in the "kitchen," telling them about the voice he had heard. They stopped what they were doing, and listened.

Was it far away, Brown?

Yes, far away, or, maybe just very weak. As if the child were dying.

A child? Did you hear a child?

That is what I felt, Brown said, beginning to doubt himself. Maybe it was my imagination. I was not paying attention. I was working on that skin of the big deer—White Cloud said it was an eland—we got some time ago. I don't remember what I was thinking about, just the leather I think, and what we could do with it. And I heard that very faint child's voice, calling, asking whether there were any people left...

The two women listened again. We don't sense any others than the ones here. But we'll keep listening now. If there is a child, we must go and find it. Did you have a sense of direction, Brown?

Oh yes, the same direction that you, Rat, came, with Old Man and Rock. From there.

The direction of the city, Katherine whispered. How could a child have survived these years, and in that city...

Later they heard it again. Very faint. Katherine thought not very far away. Brown asked White Cloud to go with him.



They found the child, tightly rolled between the roots of a tree, squeezing arms around knees. Was he, she, breathing? Brown leaned over and very softly touched a bony shoulder, and a back that seemed all spine and ribs. The child opened its eyes wide.

Are you real, it asked. Are you people?

White Cloud picked up the slight bundle, held it close to his chest, talking softly in a language Brown did not know.

A child! How can that be? How did a child survive the horrors?

Even this close Brown could not hear much inside the child other than a vague questioning, are you real, are you real?

Back at the shelter, all four women hunkered down to touch the emaciated form that seemed locked in a fetal position. They could not straighten the sticks that were legs. Rat dribbled a few drops of cool water in the mouth of the child, then one of Katherine's life-giving broths. The women took turns holding, caressing, massaging hands and feet that were almost unrecognizable human extremities.

The rest of that day, and night, and the next day, someone held and cuddled the child, trying to get it to accept more broth. Slowly, very slowly the cramped position relaxed. The child's enormous black eyes now focused. The child's mouth, which had been dry and cracked, softened enough so that the child could open her mouth. But, attempts to say words were apparently stuck somewhere. The child moaned and at times tried to open her frozen mouth wider, trying to move her tongue to moisten her lips. White Cloud brought some fat from under the skin of the deer they had brought the day before. Gently, he smeared it on the child's lips, and then on the face. The women used the same grease to remove some of the caked dirt that covered most of the child.

The child had worn no clothing at all. When it was chilly, the people covered her with some soft cloth and the skin of a small deer.

Solomon, who had been occupied almost exclusively with the plane and the four people, reported that they had landed near what they thought must be the Northwest, probably Oregon or Washington. They had no maps of this part of the world, and Max was unfamiliar with the features of this land. They were on the ground at another small airport. They had not found fuel yet, but they would not need any for a while.

The Hawaiian woman had left on foot, accompanied by "the Romantic." They were determined to find a boat, somewhere, that would take them to Hawai'i. The woman had felt quite sure that they would find something. Meanwhile, they could survive on what the forests provided. They were confident.

Max and Guinée were now trying to plan how to get close to where Solomon was, while avoiding the airport where the crazy man had attacked Max.

Old Man said, Did anyone notice that the child has a full head of hair? Does that mean she has not been exposed to radioactivity?

Solomon burst in on the group huddled around the child, excitedly announcing, Max has taken off, he thinks he can find an airport near here. Guinée decided to walk! Can you imagine... (Alive caught her breath, Alone?) Solomon continued, Guinée thinks it is not that far, and feels safer walking!

Then he added, as if he were talking to himself, I wonder whether I will ever get back to Africa?

Alive wanted to know whether Solomon thought Guinée would be able to find us, or walk so far? Solomon, Oh yes, he is big, almost as tall as Max but twice as wide. He speaks French and many

African languages. And I assume also English. I was surprised when he seemed to talk to that ultralight man. Oh, yes, he'll make it. That man has lived (with a curious emphasis on the word).

And Max, alone? Can one person fly that plane? Everyone had questions.

Not long after, they heard a plane flying high overhead. Solomon said it was Max. Flying north. He had seen an airstrip north of where the Family was, probably long enough for the plane to land. He had full tanks. He could continue to look for a place to land. White Cloud said he knew of a small airport. He described the location to Solomon, who told Max.

Max reported that was the runway he had seen from the air. It seemed deserted. Only one plane on the ground, looking damaged. The runway clear.

White Cloud immediately made preparations to meet Max. He told Solomon the shortest way for Max to walk. Follow a creek and where there is a small falls, turn south.

Solomon smiled and said, Max can hear the beacon this place is; he can find his way.

Alive asked Solomon whether he knew where Guinée was?

No, that man can hide from me, said Solomon irritably. I know he can hear and even talk inside, but he chooses not to.

Alive looked down, We talk, she said almost in a whisper. I know what he sees around him, but I don't know how far away that is.

**chapter fifteen**

More than three days of round-the-clock care brought the girl to full awareness. She opened her big eyes, and stared at all these people. She tried to smile, but her mouth was still too painfully dry.

Rock, who was cradling her, said softly, We are all friends, we found you, not far from here, and now we are taking care of you. Can you understand? Can you talk?

Thank you, the girl said so softly that they had to bend closer to hear.

Rat said, The first thing you must do is to eat, get well. Later, when you feel up to it, you can tell us your story, because we know you must have quite a story to tell. We admire you, little girl!

And we're glad you are here, Brown said.

Solomon said, under his breath, she is as small as I was when I was ten or so. She must be older than we think; older than she looks.

Rat nudged Rock, I'll stay with her now; we can take turns.

Later, Rat by her side, now and then straightening the blanket, gently holding a hand or a foot, the girl suddenly opened her eyes again. She looked at Rat, and with a moan said, Mama... mama...

Rat smiled, I'll be your mama for now. Rest and eat, little girl. Get well.

The girl seemed to understand Rat's words. She sighed and went back to sleep. A little while later Rat fed her some more soup, thanks to the successful hunts now more nourishing than Katherine's broth had been. Solomon felt that he was the expert on how to feed starving people, because he remembered his own childhood. The foreign people who had brought corn and other grains to his part of Africa, with good intentions, nevertheless had made his recovery painfully difficult. those first years. People got very sick. At first, only fluids, meat extract, and fat. As a little boy, he said, after almost dying from hunger, I remember someone giving me a piece of animal fat to chew on. I can still taste the soft taste of that, and how good it felt in my mouth. Do you have some animal fat here, Katherine? Not too much, he warned. Her lips still look dry and cracked.

That evening the girl woke up again, and tried to sit up.

Alive, who had taken over from Rat, helped the girl sit in her lap, rocking her gently. The girl looked into her face, frowned, said, No mama? Then she looked around at the trees, did not see anyone else, and began to cry softly, Mama, mama, mama...

When Rat came a few minutes later, the girl reached out her arms, Mama! Mama, mama.

That's all right. I'll take her now, Alive. The girl must think I'm her mother.

When she sat on Rat's lap, the little girl reached up and stroked the scars on Rat's face, and contentedly murmured, Mama. And went back to sleep.

A warm afternoon. Brown and Rock rested after work. Rock sat with her back against a tree; Brown, lying down, chewed on a grass stem.

Thought about corn today, he said. I think it would have grown here, but when we went back to the village, we forgot to look for seeds. We could have planted more things to eat.

It's all right, Brown. There are other things we can eat. Alive found a chestnut tree, and I think there are oak trees. Most trees here are pines and firs, but I remember reading, a long time ago, that the Indians ate pine nuts.

Brown sat up. Yeah, my mother used to go out in the fall and collect something. She was sort of secretive about it. Only she knew where to find them. Maybe that was pine nuts? Little white seeds, I remember. Maybe she roasted them? Sometimes we had them sprinkled over other food.

Why are we talking about food? If you could see yourself. You've grown at least a foot, since I've known you. Your hair reaches almost to your shoulders, and it curls. You're a handsome man, Brown!

We were talking about growing food, not eating it, he protested. And, thanks for the compliment, I guess. You know how I feel about you, don't you? You should, by now. He reached over to touch her face. Rock, you're beautiful!

They were quiet for a long time, soaking up sun and warm. There was a light, pine-scented breeze that ruffled Brown's hair. Rock had cut her white hair short, after the sun came back. Now it was well below her ears. And still white. She had hoped it would grow back in its original black. Brown always told her that her hair accented her dark skin.

When the sun was well past mid heaven they made love, leisurely.

On their way back, Rock asked, Do you think there will ever be a time when people don't talk any more? I mean, our children—if we can have any—would hear and talk inside from the beginning. Do you think that people would not need to talk any more? Talk out loud, like now, I mean.

But it's different, isn't it? Sure we can talk inside and hear each other, but that is different, not words but whole thoughts or feelings. I think of it as clouds, Brown said. I can hear and see the cloud, and I understand what the cloud says, but not words. I have to make an effort to translate cloud language into what we speak.

So, there will be poetry. That's good. I like this inside talking. I never knew it was so easy. I remember as a very small girl I listened, or heard people, but I did not understand what it meant. And nobody ever answered me. Well, yes, I think my mother did, but she felt funny, as if she disapproved. It just sort of went away. How I struggled to speak properly, as my mother demanded. She constantly corrected me! Rock continued, You know, I've almost forgotten the "before" world. Now, the "here and now," as we used to say, is so shiny and rich that it fills me up.

Rock, that's what I love about you, the contrasts. Like your white hair; your talking inside, and your mother who corrected your speech! My mom did too, sometimes. She and my dad sometimes talked an Indian language. But, she refused to teach me; she said that was her privacy! But yes, I hardly ever think about the old world any more.

Brown, she said, I think I'm pregnant.

Brown stood up. He did not say anything, but then he went to Rock, hugged her tightly to him. Then pushed her away a few inches, looking down at her stomach. I don't want to hurt the baby!

It does not show yet! I've only missed two periods. I wasn't going to tell you until later, but I could not wait.

Dear family, Katherine began that evening's fireside being-together, we have run out of cups! Someone, or maybe all of us, must think of ways to make cups and plates, if we want those. And forks and knives, and most important, spoons. We had a certain amount of all those necessities, but our family has grown!

People laughed. Yes, it was time to change their old ways.

And, Old Man, added, we must make a better shelter before winter comes.

Brown said, we need more knives, and I need to think of making a spear. Does anyone know how to make and use a bow and arrow?

Solomon said, Max is an expert at spears. You feel you have to learn all the old skills again? That was one of the reasons I came, to ask you to come back with us to Africa. We're much closer to all the old skills, we know how to make cups and knives and spears.

Silence.

The thought was in the circle: don't push! Leave us to make up our minds. Every time the girl woke up now, she looked for Rat, reached a hand and said, Mama... Then, when Rat sat the girl on her lap, she turned around, reached to touch the scars again and said, thoughtfully, Not mama. But she snuggled back anyway. Dreamily she now repeated in that singsong she had, Not mama not mama not mama. A very private litany: not mama not mama not, the emphasis changing with each repetition: Not mama, not mama, not mama, not mama. It became a little song, losing its meaning.

Rat noticed that Alive was listening: she had that faraway look. Softly she said, Guinée? Where is he now?

Alive: not far. He says he can be here tomorrow. Evening, late. But, it stays light a long time here. He is very tired, has not eaten much, but has enough water. Water is not good, he says. When you are running. She looked at Rat, I don't think what he does is what we call running. He has no word. It is moving without touching the ground, he thinks. But that is impossible, of

course. He says only his toes touch the ground, and long steps. Jumps, it feels like. Smooth and very fast.

Alive got up and wandered into the woods. Katherine called after her, but she did not hear any more; she was running now. Katherine shook her head and went back to the deer stew she was designing with roots that Brown had brought her, swearing they were safe, not poison, he had tasted them.

The stew was a gourmet delight. Everyone wanted seconds. There was enough. Katherine put some aside for Alive. Where did she go?

Brown and White Cloud looked up at the same time, and looked in the same direction. Someone coming! Soon, the others heard footsteps, something large walking fast toward the fire. Everyone stood up; some thinking how defenseless they were. Guinée crashed through the forest, cradling Alive in his arms. She was shouting, put me down, I can walk! Guinée grinning. When he put Alive down she turned to the Family and said, this is Guinée, meet Solomon, oh, of course, you know him, and Max you know, and Katherine, and Brown, and White Cloud, and Rock, and Rat with a little girl on her lap that has no name yet.

Katherine urged them to sit down, there was still more than enough deer stew and it was still warm.

Guinée interrupted, in his deep voice, Thank you, but we have to go away for a time, scooping up Alive in his arms again and walking away.

Guinée shouted back over his shoulder, We have to make babies! Solomon, laconically, Yes that cannot wait.

Alive came back early the next morning. Alone. Guinée needs to sleep, she explained. He walked, ran, all those days, almost without stopping. He is exhausted.

Will he find his way back here, Old Man said?

He'll find me, Alive said. Maybe I'll take him some food later on. I'm starved. We did not eat last night.

Katherine smiled. You know, she said, while she walked back to her so-called kitchen, to make some food for Alive, we had not realized that you and Guinée had met. We talked about it last night. We could not figure out where you met. He did not come with Solomon and Max when they first came.

No, I never met him until yesterday, when I went to meet him.

But, how did you know... ? No, I should rephrase that, how can Guinée hide his talking and hearing inside from us?

I think he can only talk to, and hear me, Alive said, tentatively. I'm not sure. When Solomon first came, and he talked about Guinée; I had this funny feeling that I knew him. No, not that. I

could see him and feel his presence, even though he was then in the plane. And, he could feel me, because he talked to me. Last night he told me that he knew that other people did this. Some other people. But not he. He regretted that. But, when we found each other it was as if we had always known. That, somehow, we would meet. After that I always knew where he was and he knew where I was. With Guinée it is as if I am inside him, I experience what he experiences. And he is inside me. That is not true, of course. I don't know how to explain. But, I think I am pregnant.

Alive! Katherine laughed. You cannot know that, already!

Yes, I know, but I know that I am. Guinée and I have always known that we would make babies. And I know that I am pregnant.

Guinée walked in the next morning. He smiled at Katherine and Brown and... his smile faded, he shook his head, closed his eyes. Then turning to Alive, he mumbled, Things and people are very different through your eyes! I can hardly recognize people. I see them very different. Chérie, you did not tell me!

Alive seemed surprised, I see the difference but it does not confuse me. You are a different person and...

Then Guinée leaned over and kissed her. Yes, I know I am a different person, but I am also part of you. Perhaps?

Old Man said, And to continue the introductions, I am Old Man, and to my right is Rat who is holding a little girl who came here recently, we don't know her name yet, and then Rock, and Solomon and Max. But, you know them; of course.

Guinée nodded to each of them, smiling broadly. I am honored to meet you and you and you and... Solomon calls me Guinée. He used to call me Man from Guinée, because I told him that is where I'm from. But that is not quite true. I was not born in Guinée. My family is from Guinée (sounds like ghee- nay) another Guinée. In Guinée we speak French. I was born in France, in Marseille. My father was probably from Guinée, my mother died when I was still a toddler, I think two or three, and some relatives claimed me. So, I was raised in Guinée. But, I think my mother was French, or perhaps Italian? My relatives never wanted to talk about her. When I was grown I figured out that my mother must have been a prostitute: my relatives in Guinée are... very high society. They did not approve of my mother. My grandmother always said, The boy-without-a-mother. In our language that becomes one word.

White Cloud said, In my language they do too! Then, turning to Guinée, I am glad to know you, my name is White Cloud, or, Whitecloud.

Old Man said, I like that, my name is now Oldman, one word.

They all applauded and laughed

Finally Katherine said, Since we are all here together this early in the day, we should sit down and relax. I'll make tea.

Katherine is our mother, Brown said, jokingly. But everyone agreed.

The little girl sat on Rat's lap, now bright-eyed, very much awake. She turned to Rat and whispered in

Rat's ear, My name is Elspeth.

Rat looked at her, smiled, and announced to the group, And this—she looked at the girl—is Elspeth. There had been several conversations going, now everyone looked at the little girl on Rat's lap. Welcome, Elspeth. I'm glad you are feeling better, We are happy to have you with us.

Elspeth hid in the crook of Rat's arm, looked away, but then turned and faced all these people and managed a little smile. I was sick, she said. I was dead perhaps, now I'm here, with No-mama, as she looked at Rat's scarred face and gently lifted one finger to trace one of the scars by her mouth.

Rat said, her mother must have been scarred too. My scars at first made her feel comfortable. Then she turned to Elspeth, Your mother, Elspeth, is she... ?

My mama... cannot remember. Long time ago. Before! She took a deep breath. Cannot remember; too far. We walked... She stopped abruptly, hid her face.

The rest of the group had gone back to their individual talk. Rat bent over Elspeth, and asked quietly, Who is "we," Elspeth?

The kids. I was in school, waiting for the bus, but the bus never came. Then we, the girls and one boy, no, two boys, walked. There were many cars, and shooting and we had to hide in the ditch and then more cars and more shooting, and the little boy got hit and then there were no more cars and no people and we got lost and hungry, and... She could not go on. Her body tightened up,

Rat gently massaged her shoulders, her arms, her legs. It's okay, Elspeth, you don't have to tell me, another time. It's okay.

Katherine brought what they called tea. I don't know how we are going to do this: you have to share cups or take turns. We haven't made more cups yet. We have six now there are more people than cups!

Guinée said, What, no coconuts? Everyone laughed.

Max unwound his long legs, stood up, went where Solomon pointed to find the spring. He wanted water.

Solomon had not said much, he was obviously deep in thought and nobody wanted to interrupt his thinking. When he was ready he would speak up, and probably dominate the discussion.



After the tea, when almost everyone had left Rat and Elspeth were still sitting against the tree, quietly talking. Some of the others went to look for berries, some to repair clothes, some just wandering. Elspeth could not remember much of the last two years... three? She said, she had been eleven when it began. The school bus did not come, and the small group of children had started to walk. Elspeth remembered that the school was in a town called Adderton. Rat repeated, Adderton? Not Addison? Not Adderton, but a thu, Elspeth said. Atherton. In Lew-see-anna.

That is quite a way, Rat exclaimed. You walked all that way?

Elspeth nodded. First, the little boy got killed. In a ditch. And then, I don't remember, and some people came and they took us in a car, but the car had no gas, and we were too crowded. My friend, Lisa, died. And then, we could not find food... Elspeth looked vaguely around. Where am I, she asked?

Rat said, do you want to walk around a little; I'll help you.

Do we have to walk again? I'm tired.

No Elspeth, you don't have to walk. Let me carry you and we can go a little way in the wood and perhaps find some berries. Would you like that?

Elspeth nodded, but she was obviously doubtful about moving, "again," she had walked enough.

How old are you, Elspeth, Rat asked casually?

I don't know. I was eleven in school. I was in Middle School.

Rat looked at her, But then you must be fourteen now? She hugged the girl tighter, thinking she must have been really starved, we thought she was maybe eight or nine...

Almost twelve, Elspeth said softly, my mom asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I was thinking about it. She went on, more forcefully, The boy, he was in High School, who was waiting for the bus with us, the other boys made fun of him because he did not have a car, but he... His shoes wore out, he threw them away, then his feet got hurt. We had to hide in a box. He did it.

Rat: He did what?

He did it with me. He said we were married. But of course we could not be because I was only eleven, or maybe twelve. But, he said he was old enough. His foot came off. Then I walked alone.

How long did you walk alone, Rat whispered.

Oh, I don't know. It was dark, you know. There was another girl, or woman, who walked with me, and then another. She said we should go this way, but then we could not because the cars... So we had to go back. And one time we found a store that was still closed, and she threw a rock, and there was food inside. Boxes of crackers and cereal and juice. But no meat. She said we

needed meat, but there wasn't any. She said we had to find meat, but we carried boxes of crackers. Elspeth chuckled. She could not walk she had so many boxes.

And then, she had been very sick. The woman said it was the crackers: they were active. The woman died. Her hair fell out, and then my hair did too, a little. And she barfed, but I didn't, And then she died. I walked away, you know? She had told me that I should go away when she was dead. I walked away. Then, with a deep sign, she said, I slept a lot. Pretended it was night. It was night for a long time. Not- mama, I'm sleepy.

Rest, Elspeth. I'm going to put you down, but I'll be near.

**chapter sixteen**

Alive and Guinée had joined Solomon and Max who had found a fallen tree to sit on, within shouting distance of the shelter. Max was urging Solomon to leave, go back to Africa. Solomon turned to Guinée, Are you ready to go back to Africa, man?

Guinée looked pinched, looked at Alive. Africa is warmer. Chérie, what do you want to do? Here or Africa?

Alive, Well, I feel I won't be much good to anybody in Africa, I don't speak any African languages, and...

Solomon: what languages, other than English do you speak?

Well, French fairly well, I can read and write it. And I can read German, and some of the Scandinavian languages. They have the best literature in my field. And I mostly understand Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese.

Solomon interrupted her. What is your field?

Alive looked at Guinée, grimacing, then turned back to Solomon, I'm a mathematician. Theoretical. Not very good in Academia. And useless in this new world!

Solomon asked, What kind of mathematics, may I ask?

Alive, looking up at Guinée again, He says "esoteric." It's not really esoteric, but it is beyond... Not easy to say. Someone called it multi-dimensional.

Solomon, You make me curious. We shall have to talk. Max and I were talking about where we could get more fuel. There must be some smaller airstrips that are not too damaged to land, and that still have some airplane fuel. Max thinks north of here. I thought better to aim for Africa and look for fuel somewhere on the way.

Alive, What's the range of your plane, Max?

Max: On the wing tanks maybe eight or nine hours, if I get a tail wind. With the extra tanks, it should be longer.

Alive, what longitude and latitude are you in Africa?

Max: We're only a few degrees above the equator, and where we are used to be in the same time zone as Croatia. We had an engineer from there.

Alive said, as if she were still visualizing, That must be about fifteen degrees east, and we must be about a hundred, or a hundred and ten west. We must be close to the border with Canada, if we are not in Canada. Say, about forty degrees north. That comes to a little less than ten thousand, if you could fly as the crow flies. Miles that is, she added. What a peculiar expression that is! Do crows fly in a straight line?

Solomon, You did that in your head, no?

Max: we have maps in the plane. Maybe all the way to West Coast Canada. But, how do we figure out where we are now? Those maps are not what a pilot uses; they are torn from school books!

Meanwhile, Guinée continued Chérie, to get back to your desire. Do you want to go to Africa?

Alive, If you go, can I come with you?

Guinée: I had counted on it.

Alive, All right. My child—our child—will be African.

Solomon had to ask: Alive, are you African?

You mean black, Negro? Probably, some percentage. My mother was from San Salvador, and my father? She told me he must have been from Brasil. I am an unknown mix. That is what the old world did to us, and to the planet. We mixed up everything: plants, people, languages, concepts. No wonder that there were such stresses that the whole structure exploded.

Imploded, Solomon said under his breath.

In the evening, when they were gathered around a little fire, Solomon announced, rather formally—he stood up—that they had to get back to Africa.

Max said in a stage whisper, I need to get back to my woman,

Solomon added, He means women, plural!

Max, And what is wrong with that? I don't force them.

That is true. Women seem to seek you out, Solomon went on. I feel conflicted. I came here with the expectation to find a group of starving people, and...

Rat interrupted, And you would rescue us.

Well, yes, maybe. But, instead, I see a happy family, well fed (at least for now!) and not in need of being rescued. Max wants to get back, I do too. And Guinée and Alive have decided to come with us. Nobody said anything, until Solomon continued, We're still talking about how best to prepare ourselves for a long trip back. Max wants to take off right now. I thought perhaps we—he, actually— should look for more fuel.

Katherine left the circle, retreated in her domain, the so-called kitchen.

Private discussions erupted all around the circle.,

Solomon had sat down, talking with Max and Guinée. Suddenly, he spoke up, Any of you interested in coming with us?

From the kitchen came Katherine's voice, Yes, I would go with you.

The Family was stunned. Katherine was such a central figure in the Family. Leaving? To Africa? Katherine joined the circle, sitting next to Solomon. I want to go with this man; she said simply.

The next morning, Solomon wandered in the woods, then turned around to find Katherine. She was in the root cellar, now much expanded, making an inventory of the stored meat, fat and the other things they had preserved. The skins were rolled up, as Whitecloud had taught them, ready to use for shoes, moccasins, the first necessity! And coats for warmth, and...

She looked up when Solomon said her name, rather tentatively.

Katherine, you seem to be the house mother, cooking and planning meals. I find myself in a dilemma, and I don't seem to be able to think straight about it. Would you, could you make some time to have a chat?

Of course. Now? Why not. This can wait.

She took his hand and led him to one of her favorite spots, the place where Oldman had first met her. The skeleton was long gone, and now it had become a cool, mossy glen in the woods, now thickly leafed.

Solomon did not quite know where to begin, so started in, It is all entwined, so maybe it does not matter where I begin. You know why I came here?

Katherine: I think so. I used to wonder. It seemed an enormous and blind adventure. I sensed you were a restless person.

Yes, I am. I never mentioned this before, but I want to tell you why, and how I came to be in Africa. You know I was at that university in Germany, all very rich, very respected, honored even. I had a good life as western society thought of a good life. But I felt empty inside. My mind was stimulated, but something was missing. There was always the thought that I wanted to go back to Africa. Had to go back for some reason. I knew, of course, of the horrible political and humanitarian mess most of that continent was in, but still... It was the place of my growing up, and a difficult growing up it was! I did not know many people in Africa any more, so when I thought of Africa it was always in a sort of dream. Not very realistic.

Katherine, as a good listener, did not say anything.

Solomon continued, sheepishly, I was married in Germany. A German girl, blond hair, blue eyes. She had married me, more than I her. She was intrigued with my brain in the body of a boy, as she never got tired telling everyone. I am quoting her! But of course I am not a boy. Our marriage evaporated; neither of us had the will, or the necessity, to do anything about it. So, when it seemed to me from all the things that were beginning to happen politically—the insanity!—I asked for and got a sabbatical, and announced to Anna that I would go away. Alone. She divorced me, which was fine with me. She also got most of my money. I did not care. I had enough left to go to Africa and live there for a year, the length of my sabbatical.

I started out in Egypt, which is geographically Africa, but really is an Arab country. I had wanted to go to Ethiopia, which has always intrigued me. All the Ethiopians I knew were beautiful people, beautiful to look at, and thoughtful inside. They're what I am not, tall and very black, he said, sadly. But there was fighting in Ethiopia, as usual, and in the Sudan, also as usual. So I went west. I flew to Morocco, then on to Senegal, where the people are also very black and very tall. In Senegal, I practiced my French. They were very kind to me. I think they did not quite know what to make of me, but when I told them that I was San, they knew what that was and from that moment on they held me in great esteem. Senegal was wonderful, but I knew I could not stay there. Something was driving me on.

Katherine interrupted, The San, they are Bushman? Of the Kalahari Desert? And what made you want to go on when you felt comfortable in Senegal?

It was some need. We who hear inside, also listen to some inner voice. So, when I had been in Senegal for a month, this inner voice told me to go south and east. I visited some of the countries along the west' and south-facing coast of Africa. Poor, all of them, even those that have oil, or gold, or diamonds, or any of the things the West wanted. Probably because politically and economically they did not know how to bargain with the big corporations. Sad, very sad places. Maybe not as bad as Central Africa where so much killing went on for years and years, but the poverty and degradation of those west African countries was hard to take. The whole idea of nation-states was wrong, don't you think, Katherine?

I've never understood politics, Solomon. To be honest, I have never understood humans. Only now, I am beginning to understand the people we have here. They are good people, you know. Perhaps unusually "good." But the masses, and their leaders? How can thinking people do the things they did? It got more and more of a riddle to me. I thought, seriously, that I must be from somewhere else.

Oh. I did too, often! I discovered myself in Papua. Thanks to them I did not go crazy. I am serious, Katherine. It was only then, that I understood that all those awful things people did to each other was a sickness. We did not used to be like that. Something must have happened to us, a few thousand years ago. I don't know what. I had all these theories about the universe, but could not understand my own species. Crazy, eh? That's why I studied anthropology, although that of course did not help me understand. But, it gave me the opportunity to meet some ancient people, who had not been much infected yet. I got swallowed by the richness of human myths and ideas, and the contradictions! Katherine, the contradictions is what I cannot understand!

After a silence, when neither said anything, Solomon went on, But, to get back to my wanderings in Africa, in the end I got to Nigeria just when it all fell apart. The Chaos someone here called it. I thought of it then as "the End." I was staying with friends I knew from Europe. Nigerians; he was a doctor, a researcher in tropical diseases, she was a chemist, at one time working for an oil company. They had a little place in the interior, far from Lagos. We were there during the Chaos. We made ourselves invisible. We realized early that was the only way to survive the craziness. Rumor had it—there were refugees everywhere—that Lagos had been

bombed. Who would bomb Lagos? Why? Of course, we never went there because then there was the Dark. It was never really dark where we were, but there was a continuous dark haze and of course the radioactivity, the bombs, the sicknesses, all floated over Nigeria as it did probably everywhere. People died like locusts. Those who survived could barely keep up with disposing of the bodies. In the end, we made bonfires and burned dead people, many of them completely unknown to anyone. Refugees. We never even asked any questions, dead people were dead people and had to be disposed of. I think the diseases were the worst. The three white missionaries near us died before any black people did. They must have had less resistance.

Katherine said, I think some of those diseases were designed to kill white people. I was very sick, several times, but I healed myself. I look white, but I too am mixed, as probably everyone is. Russian, Jewish, and Arab—not a happy combination and then mixed with generic American. The first time I had one of those mysterious diseases that mowed down everyone in my area, I noticed that some people did not get as sick, and did not always die. But who knows whether the diseases were mutated viruses or man-made? Or both!

Solomon seemed to be in deep thought, You know I deeply regret that I never got to study medicine. I got sidetracked in the hard sciences, although toward the end it was not hard any more at all. I would be more helpful now if I had studied medicine. I thought about it, but it was not scientific enough for me.

Katherine, laughing, I agree, the science was in the numbers but not in understanding sick people. I think now we have a good opportunity to learn, or learn again, natural ways of healing. Western medicine was wrong in many ways, I feel. I was a nurse, studied a lot of medicine, and was always in rebellion against the way we had to deal with sick and dying people. Too many chemicals, and an almost total neglect of whole humans. But, I am waiting to hear why you decided to come here, if there was any reason other than your natural impulsivity!

Yes, well... A small group of us—we started out with thirty-one people—fled Nigeria after I had found a Geiger counter and could see that our levels were much too high. We were on foot, of course, carrying what food and water we had. It was not an exodus I want to remember. After a pause, he went on, When we arrived where the group is now, we had seventeen people left, including myself. I had the Geiger counter, so I became a sort of leader.

Katherine laughed, No, Solomon that is not why you became a leader. You should know that. Anyone can learn to read a Geiger counter in a few minutes.

Well, maybe, but I did not want to be a leader. I find it excruciatingly difficult to make decisions that affect other people.

Now, no far-reaching decisions are needed. All we need to do is live for the day and hope that there is a tomorrow. Doesn't that make it easier?

Yes, maybe. No. Do we have to survive as savages, again? Didn't you say that you learned from those savages? That's true. I learned, but I could not live as they did.

Not even if you did not have any choice?

I don't know... Yes, probably. They were wonderful humans, Katherine!

He went on, thoughtfully, Anyway, eventually, we came to where we are now. The readings were good. It is good land; there is water. we did not displace any local inhabitants. A town was burned down probably about 20 kilometers away; two nearby villages were deserted. There are mountains nearby, and the ocean with a beautiful beach. It is south of the huge delta of the big river, and we don't get much of the mud and other stuff that comes down that river. There were seventeen of us, then two people came from the south, two more from the east. Or north perhaps. In a land where nations and tribes no longer exist, people are very careful not to identify themselves with a place, or a tribe even. People kept coming. We built a village. And then, another village a few kilometers away. People were growing things again, hunting. Interesting to note that people from different regions had different ways of planting, but they worked that out quite smoothly between themselves. What I call villages are maybe three or four houses. Primitive, but we have knives, some other metal tools. No weapons made of iron; we communally decided. Some people had rifles, and others had ammunition, but the gods be praised; the ammunition did not fit the rifles! We had a ceremony, throwing everything deep, far into the ocean. Now people hunt with spears and bow and arrow again, as in the old days. And they have probably rediscovered healing plants and other healing ways, Katherine suggested.

Yes that seems to be going on. You should ask Guinée, he knows about things like that.

Katherine asked, how many seats do you have on your plane?

Well that is sort of flexible, it depends on how much fuel we can find and pump into the plane. There is a big storage place where we put some extra seats, in case we would need them. We have enough seats set up now. Katherine, I must ask, are you sure you want to come with us?

Yes, dear. I know that is the right thing for me to do, at this point.

Solomon said, in a tone of voice that spoke of doubts, When we came... I thought... all of you would jump at the chance to join us where it is warm and things grow.

Katherine smiled, and said quietly, I don't know about the others. I'm speaking only for myself. I would like to be with you, live with you. If I were younger, I would have your children. I still have occasional menses, but not regular...

Solomon, slyly, And you don't think of me as an overgrown boy?

No, Solomon, I think of you as a towering genius, a fascinating man I would like to care for. Holding up her hand, as if to say, stop! And I don't care how many other wives you already have there, as long as you respect me. And of course, they have to approve of me! I can live with other women, as long as you don't bring disease and as long as you don't compare.

Solomon, surprised, questioning, Compare? Compare what?



Never again do I want to be told, so-and-so cooks better, or is better in bed, or has better taste in clothes. I had enough of that when I was married. Long ago! But, and again she held up her hand, First I have to ask Rat. Someone has to be here, stay here, for a little while more at least. This is a “gathering place” you know. People come here. The right people, those who can sense those things, feel an attraction and are guided this way. Someone must be here to receive them. Like the little girl who just came. Rat is taking care of her now.

Katherine, Katherine, I am honored beyond anything I can think of saying. Yes, I accept your proposal of marriage. And I have no other wives And now that I think of it, our place must also be a gathering place. People seem to know where to find us.

But Solomon! I did not propose marriage. I propose sharing lives, and perhaps love. I don’t want marriage. Marriage was a social contract, and not worth much, certainly not in a world without rules yet.

But, of course, I accept you on any terms. Or no terms, if that is what you want. But... How will this place do without you? You seem the mother of this place, the hostess, you cook for them, do the food thing, you probably saved their lives.

Rat does all those things too, and she is more loving than I am. I am a good manager, I admit. I learned that. But in nursing I learned that I did not fit in that profession. I could do all the medical procedures, but I had little patience to sit by sick people and listen to... whatever they had to get off their chest. Rat knows to listen.

That evening, as the Family and their friends (and guests?) came to the circle, they all knew that something important was about to begin. They knew this was an important evening.

Oldman came last, looking preoccupied, There was a space between Rat, who held Elspeth on her lap, and Max. Rat motioned, come sit by me! Oldman hesitated, looked around, then sat down, careful not to touch Rat.

She whispered, You act as if you’re afraid of me!

No-o-o. He smiled an embarrassed sort of sneer, I just realize that I am jealous. Envious of little Elspeth who gets all your caring.

Rat reached out, brought his face close, and kissed him on the mouth. I have enough caring for you too, Oldman..

Oldman seemed confused and relieved, all at once.

Rat said, You’re the hero of my life, don’t you know that? And I love your hair! What little there is. I used to have a full head of hair, now I have white fuzz.

It is like a soft halo. It becomes you. It fits my savior! In some traditions that means that I now own you!

I’m all yours.

Oldman reached out to touch Rat's hand, holding Elspeth. Maybe I now own both of you, he said quietly.

Slowly, it got quiet. People ended their private little asides, waiting.

Finally Solomon spoke, very softly at first; they leaned closer to hear.

It seems as if I've been here a lifetime, though it is only a few days. Or, however we choose to count time now. Or maybe not even consider time at all. I'm struggling with that. Struggling with this new world that we hardly know yet.

Something in me wants to go back to Africa. I'm not sure what it is, but I shall find out when I get there. If we get there. Max also wants to go back, and since he is the only pilot, that's a good thing!

People smiled, some laughed a little.

And, he continued, I think Alive and Guinée want to come to Africa too. We need them, both. Rock, how about you? I was told. your mother was an African princess. Would you like to come with us?

Rock frowned, then smiled. Yes, my mother was African. Whether she was a princess I would not know. That's what my dad called her. We went to Africa once, to her people, and they did make a big fuss over her. They would not let her leave. At least that's what she said. In any case, my father and I returned to our home in this country. After that my life was not much fun. My father was bitter and angry and, of course, I was the only one he could vent that on. My mother visited a few times, but she was not my mother any more. In other words, my ties to Africa are purely biological, and if I have a choice, I prefer to take my chances here.

Solomon continued, We all take chances in an almost wholly unknown world. I don't know whether we have a better chance to survive in Africa, where it is warm and things grow. I thought I knew. You've taught me better.

Oldman had been waiting to talk, now he jumped in. By coming here, Solomon, with an airplane and a pilot—and we seem to have forgotten the passengers—you changed our world. We here knew that surviving would be an enormous challenge, but for whatever reason we thought we could make a go of it. I had considered, in the beginning —when I could think again!—I considered going somewhere else, south perhaps. But, I was tired still, and felt there was really no need to choose to do anything, except survive where I happened to be. Then you come, and say, Choose! That threw me out of whatever balance I had achieved. I've never had much experience making these kind of choices. I always knew I had to get away from this or that boss, he beat me. I knew I had to get out of town before they caught me. I had to steal food because I was hungry. Surviving is like that. I wandered, and then came here. Compared to the first part of my life, this is paradise. We have enough food, but most important we respect each other; yes, perhaps we even love each other. How can I leave? Na, I'll stay and take my chances. What do I have to lose?

Katherine left to make more tea.

Rat spoke, I stay here. It has taken me much pain to come here, and I too have found “paradise,” so why move? And of course I also have to mother Elspeth for a little bit longer. And I will hostess this sacred spot when Katherine goes to Africa.

Katherine came back with more tea. Yes, Solomon and I are going to live together perhaps. If his other wives will have me!

Katherine! I told you I do not have wives. I am sixty (something). I have girl-friends, perhaps, but you, Katherine, will be the woman of my hut!

Everyone laughed.

There was not much that needed to be said, after that. People moved away, hesitantly at first, each to find their favorite sleeping place (with, or without partner).

The evening was still light as Katherine took Solomon’s hand, leading him to her favorite clearing. Katherine showed him some early blueberries, and some other berries that she did not know the name of, but she knew they were good to eat, and nobody had been sick. When they sat down Solomon dug out two tiny package of old roasted peanuts. They have not been opened, but I cannot guarantee what they taste like after these years. Katherine’s package was too rancid to eat. Solomon’s package a little better, but after eating two half peanuts each, there was nothing but salt and shreds of peanut left in the package.

They made love. Both were experienced and did not have too many expectations about coitus, and both were surprised by the wonder of it. Again.

Solomon looked at Katherine, I thought I was too old for that! Katherine laughed. Obviously, neither of us is “too old!”

**chapter seventeen**

Do you smell something?

Yes, dead human!

Katherine and Solomon had gone for an early morning “stroll,” as he called it. Solomon had been self-conscious about walking with this large woman; he worried about keeping up. But, they had soon learned a rhythm that suited them both.

Katherine asked, In Africa, did you find that bodies disintegrate much slower than before, sometimes hardly at all?

No that must be a local condition. Our dead have to be buried the same day, or at the latest the next day, This one stinks!

They could not miss the dead man, most of him eaten by whatever animal now eats carrion, but enough of him left under the helmet to show an emaciated face. However, the smelling corpse was hardly as stunning as the arsenal the man apparently had been carrying. Hard to believe that one man could have carried that. Two rifles, one with an elaborate telescope sight, some hand grenades, an automatic revolver and three or four clips still hung from his belt. And perhaps another handgun under his hand. A box of ammunition had fallen open.

They looked at each other. Finally Katherine said, What do we do? Not the body. That has almost rotten away. Leave it for animals. But the weapons!

Solomon, thoughtfully, Our group decided early that iron weapons would never be allowed again. I would bury these now, but I don’t know enough about guns to know whether any of that stuff could go off by itself. I must ask Guinée; he knows about guns.

We must discuss it this evening.

Solomon looked at Katherine, as if he had not noticed something before, Now I know why I need you. You have a clear mind, My mind is full of useless speculation; I get confused by the simple decisions. Your mind does better coping with everyday life.

Katherine just laughed. Then said, Well I’m glad you “need” me for something other than wonderful sex. In my experience, that is rare. Just for that I would be your woman!

Solomon seemed shy. Let’s start back. You embarrass me, woman.

She looked back, and said, Poor guy, wonder what he died of? Probably hunger. With all his guns, he could have killed but would not have known how to cook meat. And why didn’t we sense him? It’s not that far from home?

Katherine, what are you saying! If someone had approached him he would have killed, and if he had found all of you, he would have machine gunned the whole Family.

Probably, but I must remind Brown to keep listening. He’s good at hearing, or feeling life around him. Solomon said darkly, Obviously this man was not “a life!”

Back at what they still called “the Cabin,” although the cabin was now part of a structure that did not look like anything humans made. They discussed the dead man. What, if anything, should be done with his arsenal? Solomon listed the various weapons. The response from everyone was immediate. Get rid of the guns, hide them, destroy them, throw them away. Never again!

Guinée offered to look and see what could be buried, and what should be gotten rid of in other ways. Look out for land mines, he said. Those are evil! Max said he would go with him.

The two Africans—Oldman had joined them—were back before dark. The whole Family (and their guests) would discuss what to do, and who would do it.

Oldman asked Katherine, How can we talk without your magic tea?

Katherine answered, almost curtly, From now on, Rat is going to do that. Or, you can all take turns cooking. I have to get ready for an adventure!

Alive laughed nervously, How do you get ready for this trip, Katherine? Do you have a surplus of clothes? Precious bric-a-brac you have to pack in your suitcase?

Katherine smiled, The only thing I want to do is to show Rat where everything is, even my secret cache of food for emergencies! Then I’m ready.

Rock asked, Katherine, In your secret cache for emergencies, you would not have some alcohol, do you? We should celebrate.

Whitecloud objected, Alcohol is not for celebrations, it’s death.

Everyone was quiet. Yes that too belonged to the old world...

It did not take long to organize a small group of people who would bury the ammunition of the dead man early the next day — before the Africans, as they were now called, would leave.

They did not find mines the next morning, but grenades were a worry. Nobody knew whether the metal of grenades would rust. What if the pin would rust through? And, how to disarm them from a safe distance? They did not know of a lake, or other body of water, nearby, where they could dump the weapons. In the end, Guinée, Max, and Oldman, cut trees, felling them so that they all fell over the dead man. A wooden tomb. As they left Oldman said, Next Spring the wood should be dry enough to burn, we will light it and run far away. To be safe, they cut a few more trees, so that there was open space around the heaped up wood. As they walked away, Guinée looked back, Do we say a prayer? Wish the dead man well? Max and Oldman had walked on, so Guinée mumbled his own blessing.

After much discussion, it was decided that Max, Guinée and Alive would go the next morning, with enough food and water to last them a few days. Solomon and Katherine would leave one or two days later. The route to the plane was put on the last bit of paper Solomon had with him, so that nobody would get lost.

And then, Katherine had said, the great adventure will begin!

Brown voiced what all of them were feeling, when he said, It is strange to see people come, and then go. Somehow I had thought that we...

Rock finished the sentence, That we, the Family, would never change. But, of course, families change. Children grow, go away.

Nobody did much work that day.

Elspeth, who had recovered remarkably in a relatively short time, said, Let's call this Sunday!

Good idea. A day to do what you want to do.

But, Brown said, with a twinkle in his eyes, That's what I do every day! I do what I want to do. You don't mind, Elspeth, if I talk to the plants, do you?

Rat leaned against her tree, a warm smile of contentment spread across her mouth, lighting her eyes. Her head back, she seemed to be watching clouds, although the foliage, now thick, made it difficult to see clouds. Without looking down, she spoke to those imaginary clouds perhaps. This is strange; I feel happy. When I think about it, it seems not only strange but almost sinful. With much of the planet recovering from some terrible blight that swept around and around the world for two years, three? And yet, now, I am happy

Ah, she said as she sat forward and opened her eyes, that horror of weapons is behind us. Gone. We must begin anew, and we, the three of us, in the middle of a beautiful forest, the sun shines, there is a mild breeze, our stomachs filled, and friends on all sides. What else is there, Oldman?

Oldman was quiet. Finally he said, You don't expect an answer, do you?

Dear Oldman, no. perhaps not. She reached for his hand, but Oldman withdrew, got up, mumbled something. Going for a walk. Then, louder, All my life there have been times when I needed to be alone.

Elspeth was asleep, curled on the other side of the tree Rat leaned against.

Woman, don't you understand ... I'm scared. Had to fight all my life just to eat, to sleep, to find some peace. I do not know how to relate to people over time. Now you make eyes at me. We were sitting there as if we were a family: mama, papa and a child. I cannot afford you. I cannot provide for a wife.

And all these people who look into my head! No privacy. Here I am, walking in these thick woods, and who knows who is listening to me. Inside. They talk about hearing inside.

Alive, she was the first who made eyes at me. Told her, you're way above my class. What class, she asked? I don't know. All I know is that I am the lowest. In India I would be Untouchable, my work would be to collect and dispose of shit, and bury the dead. No, they don't bury in India. Well, whatever they do.

He had run away, slowing down. Now he stood still, looked around, He heard bird song. Hey! I don't need to be Untouchable in this new world. This time around I am up there, with the stars. With a genius who turned down a Nobel prize. Stand straight, Oldman, you are one of the select, the remnant of Homo sapiens! Whatdoesthatmakeme?Aspecimen?Asample! I'mtalkingnonsense.Letsgettothefacts.I find myself here, in an environment that is new to me, with people I have never met before, and would never have met in the old world. And they're all, without exception, warm, loving people. There must be something wrong. Why is it that I know these people now? Never even suspected that people like this existed on planet earth. Considerate, helpful. Caring. Rat and that girl, who so moves me. The little girl, almost dead when she got here—and how did she find us? She's not a little girl, of course. How old can she be?

This is a special place, Katherine says. Rat says. It must be special. Maybe it attracts only nice people? Then how about the man with all the guns? But, he did not make it. There were others who never made it. Remember the skeletons when we first came?

How old am I? I'm not sure. We've all lost a sense of time. I remember being twenty-eight. I think I remember being thirty. So I must be thirty two, three? And Rat is? Hard to tell. She could be a hundred. What does age mean anyway? Rat looks like she is, maybe ... I really don't know. What if she is forty? Does it matter? Matter for what, for heavens sake! Marriage? Who talks marriage? Not the legal kind anyway. We haven't any rules yet. We've just started making "customs."

What a thought, we are the forefathers of Man-to-be! Are we the ones later generations will tell myths about?

That's what bugs Solomon. He knows he is an ancestor, and feels the responsibilities of that. Then he rebels, as he rebelled against the Nobel prize. No, I may be an ancestor, but I have no way of knowing how future generations will remember me, if at all. And certainly I cannot live my life thinking of the future, of any future, If there is anything we should have learned, it must be that there is only Now. Today. This moment.

And this moment I want to be with Rat and the little girl, Elspeth. What a name! But it's all she has, poor kid. All I have is memories of being chased, hungry, beaten, running, hiding. I want to forget. I have no name, except Oldman.

He ran back, found Rat and the girl sitting as he had left them. He threw himself down, leaned over and kissed the girl, then Rat.

Rat, softly, the walk cleared your head?

You should know what was going on in my head

I should know? Rat said, her whole posture genuine surprise.

Well, don't you listen or hear "inside," as you call it?

Never, without permission. Of course not. And, Oldman, you have the most formidable block on your mind! Don't you know that? Such a block broadcasts far and wide, loud and clear, that you are out of bounds, you don't want to be read.

She leaned over, and said, Are you afraid of me? Spying in your head? How can I? But, I can read your body language like anyone else who is the least bit sensitive. I know you are a wonderfully caring person, despite your sometimes rough manner.

I thought you and Katherine, and now Solomon... ?

And Brown, and Rock and Alive, she added. Solomon is good at sending, that is true. Katherine and I hear clearer probably. But, not when someone blocks like you do! Rat laughed, put her arm around his shoulder, drawing him closer.

After only a second, Oldman said, What do you think, Rat, are we a family?

Rat smiled, Certainly. Although the marriage has not been consummated.

That, we can take care of. Is Elspeth asleep?

It was not the best sex Oldman had ever had, but most certainly the best loving. Almost too much. He felt unworthy—why?—for such love. He sank into himself, with tears in his eyes.

Rat murmured something, lying next to him. Perhaps meant for the wind, but Oldman could hear her if he listened carefully. Oldman, I cannot forget how you stepped out of the rubble of that cursed city, and very resolutely brushed off those huge rats with your gnarled stick, One part of me knew how unbelievably brave you were, also knowing how deeply you must care for other people. In that city of palpable hatred, anger and fear. And the suddenly, you appeared. I hurt so much at the time that I could not think clearly. When Rock and you resolutely made that sling and carried me for what seemed endless miles before Katherine washed my wounds, I was mostly unconscious. I drifted in and out of pain. I was always aware of you. Rock too, but mostly you. I had been with Rock for, I think, a few days. No, probably a week; weeks? We did not know each other well. We never even exchanged names, isn't that funny? But, no one had ever known situations like that. Humans gone insane, ruins everywhere. Smoke and fires. And then the rats! I remember flashes of clarity when I felt you, and my heart ached for you. Your actions clearly were those of a caring, loving person, and yet your heart was hidden behind steel walls. I never tried to hear you inside. I cannot do that. That gift only works where I am not welcomed.

She turned her head slightly, her lips brushing Oldman's ear. And now... You have changed, blossomed. The warm, caring nature that we all knew was always there, is finally allowed out. Thank you, my hero, my lover. You gave me a life, and now you are giving me love. Maybe that word does not fit in your mouth yet., Don't worry. Words are not important. I feel your love, and, believe me, I don't have to invade the privacy of your mind!

Oldman whispered, I must believe that. Yes, Rat, you are right. I feel so different from I've ever felt in my whole life before, that I don't quite know yet how to "be."



You'll learn. Don't give it a thought. I wish I could make you forget your early life, although I also know that perhaps that early life has, secretly, prepared you for now. But, now we must see how Elspeth is. I think she is still asleep, but I never tried to listen to her inside! So, we must get up and see.

Oldman joined the hunters, they had spotted a group of at least eleven deer, and they could use another man, even though they were unarmed. Whitecloud was teaching Brown to make a bow and some arrows, and they were working on the first spear, experimenting with how best to tie one of the few knives to the spear. Whitecloud had said they should find flint, or a sharp stone, or use a point hardened in fire. But since the knife was there, they agreed it should be tried. The hunt was a messy affair. They had strung two ropes between trees, so that hopefully, they could catch deer running in two directions. But, as it happened, at the first sound the deer scattered in all directions. Two of the deer ran into each other and ricocheted off one of the ropes. One of the deer broke a leg; the other probably choked on the rope. But the actual killing, which was up to Brown, was botched when the deer with the broken leg suddenly got up and tried to run away on three legs. Oldman and Whitecloud chased it, and brought it down. But, it meant Brown had to finish the first deer and then run to the second, which fought fiercely against the two men holding her down. Eventually, the two deer were skinned and cut up in big chunks, but it was too much even for three men to carry. Whitecloud said he would stay with the rest of the meat, and work on the spear. Oldman and Brown walked back, loaded down with a heavy load of meat.

Brown said, between breaths, Oldman you look different today. You must be in love!

That is the craziest thing anybody ever said to me. But, Oldman said, after a long pause, I guess you're right, in a way. I seem to be married.

Did you know that Rock is pregnant?

Oldman's first reaction was, and who is the father? But he did not ask.

Brown answered his unspoken question anyway, We don't know of course. We'll know when he or she is born. But does it matter who the father is? There are so few of us now. Rock explained it all to me. She wants to bear children from many men. Genetic mix, or something like that, she calls it.

For a while they walked in silence, until they took a break, carefully putting down the heavy load.

Five minutes, Brown said, no longer.

Do you have a watch?

No, of course not. I meant, we cannot sit too long. If we sit too long, then get up, carrying that meat will just get harder.

You know, you have changed too, Brown. You've become such a self-confident man. The hunter of the

Family. You and Whitecloud have done all the providing for us. What can we do to express our thanks? You do by being. And being happy. You like to play the cynic, or perhaps you are so used to it, it has become part of you. But, your heart is shining now, and it makes you a different person.

Brown, how do you know all that?

That's not difficult. I read plants, and talk to the animals we hunt. It's a feeling, Whitecloud says. A good feeling you get from people, or a tree. One of those deer was not quite ready for her death, I think. That bothered me, but she broke her leg, a bad break! And wild animals are not able to take a day or two off, stay off the broken leg. They must browse all the time. She would not have been able to do that; better to help her to die as painlessly as possible. I hope she understood.

When they had almost reached the shelter, Oldman said, Brown, you belong here, don't you?

You mean here, not Africa?

Yes, I guess. I thought of this mountain, the woods. I have come to like this place too. There is something, I don't know what it is. It is calm, certain of itself. The trees are a great comfort to me. Funny, to say that!

No, not funny. I understand what you say. I feel that too, Brown said. Then he yelled ahead, to announce to the women who would work on the meat further, so that the men could go back for the rest of it.

Brown said, Oldman, I am sure Whitecloud and I could easily bring the second load home. Why don't you stay and help the women. There is a lot of work!

Katherine and Solomon planned to leave the next day; the Family had a party that evening. There was an abundance of food. Berries were now everywhere. Brown's garden was continuing to provide greens. And Katherine's famed tea, now made by Rat and Rock, with some help from Elspeth who was on her feet. Solomon was very quiet, and so was Katherine. Nobody felt much like celebrating. Katherine had been mother, or provider, for the Family from the time each of them had found the place. To see her go was hard. Katherine herself seemed content, but reflective. Much of the food remained uneaten. Nobody was hungry, yet nobody had the urge to leave the group and go to sleep.

In the night a big storm broke. Unexpected, no one had noticed the dark clouds gathering at sunset. Wind first came from the north, then abruptly changed to west wind, and back to north. Torrential rain fell. Thunder and lightning smashed all around the Family, huddled under the shelter. The shifting winds strained the covers of the shelter; before dawn half of the roof blew off. Oldman, Rock and Brown looked at each other, We were planning to build a stronger shelter, we had better do that before more storms come and before it gets too cold to do much.

Just when it looked that the storm was blowing away and that the sun would be up soon, a tremendous thunder clap sounded. No lightning, however. What was that?

More thunder, all from the same direction. And then, they could see, against the now graying sky, black smoke, and perhaps flames. A fire? A forest fire!

Oldman remembered the weapons arsenal which they had buried under downed trees. As soon as it was light enough, the men went in the direction of the fire. It was as they had thought, something had set off a grenade perhaps. That had triggered other grenades, or whatever was in the pile, to go off. The wood piled had caught fire. A good thing they had cut a wide swath around the woodpile. The wood was probably too fresh to burn very well anyway in that fierce rain.

It was probably after mid day when they dared leave the fire that seemed to have burned out. Katherine and Solomon had left...

Oldman and Brown felt a gaping hole in the Family. Nobody felt like doing anything about the shelter's roof. They ate leftovers from the previous night's feast, Elspeth helping Rat in the kitchen. Rock had gone with the travelers for a little way, came back late afternoon, bringing a full basket of a new kind of berries and the first mushrooms of late Summer.

**chapter eighteen**

Oldman looked away, as if he were listening. He turned to Rat again, You know that man with all the weapons? I started to think about how he had managed to carry all that stuff, when he was almost certainly tired and exhausted, probably starved. Maybe no water. How did he carry so much? He should have had two more arms and a lot more muscle than he seemed to have. Max asked the same question out loud when we stood around him, deciding what to do. Then Guinée said what of course, we had already thought, the man must have had a companion, or a pack animal! I did not see any sign of a wheeled cart, even a bicycle. Then Max had said, “and if he had a companion, where is the companion now?”

Rat sat up, straight, interrupting Oldman’s reminiscence. That blast we heard, all the munition blowing up, and then the fire. Do you think that companion could have done that?

When we first went out there, we did not even think of another person. He, or perhaps she, hid, but then could not help but know about us, when seeing the pile of tree trunks, perhaps thinking we did that to save the weapons depot for ourselves.

So now that he or she is the only one around with a weapon. It does not have to be more than a light handgun, if she had observed that we did not use weapons for hunting...

Rat looked at Oldman, her eyes wide. Then, she raised her voice, strongly, I hope that whoever it is out there knows that we don’t have weapons, and that we probably would welcome her, if she wants to join us.

Oldman, added in a louder voice, Of course, we would be glad to have someone join us, IF SHE WERE FRIENDLY AND PEACEFUL.

Slowly, very slowly, a shadow detached itself from shadow. A person stood outside the shelter, looking in. Rat and Oldman stood up, calmly walked to her. A woman, a young woman, in worn, dirty clothes. She stood still. Her black hair looked hacked off with a dull knife, uneven lengths sticking out from her head. Her hands open, empty, she moved to Oldman and Rat.

I have no weapon, she said.

Rat tried to read her, unsuccessfully, asked, How could you come so close without us knowing?

I learned, the woman said. I learned well from two crazy men. They owned me, they said. I was pack animal, mate to one while the other slept. I was not supposed to need sleep, or food. One died; you found his corpse after it had been half-eaten, or rotted. I killed the other, far from here. He had to sleep, and I stole his gun and shot him. Then I threw the gun at a land mine — you didn’t know that was there, eh? It was visible at the edge of what you so carefully buried. You must have heard the explosion. You saw the fire. I followed you here, but there were too many people, so I waited. I’m hungry, and very thirsty. Do you have... ?

Of course, Rat and Oldman said simultaneously. Oldman went to get some water; Rat went to get food. They still had leftovers from the feast that had not been much of a feast.

When the young woman had eaten and drunk plenty of water, she sat back That is the best meal I have had since... ever. The men were not very good providers. Too busy arguing with each other, shooing animals we could not eat. Toward the end they shot at things that weren't there. Of course I had to do the cooking. I know how; I grew up in these woods. Those two men who said they owned me, called me Squaw. They did not know I owned them.

How did that man die, Rat asked gently? He was carrying the biggest load, and I guess he did not have enough to eat. Not my fault, I cooked what they gave me to cook. I never showed them the berries they could eat, or mushrooms, or roots.

Oldman said, What tribe are you?

You guessed! No tribe. My mother was mixed: three different tribes, one from here, the other two far south. My mother, my grandmother, and auntie, they knew how to survive in these woods! Mom went to a town. I told her not to, too dangerous. But, she had to buy something, she said. I knew, she needed liquor. She never came back. I looked for her, and listened, but she was gone. When those men came, I thought... I was stupid. I just could not be alone any more. I had lived with my mother not too far from a mining camp. Lots of booze, few people. My mother couldn't be around people. I can't either. People's pains and screams keep me awake.

Rat and Oldman looked at each other. You can hear us, but we cannot hear you? How do you do that?

I told you: those men. Their screaming and yelling and pain were so fierce that I had to shut myself off. I would have gone crazy. I almost did go crazy. One of them beat me, then I hurt all over, and had to forget about them. I learned.

Then she added, Who were those other people? They walked to an airplane and took off. Are they coming back? Tell me when they come back, so I can leave. Now I feel very sleepy. If you don't mind, I'll go back to my hideout.

You can stay here, Oldman said. Rat nodded. We're only a few people now, we have no weapons. No alcohol, Rat said, with a smile.

The woman was already asleep where she sat.

Oldman: do you think we have a new member of the Family?

Don't know; it's possible. She's a strange one.

We all survive in our own way. The kind of dire, life-threatening emergencies we have experienced bring out hidden strengths.

In the morning, the Family met again. For a long time nobody said anything. The woman seemed to be comfortable, just sipping her tea, eating little bites from the food Rat had put in the middle of the circle.

Brown broke the silence, Now we have enough cups again, I see.

Rat: but we need to think of fixing the shelter.

The stranger woman looked around, and said, This is your shelter? Not much protection for winter, I would say.

The last storm did much damage, Rat said. We need to think whether we want to expand, strengthen, or start anew. Any ideas, as she turned to the stranger woman?

There are enough trees, and if you have some skins, or other covering, we can make teepees. They're strong in wind and snow. They don't heat too well, though.

Whitecloud asked, You have experience living in a teepee?

The woman bristled, Just because I was called their squaw does not make me Indian.

Brown said mildly, Why did they call you squaw? Not because of your looks, I guess.

No, they wanted to make sure I knew that they owned me. I was like their slave. I tried to run away a few times, but they had guns. I got scared. And if I left them I would be all alone in the world, and that did not feel right to me either. Better stay with the bastards; I knew how to handle them.

Oldman said quietly. Everyone here is a little bit of this and that. Maybe Whitecloud (he motioned with his chin) is full Indian, but I doubt that. Some of us don't even know who we are. I mean what kind of people our parents were. Except Brown, he grew up not far from here, in a little village. His father was from the West Indies, and his mother was a mix of Indian tribes.

Brown said, She called herself Cherokee, if someone asked, and she wanted to give a short answer. Cherokee to her, meant Native American, I think.

The stranger woman smiled, Yes, my dad called himself Cherokee too, although I think he did not know much, if anything, about his ancestors. My mother? She said, white, but she was really white trash. She fought everybody. I had brothers and a sister supposedly, but I never found out who fathered them. I ran away when I was eight, and ten and eleven. Brought back by cops, social workers, drunks who thought they could sell me back to my folks. At fourteen I left and never looked back. And here I am. My name is Georgette, by the way. She laughed a full laugh. What a name, eh? Georgie my dad called me. My mother never called me anything except, Kid. Kid come here. Kid, wash the dishes. Kid, get dressed, do this, don't do that. The only time she touched me was when she beat me. My dad was drunk most of the time, but he meant well. When he was sober he was a good dad. He taught me things. Real things in a real world. The world today is real. She spoke firmly.

She fitted in this Family! Now she had the same drawn, emaciated look they all had when they first came. But, she seemed sound.

. Rat had Elspeth on her lap until she gently moved the girl to sit beside her. She looked at Georgette, and said kindly, Do you want to be called Georgette? Some of us have names that we took “after.”

After? After what, Georgette asked?

After what we have come to call the Dark. My name now is Rat. She noticed the shock on Georgette’s face. Because I was attacked by monster rats, who ate half my face, before Rock here (looking at Rock) and Oldman (looking again) rescued me. It took me a long time to heal my face enough to talk again, but now I look fairly normal, I think. Nobody has made comments lately. Anyway that is why I call myself Rat, now. Maybe I’ll change it again one of these days.

Oldman said, with emphasis, All of us have changed our names to fit into a new kind of world. We felt the old names did not fit any more.

Georgette said, I have to think about that. I still have a bad taste in my mouth when I think of the last name I was given: Squaw. I have nothing against the word. I’m probably enough Indian to be called it. But at the moment, “Georgette” feels safe and it goes back to a very old me, when I felt good about myself. If nobody minds, I’ll stay Georgette, for now.

Whitecloud was telling Rock how to make moccasins for Brown, who long ago outgrew the pair of shoes he had when he first came. First, you choose the right kind of skin. And, now that we are approaching winter, maybe a skin that can be used with the fur outside, for more traction in snow, and on ice. Soft furred animals have thinner skins, sometimes used with the fur on the inside, for warmth. But then you need an outer skin for strength. Oh, and of course you have to know how big a piece you will need. He looked at Brown’s bare feet, thickly calloused now. You have big feet, this boy who is now a man!

They all laughed.

There were enough rolls of leather from the summer hunts to choose two pieces large enough for Brown’s feet.

Brown said, when you learn on mine, you probably will want to make moccasins for everyone here. We have learned that shoes with leather soles do not work well on ice and snow. Whitecloud, do you know how to make snow shoes? Last winter, we tried, and we could not quite figure out how. It was fun trying, though!

Whitecloud looked up at the sky. I don’t know what month we might be in, but I know from where the sun rises and sinks that it is mid Autumn. Perhaps we shall have a mild winter.

Winter began gradually. It got colder, but not much; it snowed, but not much. Then, after the leaves had fallen, berries less abundant, there were two sharp, short storms. After the second storm the Family dug themselves out from a few inches of very dry, light snow. It was winter

cold, but perhaps they had adjusted to the climate; nobody complained, or even remarked on conditions outside. They had more than enough fuel to stay reasonably warm, the shelter had been improved: Georgette had emerged as a master builder. And now they had enough food. Even enough leather to make necessities and keep busy.

Rock was now visibly pregnant. She did not really “show,” but there was that certain glow around her that spoke of the wonder of life within life. She was pampered a little, until she objected.

Save your hovering for later. I may need it then. Now I feel wonderful. You look wonderful, everyone agreed. Georgette had a bad time at first. She had been quite ill, and it took her a long time to regain some of the bravado she had shown that first day. Most of the time she had locked her teeth together, without uttering a sound. Until one evening when Oldman, who sat next to her that evening, spoke harshly to her: You are tougher than any man I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen some. But, and he turned to face her, if you go on to swallow your hate, and pain, you break. The harder you control yourself, the deeper the fall. If I were you, I would scream! We don’t mind. We all scream from time to time (except Brown). Good for the liver.

Everyone held their breath when Georgette turned to Oldman, spit him full in the face, and then said, barely audible,, Kiss me.

Oldman, almost immediately had reacted with fists and raising his arms. Now he slowly unwound, then reached out and held Georgette in his arms, while she sobbed as if she must shed the tears of a lifetime in one sitting.

Nothing was said; the others slowly moved away from the little fire that was about to go out. Oldman held her until they both fell asleep.

After that, at irregular times, Georgette had to leave whatever she was doing and go off in the woods for a while. She healed. Months later she would tell them that she had been healed as much by their acceptance, as by their “I can’t say it any other way: your love.”

And, by the food Rat made you eat, Whitecloud said.

Brown called her a true ancestor, I see you with children, and grandchildren, he said.

Georgette asked, Whose?

Brown shrugged his shoulder. I don’t know. Is that important?

You know, she turned to Oldman and then Whitecloud, who sat a little further, I’ve never thought of that. I always heard how useless I was, how I was a servant, scum. You know, the usual. Now I feel different. Yes, I would like a child. But, I would not know how to raise a child! I never learned. My mother was no good at raising me.

Elsbeth spoke up, You raised yourself. I did, too.



They all laughed, but they got the point. Probably all of them thought about whether there would be a next generation?

Rat said quietly, I'm probably too old to have children.

Elsbeth said, But I'm not! I want children by all of you!

White Cloud laughed, We do have our uses. One of my wives always rubbed that in. She grew the babies, but I had to feed them; "that's only fair," she would say. Fair? What's fair? We all need each other, for love, for children, for food, for companionship, for wisdom.

Rat picked it up. That's good! I agree, the first thing we have to learn is how we can best live together. We're a small group of people; we should be able to live in harmony.

Oldman said, Our gene pool, to talk shoptalk, is small. The more we mix it up, the better.

Rock, Your science point of view is probably true, but somehow I have a hard time thinking of myself as a brood mare.

Brown, surprised, Is that what we are talking about? Having as many babies as we can, as if it is our duty to repopulate the planet?

We don't have to worry about the planet, Brown. For now, all there is—all we know—is just our little Family. What is a family without children? And I'll be the grandmother, Rat said.

Oldman, And perhaps some of us are just thinking sex, never mind children. In my old life I never even thought I might have children, but when I was healthy, or at least healthy enough, I wanted sex.

Rat, What are you saying? I'm not enough! I thought...

Oldman, You are wonderful. Sex is wonderful. But, I have a hard time thinking of tomorrow and tomorrow and days and months, "forever!"

Georgette sounded irritated, We're all talking old world here. Come, Whitecloud, let's you and I explore the woods. I'm sure you know as much about these woods as I do, and probably more. We're "unattached," as my dear mother used to say before she croaked. About time, too.

Whitecloud got up, smiling, Woman, I old man, made many baby, four son. Maybe cannot give babies any more. But show me your woods!

And I bet you're a good provider in the wild. We may stay away for a while, if you're up for it. I'd like to learn some Indian stuff. Maybe I'll be a real Indian squaw this time. Whitecloud, you show me?

Whitecloud took time to prepare for this expedition with the new woman. He selected some skins for moccasins. And some other skins for cover, or clothes. He and Brown talked about knives, arrows, spears.

Yes, Brown said. Oldman and I can manage what hunting there might be in winter. And keep safe the womans, Whitecloud added seriously.

At dawn of the second day, they left very early morning.

Rat, with Elspeth beside her, as usual, said, Georgette, please come back. We haven't had much of a chance to get to know you. We need you. And Whitecloud.

Georgette leaned over, and whispered in Rat's ear, Yes, we'll come back. I want to taste Oldman and Brown, too. Whitecloud is a dear, we get along fine we discovered these last few nights. But for the first time in my life I am free. You know what that means, Rat? Those bastard men who brought me to this neighborhood, gave me a gift: I got stronger.

She stood up, and said to the others who had gathered, Hey, I just figured something. You know, when I was with those two supermen; they did not know what they wanted. But, I felt this place calling me. When they had a quarrel about where to go, I sort of sidled away, in this direction. I did not even know I was doing it: just thought of it a minute ago. This place still calls me. Yeah, we'll be back.

**chapter nineteen**

Winter continued relatively mild. Brown and Oldman went out regularly, usually just for the exercise. Walking in the snow, expanding the area they knew, was exhilarating.

Elspeth was the one who kept count of days. She cut notches in a long stick. She also was the one who began to keep track of the length of the day. It had been rapidly changing; days were shorter every day. Then they seemed to be the same for a few days. Oldman had created a window in the wall of what was now the kitchen. No glass, of course, but a framed hole, and a skin that could be rolled up when it did not rain. The window faced almost due west. Elspeth made little scratches in the opposite wall, to keep track of the last shadow before the sun went down. They did not measure time of day, but they did catch the day (a few days) when the sun was the farthest north, and then went south again. Oldman and Rat could not remember whether the shortest day was called equinox or new year. Or whether it measured midwinter, or something else.

Oldman said, we can make up our own name now. I think it should be a beginning. Now every day will get longer.

Elspeth asked, can we call it Shortday?

Yes, that's a great name. Just right. And in Summer there will be a Longday!

Now they celebrated Shortday with a special dinner, and new moccasins for everyone.

Elspeth had a crush on Brown. She followed him everywhere. Rat was happy, it meant she was recovering, or perhaps she was well again. After all, Rock reminded her, she is, what? About fourteen, fifteen? Surprised she has not had a period yet?

Rat chuckled, Oh but she has. Even when she first arrived. Not much flow, but now it seems quite normal.

Rock said, Funny I did not smell it. In the hospital, I got very sensitive about the scent of menstruating women.

You never smelled me, did you, asked Rat? You know why? Because we use a kind of moss, I found and dried that is fragrant. Or perhaps it is the pine needles we have to pluck out of the moss.

Rock said, I'm glad I am pregnant! To me, "the curse" was always a curse! Some doctor told me I should have everything out. Glad I never consented to that. (Laughing) Brown will see to it that I'm kept busy with babies.

Or, Rat said matter-of-factly, Oldman will. Or, for all I know, Whitecloud.

Rock, You are serious, aren't you? You want to swap husbands?

Oh, no, Oldman and I knew from the beginning that we are not husband and wife. If we are just four, or even six, for more than a year that would never work. We would kill each other.

Rock, said thoughtfully, If I remember the old world, it was the playing around that led to killings. Not communal living. Then, with a sigh, I don't know. Wish all this would not even be an issue. From what I learned from the Africans, it wasn't an issue there. They never talked about it. She giggled, and said, Max told me that in his language there is not even a word for "my" husband or wife. Some men have more than one woman, and some women "have" many men. Max had told her, "You get married for when you get old; you want someone to take care of you." But of course most people don't get old, he added. He seemed really surprised when I asked how they had organized themselves. We haven't, he had said. We just... live. There are enough troubles all around to worry about this "how you organize."

Rat said, You know when Oldman and I talked about it, at first, we got all tangled up when we thought of what we had as a "relationship." Then one day, very early, he said, You know, let's just forget this "relationship" thing. You are you, and I am I, and for now we like to sleep together and do things in bed. Isn't that enough?

Rock, I'm remembering something from way back. My mother, no, one of her sisters, when we were in Africa—wish I could forget that visit—well, anyway, someone said to me, "The less baggage you have, the easier it is to get there." I remember now: it was my mother's mother. I had been fussing because something was missing out of one of my suitcases. Oh yes, I had three. My father thought I should be prepared for all eventualities. Even he did not have a clue, apparently, about my mother's family! But, the baggage thing stuck with me. That was good advice from my grandmother, bless her soul! Help me forget that crazy world, Rat. I don't really want all that baggage. I really love Brown because he is so ... pure, you know. He is so himself in this strange empty world we are allowed to live in. I haven't found my me yet. She is buried under too much baggage yet. I envy Georgette.

For going off with Whitecloud?

No, for knowing what she wants and going for it. I don't even know yet what I want, other than what I have.

Isn't that enough?

Shortly after Shortday, Brown and Oldman came back from one of their explorations. They had not seen any animals. However, first Brown and then Oldman too had sensed people, perhaps coming this way. They had hesitated at first, then decided to come home.

Have you picked up anything, Rat?

Yes, I did, not recently. I'm glad you're both back here. I cannot read those people well, or where they are, but there are several, and somehow I don't feel good about what I do pick up. There is something veiled, hidden about them. Not sure what it could be.

Rock said, You said the same kind of thing when that man with all the weapons was near, even before Solomon and Katharine had found him.

Brown said, Can it be the weapons? I felt something threatening, and so did Oldman, didn't you?

Yes, most unpleasant. I'm not as good as any of you in this far hearing, but I did sense these men. There are more than two, I think.

The Family looked at each other. More than two men, with weapons? What should they do? Hide, run away from here, separate or stay together? And Elspeth... she is so young.

Oldman, under his breath, First we need to hide the food so that they can't rob us of that.

And, Rat said, maybe make this place look less lived in. It should look as if no one lives here. Maybe they won't come this way.

Elspeth piped up, Remember, this place is a beacon!

Even for people with guns?

How much time do we have, Rock wanted to know? I can barely sense them; I know they are over there. Do you think one of us could go and take a look?

Both men volunteered, and both also agreed that at least one of them should stay with the women. We must save the women! Pregnant and possibly fertile women, Oldman's thoughts were very public!

The women smiled, even Elspeth. She said, Let me go. I've wandered through these woods so long that I know how to move, how to find food if I need to eat, water. Shelter. I can climb trees. Meanwhile, you can hide the food, and... how would you make this place look not lived in? And if I find out something, how many there are, what they are doing, I can come back here much quicker than people who are not familiar with these woods.

Rat protested, You've only just recovered!

No, I recovered weeks ago. I just could not let go your caring for me. I haven't had a mother for too long. But, now I am strong again. I'll go.

And she was gone. Without taking food or water. She had on her new moccasins, and a warm jacket

Rock had made out of one of the skins. It was true that she could move through these woods like an invisible ghost.

The four looked at their cozy shelter. Hate to tear anything down, it is still winter, even though this winter is mild. How can we make it seem not lived in? And where shall we go? Do we need to hide? Better be prepared...

Brown remembered what Whitecloud had shown him about brushing his own trail. Take some branches, sweep old leaves and dirt on the floor of the shelter. Remove all signs of human habitation. But first the food. And the skins. Their new spoons. Amazing what we have accumulated in the wilderness of this forest...

They worked until well after nightfall, in the light of a little fire. Rat worrying about Elspeth: would she be warm enough; did she know how to hide? Until finally they all slept in a huddle, too tired to care. The rest they would do tomorrow. The strangers were still several days away, they thought.

That night it snowed.

The snow covered tracks, but also made it more difficult not to leave fresh tracks. A thick overcast promised more snow.

When the food and skins were buried, then covered with branches and dead leaves, and now covered with a few inches of snow, all they needed to do was to pack up what they had in the way of clothes. They divided the cooking utensils, blankets, and a few necessities. Still making a fairly heavy bundle for each of them.

What shall we do about the well, Rat said suddenly?

I've thought about that, said Oldman. It's mostly frozen anyway, there's only a trickle coming out now, and if we erase our prints from that area, it will hide under snow. Hope it snows some more!

Rat and Oldman decided to walk to Elspeth, who by now probably had spotted the strangers. Rock and Brown would go a little further north. They would all stay in touch. They would keep listening for Whitecloud and Georgette, who might be coming back.

And Elspeth?

I'm talking with her, said Rat. We each know where the other is.

Brown laughed. We have to invent new words for this strange "talking and hearing" we learned to do!

Really quite wonderful, isn't it?

Yes, said Oldman with only a hint of his old cynicism, if it works it may protect us from people with guns. This'll be a test. Lets... I was going to say let's say a prayer, or something like that.

Oldman, Rock exclaimed! Yes, I feel the same way. Lets hold hands and each say, or think, what needs to be said or thought.

They held hands, finding themselves moving closer and closer, until their heads touched. No words were spoken. Sharing thoughts, feelings, love, caring, was greater than words.

Rat whispered, There are three men, Elspeth says. And a woman, but she's very sick. Elspeth thinks she may be dead. She does not move. They don't have food, and apparently don't know how to find any. They have a container of water, but it looks dirty. Green! Elspeth is in a tree, far enough away so that they cannot see her, but she can see them. The men are not doing anything.

Resting, Elspeth says, but she thinks they cannot move any more. She remembers that is how she felt when she was so tired and hungry that...

Oldman asks how far away they are from here? And do they have weapons?

Rat was still for a moment, then said, If we don't carry too much, less than a day. And yes, the men have guns. After another pause, Elspeth does not know what you call that kind of gun. The old man has a long gun (a rifle?), the middle old one has a belt on with two little guns hanging on it. The youngest man, "like Brown," she says, has a little gun in his hand. The young man and the middle man have a kind of shirt without arms on that has rows and rows of things, I think bullets. The old man has a long coat with big sagging pockets. He is tired, he is lying down sideways, all curled up. The middle man walks around sometimes, a little bit. But they never talk. They are very dirty, their hair is all tangled, their hands are dirty, the middle man has long finger nails that curl like claws. The woman's face is all bloody.

What shall I do, Elspeth asks?

Rat and Oldman look at each other. He was able to listen to most of the exchange. Let me go over and see, he says. I don't like guns; I'm afraid of men with guns. But can we just leave them die there?

Rat heaves a big sigh. Part of me says we must rescue them, feed them, bring water. But, another part of me says, I know men like that too well. As soon as they eat and drink and feel better, they will want to control, bully, take over.

Rat talks to Elspeth, How are you, dear? Hungry, thirsty?

No, I ate pine nuts and some old dried up berries, but that's all right. There is snow here so I'm not thirsty. Funny, those men have not figured out that snow can be made into water. How can they be so stupid?

Can you stay in your tree a little longer? We're talking about the best thing to do.

Oh yes, I can manage. I just peed down the tree! Feels funny. Perhaps the tree likes it, though?

Rock and Brown are now north of here. We can contact them. We need to consider what we can do, or must do.

Rock was asleep. Brown talked with Rat. After explaining what Elspeth had reported, Brown's first thought was to go and help those people.

But they have guns!

He had not thought through what that might mean.

Are they well enough to shoot straight, he asked?

It does not take much energy to shoot a revolver, you know: children and dying people have.

Wish Whitecloud was here, Brown said. He would know what to do. Maybe we can surround them with a rope, or confuse them with voices from different directions. Or distract them and...

And rescue them as prisoners, Rat asked?

No, of course, we cannot do that.

Elspeth interrupted, They are waking up, it is cold here and they are shivering. The middle man kicked the old man awake, and then the boy. He's not really like Brown. He's only a small boy. They walk around, not going anywhere, just moving. The woman has not moved. She must be dead. The old man does not seem very firm on his feet; he keeps stumbling. Now he is leaning against a tree. Oh, they have packs, two packs. Bundles. They open one. The boy brings out a blanket. Filthy, they smell! I can smell it here, like they never wiped their rear. The boy sits down, covers himself with the blanket, still shivering. The old man says something to the middle one. I cannot hear what he is saying. No! I cannot understand what they say, they swear, say God and the f-word! Now the old man is talking; the middle man is mad, he throws something to the old man, a pipe? He is really mad. He kicks the woman.

I cannot stay here, Rat. I am getting sick of the smell and the way these people are. I must get away. Careful, careful, Rat tells her. Be careful that they don't hear you or see you.

Don't worry, now they are arguing loudly in that dirty language. I slipped down the tree and am farther away. I can still see them, through the trees. But I', m standing behind a big spruce. Not a good tree to climb, but big enough to hide me.

Rock had awakened. The four of them were able to establish contact, so that they could have a sort of conference. Rock was worried about Elspeth. One of us, at least, must go and be with Elspeth! She's too young for this.

Rat said, Oldman and I will go; we are closest. And, as to being "too young," remember what she went through before she came to us! We'll see what happens when we get closer. Wish I could think of a way to disarm them. Any ideas anyone?

It was late night when they reached Elspeth. They had walked fast, until they came close enough that they had to consider being heard. The armed people were asleep. The boy lay curled against the woman, who still had not moved, Elspeth thought, but she had not been able to stay awake. She had slept most of the afternoon, perhaps. She was excessively glad to see at least part of the Family; she hugged both Rat and Brown close. They ate some of the dried meat that Rat had with her, drank some melted snow from the branches of a tree (pine-flavored water, not bad at all, Katherine introduced us to that!) They did not dare talk, they were perhaps a hundred feet away, but the night was very quiet. Rat and Brown had a little conference inside; Rock listened in.

Oldman was preoccupied and Elspeth had fallen asleep again, between Rat and Oldman. They still could not think what to do without getting themselves in trouble.



Later that night, almost morning, Brown and Rock came, too. They fell asleep almost before they had stopped walking.

When morning came, the boy of the armed people whined a little and said something. The old man woke up, growled something back, but turned his back. The boy sat up; with difficulty it seemed. There was a very light covering of snow over everything, or perhaps it was hoarfrost. The boy rubbed his eyes, then looked at the palms of his hands, then licked his hands. He touched the white, brought it to his mouth and licked again. He couldn't get enough, obviously he was very thirsty.

The watchers also awoke. Elspeth touched the people around her, some sitting up, but all of them close. Then she looked at the armed camp. She noticed the boy smearing his hands over the white and licking. She leaned over to Brown, tugged his sleeve. Brown, Brown, that boy (pointing at the youngest of the armed men) is sick! I know that sickness. That is what Toss died from. The boy from my school, who... She stopped abruptly.

She had whispered, but it seemed the armed old man had heard something. He stood up, holding on to his rifle as if it were a staff. He looked all around, but apparently did not see the Family. But, he roughly shook up the man, who woke up suddenly, sat up, yawned, and swore at the old man.

When he talked, he too looked around, then said bitterly, loud enough to hear where the Family sat, motionless, I need to eat something. Do we have any water left? Or, what we call water. Then he looked at the woman. Touched her, she rolled a little, then rolled back. Damn, damn, she croaked. No loss. But, I don't see how we can bury her, so let's go on. North you said? With mocking irony he added, Isn't that what you said, you old fool, "something is there, in that direction." Well, okay, we go there. Maybe we find a bear to kill. I'm hungry. Anything left to eat? Damn, damn, damn. That woman wasn't worth keeping. She didn't think of anything. We should've left her long ago.

He got up, stretched his arms wide, rocked left, right. Damn, I'm hungry.

The boy remained seated, but lifted his head and said, loud enough for the Family to hear, We got lots of ammo, and an extra gun. Whyn't you eat that? You insisted on lugging all this with us. "We find stuff on the way," you said. Sure, we found lotsa stuff. Rotten food. Then, in a softer voice, You couldn't kill a bear if he looked at you.

Shutyamouth, brat! Should've left you behind with the woman. And you, he now yelled at the old man who still leaned on his rifle. You! What good are you? You got food stashed away in those pockets?

The boy again, Ammo! It's you, who told'm to fill his pockets with bullets.

The older man smiled, And guess what, the bullets wore holes in the pockets long ago. They musta dribbled out as we went here and then had to go there and back to wherever. He laughed, We could trace our path back by the bullets along the way!

Dangerous, threatening silence.

The man said between his teeth. Don't know what you two are doing, and couldn't care less. I'm going. He walked. North. Missing the Family, although if he had looked to the side he could not have missed them.

The boy got up slowly, Grampa, whaddayou wanna do?

I don't know, kid. I'm so tired, I'm willing to give up. Yeah, I think... He picked up his rifle, looked at it, twirled it as if to figure out how to pull the trigger to shoot himself in the mouth. He threw the rifle far from him. Almost fell down, leaned against the nearest tree. You go, boy. Go follow the man. What else?

Rat and Elspeth let tears flow silently; Rock held her knees so tight that her hands were bloodless white. Every instinct screamed to go to them, help them. But, they could not forget the angry man with the guns, and presumably enough bullets to create havoc.

Brown stood up quietly and began to walk, slowly, carefully to the boy and the old man who had picked up the rifle, but looked as if he needed it for support.

Elspeth immediately joined Brown, reaching out to hold his hand.

Oldman stood up, but Rat said, inside, no, you are needed here, Oldman. You and Rock circle around, I shall follow the gun man. I hear him more clearly.

Brown and Elspeth walked quietly, but resolutely forward. Quietly, but now both the man with the rifle and the boy were looking their way., Brown and Elspeth approached.

Elspeth said, We have food, we can help you...

Brown interrupted, But no guns!

Elspeth nodded. Brown went on, We do not have guns, and we don't want any. If you want to come with us, you must leave your rifle and any other weapons you have. All ammunition you have. Leave it here, we'll bury it.

The boy reached in his coat pocket brought out a small handgun and threw it on the ground. I have no ammo, he said.

The old man, hesitated, but then reached in his pockets, and turned them inside out: empty. He still leaned on his rifle, but shook his shoulders, as if to say, Could not do anything without bullets anyway...

Rock and Oldman showed themselves on the other side. The boy and the old man turned around. They were surrounded!

Oldman repeated, And we have no guns, and don't want any. Do you know what the other man has on him? Handguns? Any other weapons?

He has a knife, the boy said. He calls it a hunting knife, but it's just a kitchen knife. But it has a point.

The old man said, What are you going to do about him? He's nuts, that guy. He is angry, mad, crazy. He's dangerous!

We thought you were a family? Isn't that man your son, and your father (looked at the old man, then the boy)?

Oh no, he's a man who was wandering, like we were. When he saw we had a woman with us and some food, he joined us.

And the woman, she is family?

Nah, the boy said. We're all strangers to each other. We tried to get rid of that man a couple times before, but he has guns. He gave me a gun to carry, but no bullets. This vest I'm wearing he gave me too, it's supposed to stop bullets, and then he said it was for holding ammo. But it's warm.

The old man said again, So, what are you people going to do about that man? Count me out. I've had it with that crazy. He wants to kill everything and everybody. He's the one should be killed.

Rat was following the man. He was not difficult to follow: he crashed through the woods. Any animal that might be around would have ample time to run away, if they wanted. Rat walked carefully, but he probably would not have heard her anyway.

She could hear his thoughts clearly. He broadcast his anger, his paranoia. Truly a dangerous man, she knew.

She tried to reach him inside, but of course what he heard were "demons" whispering violent, sick threats.

Now the man stalked. He had a revolver in each hand, bent over, looking at every tree, as if those threatening murmurs came from behind that tree... No, that one! Or that other one!

Rat, who wanted to distract the man, collected branches, a rock, some acorns, and began throwing things as far away from herself as she could. The man reacted as she had suspected he would. He shot to where he "heard something" and then randomly in this direction, another, in front of him, to the side. He must have emptied the gun in his left hand in a few seconds. He reached for another clip, could not find it, searched another pocket, dropped the gun. Searched again, meanwhile continuing the fusillade with his right hand gun. When that one was empty as well, and he had patted himself down, finding no more ammo he burst out in a continuous stream of filth and curses.

The now sizable group of people heard the commotion, of course.

The boy yelled at the top of his voice, You stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid...

The man heard, turned around and almost ran to where he had left the dead woman, the boy and the old man with the rifle.

Rat sidestepped just in time (he did not even see her), ran behind him, but he did not hear. She could read his mind: boiling, explosions of pure anger and violence.

The old man with the rifle stood up straight, lifted his rifle, and as the man came in sight, almost foaming at the mouth, he yelled, STOP! NO MORE!

Before anyone had time to take a breath, he shot the man through the head.

My last and only bullet, he said, as he threw the rifle on the ground. Had saved it for myself, but...

**chapter twenty**

Rat dropped on the ground, leaning hard with her back against a tree. Elspeth, who had hidden behind Brown during the confrontation, now tore herself away, rushed to Rat, Are you all right? What... ?

Rat embraced the girl (woman, she thought, cannot think of her as a girl any more). Oldman reached down, to pick up the rifle, broke it, Yes, he is right. No more bullets. The boy, as if coming out of a dream, whispered, He's dead? The man is dead?

Rock reached out to him, touched his shoulder, Yes, he is very dead.

Oldman turned to the tall man, Where are the other weapons you have?

The man looked at him with scorn, He carried them all on his person. Didn't trust anyone. Not even the kid. That handgun he gave the kid? No ammo. He did not even have bullets for that piece. He should have two, or three more guns left on him. We were running out of ammo. Isn't that funny? All these guns and no bullets. He was so paranoid toward the end; he shot at shadows.

Then a bitter hiss: The world is a better place without folks like him.

He turned around, walked a few steps, bent over, retching.

Brown, who had not spoken a word, nor moved a muscle during the whole episode, spoke up very firmly, We must bury the woman, and probably the man also. It is almost midday. I don't want to have to stay the night in this place. This is not a good place to be.

Oldman, Why don't we bury the man here, with all his rotten guns. Then we take the woman away and bury her in a softer place.

Rat and Elspeth got up. Rat said, We will take the woman, to bury her in a softer place. You men (she nodded to Oldman, Brown, and the boy, then with raised eyebrows to the man-with-the-rifle) look through the dead man's clothes. Be sure that all the dangerous stuff gets buried with him. We want nothing to do with those kinds of weapons. You can find us. Brown?

Brown nodded, yes.

The boy turned to Rat, Can I come with you? I don't feel so good. He had barely said the words, when he too bent over and vomited a dribble of fluid and bile, then sobbed, collapsing on the ground.

The women cleaned the boy up as much as possible, and led him away.

Brown turned to the man-with-the-rifle (who did not have the rifle any more) and said, My name is Brown. Do you have a name?

How about Murderer? Call me Killer.

No, Oldman said, that does not fit you. If you don't have a name, we'll have to name you. He smiled, The man-without-a-rifle almost smiled, and said, How about Frank, or Francis? I haven't been Francis for a long time. My best friend in first grade called me that. First grade! Can you imagine? Many lifetimes ago...

Francis, my name is Oldman. one word. It's a long story that we shall tell you some time, but some kids named me that, giving Brown an affectionate pat on the shoulder. This kid, who has grown up to be a man.

Let's bury this man who has no name, with all his poisons, metal and mental. We have no tools, so we shall have to use branches and our hands.

The dead woman weighed almost nothing. Rat marveled that she could have walked at all. They must not have eaten for some time. The corpse was dry as tinder.

Elsbeth spoke up, I remember a large, friendly tree that way. I rested under it on my trip here. She shivered. It's friendly. Shady too. In summer, I mean.

They asked the boy, has the woman a name?

I don't know. The Man found her not long ago. A few days, maybe weeks. I don't know any more. She was hiding too. We were always hiding. I don't know why. We never saw any other people any more.

Did you know the Man, Rock asked. Before, I mean?

No, he... We were in a town. Some kids I mean. We hid in a cellar. That's a long time ago (he almost smiled). It was black inside. Coal, someone called it. Our faces and hands were black too. We were in there a long time. There was a water pipe that leaked, we took turns drinking. And upstairs was a kitchen with a lot of food. But, then the food: we ate it all, I guess. Or... ? We came outside. The town was quiet, empty. We—the kids, I mean—didn't know what to do, but I walked away. Just walked away. I never saw them again.

He began to cry, softly, tears running down his face.

Elsbeth came over, You don't have to tell us, she said. We know.

When they had scraped a shallow grave, Rock said, Maybe we should do something, give this woman a sort of funeral. Does anyone know what to say?

Nobody answered.

She was nice, the boy said.

Well that will be what we say, said Rat. We buried a woman, we don't know her name, but we know

“she was nice,” we give her back to the earth, so that the earth can take her and give her peace. Elsbeth whispered softly, Amen.

The women started to walk back to the shelter. It was clear that the boy could not walk far, so they had to look for a place to spend the night. Away from where they had buried the woman, but not too far away. The boy moved close to Rat, Can I hold your hand?

Sure. Rock and Elspeth will walk ahead to find a place; we follow slowly.

As they walked, slowly, the boy continued talking, first hesitantly, then stronger. When I was walking, I was so hungry and thirsty I did not know what I was doing. I was walking asleep, I think. That man with all the guns found me. He did not have all those guns then, or perhaps, but he found some more later on. He said he would take care of me. He said he was my father. I knew he was not my father, who is dead. But, I felt safe with him. At first. He found food and water. He said we must get out of the city. I don't remember much after that. Only that he took care of me. Then he raped me. He said, that is what fathers do. My real father never did, but he died. I don't know. When we found the woman, he sexed the woman, and left me alone. He did not need me any more, he said. He did not want me. But then...

A long pause. They had walked slower and slower, now were standing still, the boy looking unseeing into the trees.

That other man came, with the rifle, he continued. He and the Man argued a lot. He told the Man that he could not abandon me. "Abandon," that is what he said. It means, Leave behind, you know. They were always fighting, arguing. The Man and the woman and the other man with the rifle. I don't know what their names are. He, the Man, called me Kid. The man with the rifle did not call me anything. The woman was nice. She... He burst out in tears. I can't walk any more, he said.

Rock had come back, she and Rat carried him to where Elspeth was waiting in a small clearing. They made a sort of nest of pine needles for the boy. The women sat around, silently.

The men came after a little while. They ate some of the food in their packs, drank water. There was nothing to say: they all felt drained of emotions. They went to sleep. They were tired and filled with emotions that could not be sorted out easily.

That night it rained. Hard at first, soaking everybody. Then drizzle which did not seem to stop. The

Family shared clothes and cover as much as possible with the boy and Francis, who had nothing. In the morning they slowly walked back to the shelter.

The boy said he wasn't hungry. When Rat got some broth in him, he vomited. A few days after they had returned to the shelter the boy still could not eat. He slept. There were days he did not talk. His mouth was dry, he said. But, all Rat could do was moisten his lips.

He got weaker very fast, and perhaps the fourth or fifth day after they returned, he died.

Rat asked, in the evening, Where did you bury the other people who died here? The Ancient One, and the two girls that came with you, Brown? And the drunk woman, wasn't she the one who left that bottle we still have around?

Hesitantly, Oldman answered, We don't know. Katherine, who we then called Visitor woman, took care of that.

Rat felt what Oldman and Brown were not saying.

We'll find a good place, she said.

Elsbeth sat, not saying anything, not seeing probably, tears running down her face. Finally she said,

How old do you think he was?

Francis had hung around without saying much, nor eating much. He had tea, a few evenings. Now he spoke softly, I asked the boy, in the beginning. He cannot have been more than twelve now. Maybe eleven.

He got up, looked around. Slowly he walked away into the dark forest. The Family never saw him again.

Those were days of anguish. Nobody could forget three deaths. It was too much. They mourned the boy, certainly. And in a way also mourned the crazy man and the man-with-the-rifle.

Francis, Brown said with emphasis. We must remember his name, at least.

For several days they did hardly anything but eat and sleep. And talk, mostly in broken sentences, a few words, a touch.

Rock was feeling pregnant. Everything seemed normal, but she, and even Brown, were aware that she carried a life.

They were sitting around a little fire again. The weather had been warmer. A very short winter?

Oldman said, I have wondered where Whitecloud and Georgette are. Do you suppose they will stay away, and make a life somewhere else?

Brown said, hesitantly, I talked with him a few times. They are far from here, maybe on the west coast. He was looking for relatives, or sons. He thinks Georgette is wonderful, she works hard, she is a good hunter, and... They like each other. A lot!

Elsbeth, from your words I have a picture of them. I hope they come back here. At least to tell us stories. We need the stories he knows.

Rat smiled, Very true, very true. Maybe we have some stories in us too?



Rat asked Brown, Have you sensed anyone coming? I have a very faint impression, but not clear at all. Thought we could both reach out.

Yes, Browns said, first I thought it must be Georgette and Whitecloud. I really miss him; maybe I want so much to see him again that I felt they were coming back. Now I don't know. I sense more than two people, but...

Yes, I had that feeling too. I cannot go through another confrontation with people with guns and bad intentions. That whole thing makes me feel uncertain. No, not uncertain so much, it makes me feel unsafe. We're only five here. Perhaps not enough to protect ourselves?

But this is still a place that people find, isn't it, asked Brown? We can expect more people to find us... if there are still people out there. Sane people.

Then, his voice very uncertain, Do you think there are many more crazy people out there? How can they survive if they are crazy? That man could not think, could not find food. They did not even eat snow! Rat looked thoughtful, In a way it would not surprise me to know that many, perhaps most of the people who have survived these two, or three, years are mad. We are so privileged here, it is beautiful and peaceful, we have enough to eat, thanks to your skills as a hunter. It is peaceful here. I sometimes try to imagine people who somehow still survived in, or near one of those big cities. Everything bombed, burned, ugly. Mutated rats, and who knows what else! Anyway, that's my nightmare, of course. I must confess, at that time I was almost crazy. I felt so despondent. There seemed to be no hope. If it hadn't been for Rock, I would not have made it.

Rat, don't you know that we all saved each other? And we still do. But you are right, these trees, this environment, is blessed. I so wish we could welcome lost souls to come here. But, no guns. That is a legacy of the old world that I do not want any more. Never again.

Oldman was fussing in the kitchen, with Elspeth. Rock was resting, not far from Rat and Brown. Early evening. Days were visibly getting longer, the sun seemed warm for this season, but they could not be sure what part of the season it was. They had no need for keeping track of dates or time. They just felt it getting warmer. Even Elspeth had given up making scratches on the stick!

Suddenly, there was a loud noise. A rumble of sorts, a long, sustained thunderclap. Elspeth, who had run out of the kitchen, said she thought she had heard a sort of hissing noise. But far away, and going in that direction. She pointed north, or northeast.

Rock said, I heard thunder. I imagined I could see something, like a falling star, streaking across the sky.

Oldman, who had slowly walked outside, drying his hands on his clothes, said, That was no thunder. That was a sonic boom. Something, a fighter plane, or perhaps a missile, traveling at more than the speed of sound, creates a wave... Oh, anyway, it makes that kind of noise.

Oldman and Elspeth brought out pine needle tea, with their last bit of honey. They had enough cups now. Just as they were sitting back, warming their hands around the hot cups of tea, there was a second rumble, louder this time, and they all heard the hissing. Elspeth and Oldman looked up, and saw a fiery trail disappearing in the same direction as the first one, northeast.

And, shortly after that, a third thunderclap, even louder. Now everyone saw the fiery trail that looked lower. Perhaps slower?

Brown said, Rat and I were just talking about how peaceful it is here. I feel invaded by that reminder of the old world.

Rat, More crazy people!

Yes, Oldman said, those people, and he pointed up, are the true crazies of the old world. Even in that old world, those people lived in a world all their own. They talked only to each other, and thought they did not need to know anything about us, ordinary people. They knew it all.

Brown asked curiously, You have experience with those people?

Yes! Oldman obviously did not want to say any more.

Rat said, I think we should continue to listen to our environment, listen for people, who might come this way. Obviously, there are still people left in that old world. And...

Oldman said, Do you mean we have to organize ourselves to keep watch around the clock, as we used to say when we had clocks? Should we take turns? We have uneven talents in that new way of hearing, you know.

They all looked at Oldman; he seemed very upset.

Elspeth spoke, We're just talking, Oldman. We're all shocked. She sounded almost tearful. Those things up there scared me. When we were walking—the kids and I, I mean—we heard those noises in the beginning. One of the girls in school knew all about those missiles. Her dad, I think made them, or invented them, or something. She said they fly high and fast. Actually, they don't exactly fly, she said, but it's more, sort of like a bullet. But bullets that think, or take pictures or something, and turn around to get you. She (I can't remember her name), she said that. She said they were really bombs.

Someone must shoot them, then? Rock asked.

Oldman nodded, Yes, probably. Or, they could be programmed to go off at a certain time, and with a given target. Programmed to hit one house, or one ship. Programmed before, perhaps.

Now, after all these years? Would they program three years ahead?

Not likely, but possible. Or perhaps something rusted through, a plastic button disintegrated, or burned. Who knows what.

Elspeth asked, If they can see, could they see us? Our little fire?

Rat tried to get them back to their quiet lives as soon as possible, although she could not forget those missiles, or whatever they were. But, it did not do them any good to worry about something like that. Or should they worry? They should be busy making moccasins, clothes, covers, getting ready for the planting season, and perhaps hunting, although they still had more than enough dried or otherwise preserved meat from last year. And she kept listening for people. She tried to teach Oldman, but he was resistant. They were all thinking about that rude reminder of a crazy world. Was there no escape?

A few days after, Brown came back from an exploratory trip with Oldman to announce that he had felt people approaching. Perhaps it is Whitecloud, he said.

Oldman spit out a laugh, You have said that before. You just want him to come back, don't you?

True, but I think I sensed something, pointing north and west. Not just two people, but more. Not from the dead cities, though. These people are not traveling as a group. And they travel slowly. Perhaps they are looking for food.

That night, long after everyone had gone to sleep, another missile flew over, but this one going in the other direction, southwest.

They all sat up, huddling closer.

Someone is retaliating, Oldman said in a somber voice. The idiots still fight!

**chapter twenty-one**

Whitecloud and Georgette arrived. Tired and hungry, but happy. They ate, rested. The next evening all sat around a little fire, now built under a sort of shelter Oldman and Brown had made.

So that the fire is not visible from up there, Elspeth explained.

Whitecloud spoke first. They had not heard the first three missiles, but they had seen the trail of the last one, going southwest. A falling star, they had thought. Oldman explained missiles. Yes, Whitecloud and Georgette knew what they were. Who, in the old world, would not have known?

Whitecloud told a leisurely story of their trip to the coast.

Georgette interrupting, At first, he spent a lot of time teaching me about living on foot. Finding food, making shelter.

Whitecloud, laughing, And you taught me about making love! This old man learned much. You women!

But, Georgette said, you were eager to learn. And we both learned more than making love, we learned to love!

Yes.

A silence nobody dared break. Whitecloud and Georgette sat next to each other, without touching, yet it was as if there was some kind of shine around the two of them.

Whitecloud went on. I wanted to for my family. I have children, and many cousins and nephews on the west coast, north of Vancouver. I thought some of them would have been smart enough to survive. Some did, of course. Many people over there survived. Not too many white people, the Dark got them. The big city was pretty much deserted, what little we saw of it. People told us that nobody wants to live there now. But in the country, in the mountains, there were small groups of people. They were doing pretty well, don't you agree, Georgie?

He calls me Georgie! I guess that's all right. Yes, the people we met seemed to do well enough. A few even had electricity. Solar panels, or something.

And a windmill, remember, Whitecloud said.

And horses, Georgie went on. And goats, they had. But, we did not see any dogs, did we? But we saw wolves.

Brown interrupted lazily, And some of those people are also coming here?

Whitecloud looked at him, fondly, You've seen them, have you?

Not clearly, but yes, I had a feeling there were others, besides you two.

Georgie said very quietly, We are not really two, you know. I am pregnant!

Everyone sat up, congratulated Georgie and Whitecloud, who said, That is one of the reasons we came back; we thought we would want Katherine to be around when the baby comes.

But, don't you remember? Katherine left. With Solomon and Guinée, and Alive. And Max, the tall one.

Were you already gone when they left?

Whitecloud and Georgie looked at each other.

Brown, very softly, Rock is pregnant as well, as you probably knew. We're confident that everything will be fine. He smiled almost apologetically.

Rock asked, Are there any reasons why you would worry?

Georgie looked down, No, except that I had two abortions, in my old life, and... two what they called miscarriages. Spontaneous abortions. But that was then, I was on drugs, and living not very healthy. Now I feel ten years younger. I am maybe third month? What do you think White?

You see, she calls me White! Such lazy customs those white people have, shortening names!

He says, I am white, Georgie said indignantly. I'm mostly Indian, or something mixed anyway.

Aren't we all, Rat said?

Rock could not help laughing, I notice that White certainly learned how to speak proper English, not

Indian talk any more, eh?

White smiled, and did not answer.

How many moons have I been pregnant with your baby, Georgie asked?

Let's see, you first told me when we were visiting my son, up north. Or, was it that time by the lake?

Yes. That was... Oh, Long ago. After that we came steadily in this direction. That woman, looking at Georgie, she was the one who said, we have to go that way!

And she was right, wasn't she?

Yes. I know about where we were, but that one knew exactly. When did we see the old woman? After; no, before the lake. That's right. Yes, I would say at least two moons, probably three. Whitecloud looked down, counting on the knuckles of his left hand, ... there was a full moon by those birches, and then when we saw wolves. That is two, and then... And we're close to the full moon now. Yes, three months! A few days more. And that is from the time you told me. How many moons before you told me?

No, White, I told you right away. The next morning. Remember, we were having that good tea you make, at the lake, early morning. Then she said, very quietly, “that old woman” is a midwife, She’s really not old, but “old woman” is a name of respect, I gather. She told me I would have trouble. But, she did not say what kind. Funny, I did not know all of you so well before we left, but I wanted to come back and tell you about this baby, I guess. Yes, probably we both knew Katherine was gone, or would go. We just felt we wanted to come here. Or, I did.

Whitecloud: I honestly did not remember about Katherine. I think of her when I think of this cabin. The cabin that was here. When we left, I was too full of Georgie, and looking forward to traveling with her, and... I thought about Brown, how he was going to hunt for food. Of course, I knew he would be all right. I remember there were other people here and that they were talking about leaving. That time was confusing to me: a plane, going to Africa? I thought... I did not think. I just pushed all that out of my memories. Like I used to not hear what white folks said. I could not understand what they were doing. Why the rush-rush, first make a hundred rules and agreements, and then break them when it suits you? It just made no sense to me. So I just did not hear. Whitecloud ran out of steam, but the meaning was very clear. They had wanted to come” home.”

Nobody felt like talking about the time when Katherine left them, until Oldman said in his most reflective tone of voice, Yeah, all that stuff with a plane, and Solomon who wanted to make plans for us, all that reminded me too much of the old world that went up in smoke. Too complicated, too... too artificial, or something. Making plans for humanity!

Rat interrupted, but Katherine left because she was in love with Solomon.

In love? She was fascinated by him, Oldman said. I’m not sure she had a romantic heart.

Rock said, She was talking about having Solomon’s baby!

And I’m younger than Katherine, Rat said.

Elsbeth, who everyone seemed to have forgotten, she looked asleep, said, You mean, having a baby? Yes, I would like to, said Rat. But, perhaps I am too old.

Elsbeth said. I’m young, I can have lots of babies.

Some of the others smiled; none said anything. All probably thought the same thoughts: how do we know that we can have children after the Chaos, and the Dark and all that...

Oldman said, we’re talking old world again. Thinking big thoughts: what if, the future and all that.

Why not just be here? Tomorrow is tomorrow. Anyone want more tea? I’m going to bed.

Rat turned to Georgie, What exactly did the old woman, the midwife woman, say?

Oh, you know, Indian talk. “You in trouble, girl,” she said, didn’t she, White?

Whitecloud nodded.

I thought at first that she meant I was pregnant. You know: unmarried, pregnant: trouble. I laughed.

The woman had her eyes closed, opened them, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, “Your baby, he impatient. Trouble keep him in, to grow good.” Then she got up and walked out of the little shed she lived in. White, did she say anything else?

No-o-o, I don’t remember. It was then that we decided to come here. Do you think we should have stayed with her? We can easily go back, you know. It isn’t that far. And we take it easy. I carry stuff. Pretty soon it will be Spring, the rains will come, I build you a nice teepee.

All by ourselves, in the wood? I want people around me, White. It doesn’t matter that Katherine isn’t here; these are good people. We need to be with people. I’m not sure that I would want to live close to the old woman.

Brown asked, Have you had trouble so far?

No, not really. Only once did I have what could have become some kind of contractions, like I had before. We were walking, and suddenly... I had this cramp. Remember White, you sat me down on that fallen tree. But by the time I sat down, the cramps had already gone. We waited a little, and then we went on, didn’t we?

She’s a tough one, that one!

Elsbeth said, I’m sleepy, Good night everyone. Rat got up, Oldman followed. The evening broke up. Each couple went to their tree, their nest, for the rest of a balmy night.

Many days later a group of three came. Georgette and Whitecloud greeted them as long-lost family, although the biological relationship was vague: Whitecloud’s brother’s ex-wife’s cousins, or second, or third cousins, perhaps. A man and two women. They were obviously well-fed, healthy. They had traveled leisurely, they said, to hunt and stay at pleasant places as long as their food supply lasted.

Nomads, Oldman thought. That was the way humans started. And now, again?

The three easily fit in with the Family. For many evenings they shared food and stories. The weather was mostly sunny. It rained a few times, but the new shelter was big enough to keep everyone dry. If anyone needed more privacy for a few hours, or even a day, the woods were safe and hospitable.

The three had introduced themselves, the first day, as Mr. and Mrs. and Mrs. Harrison. But when Elspeth snickered, and Brown laughed outright, they too laughed.

I am Horse, the man said, and this is Mary, also known as Brown Woman, and this one is Helen, although she prefers to be known as Squirrel.

Brown Squirrel, the woman added. Then she looked at Brown, and burst out laughing, We must all be related: Brown, and Brown Woman and Brown Squirrel. What is it with all this Brown?

With that, it was as if the Family had opened its heart, admitted three more people, expanded, and closed the unity again.

Brown Woman was a weaver. She made baskets, and wove cloth, “when we settle anywhere long enough to make a loom.”

Brown Squirrel was an adventurous cook, could climb trees (like a squirrel!), was quick and jolly (also like a squirrel)!

Horse was stubborn as a horse, the women said, but immensely capable. He could do anything, and often did. Almost from the first day, Horse joined the men in their explorations. They felt that now they would be able to have two hunting parties. When the animals came up from wherever they had wintered.

A day or so later, another missile screamed over, going northeast. And another, in the same direction. Then two side by side, also in the same direction.

The Family warned the newcomers that they should be prepared for one or more other ones coming back.

Not much was said, as they sat around the, now hidden, little fire. What was there to say? But everyone huddled closer. They drank more tea, waiting...

The return missile(s) did not come.

In the morning, nobody had slept much, and nobody felt like sleeping in. As soon as it was light, people went about their business.

Horse and Whitecloud went off somewhere. The women busied themselves sorting out food and pelts they had brought.

Whether they were aware of it, or not, everyone was waiting for more missiles.

That reminder of the old world was deeply disturbing. An invasion of their cozy new world.

In the afternoon Oldman voiced what others only thought, when he said, Maybe there are better places to live. We don't have to stay here, just because there used to be a cabin here that seemed to attract people. But perhaps now is the time when we need to find a more permanent place to...

Squirrel said, We had imagined traveling for quite a while. There is no reason to be settled. Perhaps later, but for now, we found more than enough meat everywhere we went, and more than enough other food, like berries, and fruit, if you know where to look. We've been traveling for a long time already. It gets in the blood, I think. We like it, don't we (turning to Brown Woman)?



Rat and Brown Woman made tea early that afternoon. People gathered well before dark, and exchanged more stories. The latest arrivals told of places they had been, people they had met. The men, who had come back from wherever they explored, in the morning, added stories of good hunting, and fishing.

Even salmon is coming back, Horse said. We all thought salmon had disappeared forever, but apparently some smart salmon waited us out, and came back when it was safe again.

But no dogs, Brown Woman added.

Squirrel said, but we did see birds again. In the beginning, you know, we thought all the birds had died, too. But we saw birds. Little ones. Perhaps the big ones will come back, too. Did you here see any birds, eagles perhaps?

Nobody had seen any birds here, certainly not eagles.

Elsbeth whispered, The birds are scared of those missile-things!

But soon enough, they were talking about what had come back. And people they had met. To hear them talk, the far Northwest was full of small groups of people here and there.

Brown asked whether people were hunting, or growing things?

Well, both probably, Horse said. They grow some herbs, some greens, maybe sweet potatoes. But, we did not see anyone who had cows, for instances.

Squirrel: but we saw one man who had a horse, and at least one place where they had goats!

True, there were goats, and I assume people eat them. But for the most part, meat was from wild animals. Isn't that what you, here, have lived on? Meat from deer, and perhaps a bear? Did you see wolves here?

No, Oldman and Brown said almost simultaneously. They had not seen bear either, although they thought one might have been in the neighborhood. They had really only hunted deer, and an elk occasionally, and some smaller animals, like a badger once, and a fox.

The women took turns going back to boil more water for tea. Rat brought out dried meat to share all around. Very tasty, everyone agreed. Very tasty, indeed!

Ththththththththsssssssscccccccccc..... Another missile, if that was what it was, going north and east. Almost immediately another, and another. And a fourth.

The silence in the group and the surrounding forest was absolute. Nobody moved, they barely breathed.

Until Oldman broke the spell, said, They seem to be coming more often I think. I thought they were lower too. That could mean the target they are aimed at is closer.

Without speaking, everyone was expecting a return salvo; a response from the north and east.

Horse cleared his throat. And again. Are you... em... does this happen often? I do not like it. Reminded me too much of the crazy world we thought was dead. Evidently, it is still going on. After, what, three years? Four?

Brown Woman said, And maybe only two. Who keeps track any more?

Squirrel was crying softly. Elspeth went over to sit beside her, held her hand. We're all scared, she said.

Brown stood up. His voice clear, straightforward: Do we have to stay here? Couldn't we pick up the few things we cannot do without, and the food, and go where these people came from? Rat, what do you think? Do we have to stay here, because it is a special place that people might find? And sometimes not the right kind of people either, remember?

Rat sat back on her heels, rocking forward and back.

No, she said, after some thought. Of course, we need not stay here for that. It's just... We know these woods now. It's sort of home. But perhaps you're right.

She turned to Horse and the two women, What do you people think? Would we be welcome somewhere else? Are there better places for us to... to stay, to live?

Oldman, who sat by Rat, put his arms around her, to still her rocking. Do we need to settle right away? If I remember correctly, our most ancient forebears were nomads. Humans survived for a long, long time, moving slowly from place to place. Or, perhaps just from winter place to summer place? Who knows. But moving around is nothing new, of course.

Rock looked at Brown: What do you think? Should we move?

Brown, who was still standing, said slowly, I don't know what we should do, or could do, or want to do. But in any case we don't have to decide at this very moment. Let's all think about it, and talk again tomorrow. Shall we?

They talked the next evening, and the next. The third night was fireworks night again. Just as they were going to their nests, two missiles streaked over to the northeast. Minutes later three more. And a little while after that, at least five, perhaps six missiles streaked in the other direction.

Oldman, who had remained standing from the first, shook his head. This looks as if they're still at war. What can they possibly fight over?

Ideas, Rat said. Only humans can destroy each other, and perhaps the planet, over ideas. Fictions, illusions.

Brown, ever the practical hunter, said, Can we escape them? Can we escape ourselves?

Elspeth had tears running down her face. The others had been too busy looking up at the sky, lost in their own thoughts, to notice. It was Georgie who sat down next to Elspeth, and, without a word, hugged her. Then they all sat down.

We need more tea; no, I need more tea, Rock said, standing up, I'll make more. How many?

They all nodded, yes.

They did not sleep much that night. But without much more discussion it seemed they had decided.

They would pack up and move. West, and further north. If nothing else, Whitecloud whispered, there are more of us there. And all the people we met were kindred.

Family, Elspeth asked quietly? I have no family.

No, I don't mean they are related to me. I mean they are kindred souls; they feel as we do.

Rat reached out her hand, Of course, you are family, Elspeth. You are our family; we are all family. And the people who shoot those things at each other?

They are insane, Oldman said with passion. Definitely not family.

Once they had made up their minds, it did not take long to get ready. All preserved meat was divided, so that each of them carried according to their strength. Georgie and Whitecloud had made themselves backpacks that worked well. Rock and Brown copied the design, with some "improvements," Rock said. They did not decide how they would walk, but it sorted itself out very quickly.

Horse and the two "brown" women left first, they wanted to explore far north while it was summer and warm. Then they would leisurely move west. Eventually, they would all meet by the lake.

The weather had turned: it was almost Spring-like, seeming warmer than it was, and changeable.

Good for hunting, Horse declared. Hibernating animals are coming out, are hungry, and careless. We might get ourselves a bear, he said.

Brown Woman added, we came by a place that looked like it could be a winter sleep place for a black bear. They would check it out.

Squirrel shook her head, I don't like bears! Definitely not in Spring, they are mean!

But we are three, Horse said. We spread out a little, and we look pretty formidable to an old bear, groggy after his long sleep.

Yah, and I'm on the side where the bear is charging! We won't let anything happen to you! Don't worry.

Whitecloud and Georgie went a day later, leaving very detailed directions for paths, and the rendezvous place by the lake.

Rock and Brown followed a few days after, but came back the next day, to help clean up. They needed to be with "family." After tearing down the shelter, and what was left of the cabin,

they briefly discussed leaving a sign, so that people who might find this place could follow. But, they soon decided not to leave a trail. They agreed to travel at an easy pace, so that they could more or less stay together. Certainly at first, spending the nights as a group of five. The core Family, as they thought of themselves. They carried food enough for quite a while, but they would also hunt and gather berries and other plants, as they wandered. When they reached the lake, and caught up with the others, they would see what seemed the best way to go on from there.

It is possible that we would have to spread out, in order to have enough space to provide for ourselves, Oldman said.

The five core family scattered leaves, to cover the soil they had spread over last night's fire. Then they put their packs on, made the adjustments of first time use. There was not that much they carried, food, of course, blankets, a few clothes, an extra pair of shoes, or sandals if they had it. A few pots and pans, knives.

They began the walk single file: Oldman, then Rat, Elspeth, Rock and Brown. Brown looked back, smiled—leaving what had been his home for a long time. He could barely remember his life before living here.

They walked due north, as far as they could tell. Late that afternoon they found what first looked like the edge of the forest, but turned out to be the edge of a very large clearing. Under shelter of trees, but with a wide open view, they settled down for the night. At sunset, a quiet time with gold light coming from the west they debated whether they would make an evening fire, but they were too tired. They probably should start walking again early tomorrow.

Oldman said, Let's at least sit in a close circle, and share food and perhaps a little talk before we sleep.

Rat talked about when she first came to the cabin; what was left of it. A place of healing it was, she concluded.

Elspeth looked around, said I worked hard today! (everyone smiled) But I feel great, actually.

Rock said, I'm thinner than I ever was, but I'm in much better shape now. Wonderful to have food again!

Oldman smiled, then laughed—the first open, hearty laugh they had heard from him—, It feels good to be with good people, in a good life! I've wandered all my life and learned long ago that anywhere, away from people, I could always find what I needed: food, shelter, and healing. Now I have all that, and also a good family. I am home.

Elspeth, But we're walking; we have no home!

Brown said softly, we have no house. For the winter we'll build a house perhaps, or a teepee: now our home is the forest, or a protected place by the lake. The earth itself is our home; we are

## Earth Renews

part of it. Now we fit in again with the trees, and the rocks, the animals: “all my relations,” as my mother used to say.

Oldman added, equally softly, Our earth has always been the only home I ever had.

“We Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never-ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers, the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find—they are all relatives.”

Jenny Leading Cloud White River Sioux

## Saba

Katherine, naturally, and smoothly, slid into the role of housekeeper, even on the plane, where she carefully prepared breakfast. The little pantry was overflowing with the venison they had been given, in two or three guises of preservation. With berries, it made an ample breakfast. They had some water, and she found several kinds of same-tasting juice in one of the drawers of the tiny galley. After everyone had eaten, and it was light outside, she checked the healing wounds on Max's shoulder and arm.

You were lucky, she said. A few inches (now I must learn to think in centimeters) to either side and it would have been much more serious.

Max, born and raised a Maasai, now the pilot, murmured something, then whispered, but it still hurts when I move this arm, lifting his arm back as if to throw a spear.

As he moved his head sideways, he looked out of one of the windows and yelled, Storm !

He and Guinée rushed to the front, almost colliding in the narrow door. Max saying, I'll take the pilot's seat. Now they could all see the black towering clouds to the left of the plane. Max put the plane in a steep climb and a slow turn, up and over the storm. When Guinée was about to ask a question, Max said, under his breath, hurricane, as he maneuvered the plane toward the black wall of clouds, This way we'll be above the storm hopefully.

Then, in a normal voice, We had no weather report! Guess there are no more weather reports, eh?

It took almost an hour to fly high enough above the storm to encounter only minor turbulence. But they had radically changed their course. Now they were over open ocean, the storm still visible below and behind them, as a gray mass of thick, roiling clouds. Max pointed the plane south. He looked at his gauges, checked the reserve tank again, then said to Guinée, Tell them, that we have at most an hour, maybe less, of fuel left. I am gliding very slowly down, using a minimum of fuel. Tell them to look for airports. Islands, we must be over the Caribbean. Preferably without people but with fuel! If...!

Guinée left, stretched himself, Are you sure you can manage, Max?

Yes, Go ahead.

Alive and Katherine each took a side, Solomon moved from one side of the plane to the other.

Now that they were flying with the nose slightly down it was easier to see the ocean, looking for 119 islands,. There was still a cloud layer below them, but thinning. As Max hoped, a big island came into view. Jamaica?

Solomon stuck his head in the cockpit, There must be more than one airfield on Jamaica. But when they spotted one, and then another, Max said he would have to go back if they wanted to land there. They were still much too high.

Guinée: go on, there are many islands! I can see a whole string of them.

They saw islands, big ones, small ones. A large island looked devastated: air fields, including obvious military ones, that had been severely damaged, probably bombed, burned runways, pieces of airplanes and tons of rubble everywhere. They obviously had to look further. They spotted a small island, like a brimless hat in the ocean, with a shiny white runway, glaringly empty of planes, undamaged as far as they could tell. They were low enough so that with a gentle turn they glided to the runway. Max had to go down at a steeper pitch, the airport was closer than he had thought. Close to the runway Max pulled the nose of the plane up sharply, almost stalling, making the plane “fall.” Before the wheels had quite touched the concrete, Max reversed both engines, full blast. The plane clunked down, began to roll, slowing down rapidly. Then one of the engines cut out, spinning the airplane around a full 360 degrees before Max could shut down the other, relying on the brakes to stop. The plane was now moving at a slight angle to the runway, the brakes were working, but not fast enough to prevent one wheel to drop off the edge of the concrete. The plane lurched, shivered, the wheel dropping and the plane swung some more, then stopped—too suddenly. The nose wheel rested on the very edge of the runway. The right wheel deeply buried in sand.

Passengers and crew had been safely belted in; nobody was hurt, but they were shaken and dizzy from the violent motions, first the rapid descent, then the full circle, and the last lurching coming-to-a-stop..

Guinée was the first to unbuckle. The plane leaned so that it was difficult to get out of his seat. He looked at Max, Are you all right?

Yes, go look at the others. I can manage. Come back for me after the others are off the plane. I don't think there is much danger of a fire, we were just about out of fuel. That's probably why the one engine failed.

Alive and Katherine had already gotten out of their seats, and were struggling to open the door on the low side. When it was open, and the steps had extruded—at a crooked angle—the two women and Solomon got down, walked away from the plane.

Guinée went back to help Max. A few minutes later they were all standing on the hot concrete watching the sad fate of their plane. It was not obvious that anything was broken, but one wheel had worked itself in the sand well past the axle.

Katherine laughed. My great adventure! Who would have thought we would end up on a rock in the Caribbean. And probably hurricane season. She threw her arms around Solomon. Then Alive, Guinée and Max joined and they made a tight circle, laughing, crying, shaking, swearing, then laughing again.



They stepped back, looked at the plane again, then turned around to see what the airport looked like. They were close to the very end of the runway. Max gasped, If that engine had not shut off just then, we might have dropped straight off the end of the runway, probably in the ocean, or on the rocks below. Phew!

Look, there's a station building!

First Alive and Guinée, then Max. Katherine holding onto Solomon I know what you are thinking, she said. You think, How am I, we, going to get to Africa.

Yes, of course. That is exactly what I am thinking. Maybe we can find another plane. Or a boat! Only an ocean now separates us.

Only?

Well, we can wait until after the hurricane season. There must be ways to sail across from here, our forefathers did it hundreds of years ago.

Come, let's explore this island, at least, Katherine said.

Reluctantly, Solomon let himself be guided to the building where the others had gone. As they reached the little building, WELCOME TO SABA, a large sign screamed.

Max, who was ahead, of course, turned back, Anyone know where or what Saba is? It must be the name of the town, or maybe the island, Alive said.

Guinée looked around inside, "we're in a movie," Guinée whispered. The people left everything without even closing the drawer of a desk. I bet the TV screens would be on, if there were power.

Katherine and Solomon had come in. A man came out from behind one of the counters. He looked at each one, separately, moving his head slowly from left to right. He whispered, An interesting party of tourists? He looked again, slowly moving his head from right to left.

Is he real, Alive whispered?

Is any of this real, Katherine asked?

The man spoke, louder this time, Welcome to Saba. As you guessed, Saba is the name of the island. You landed your plane at our proud airport. They all left; all the people left. Only I stayed behind. So, now I am Saba. I, all by myself, am the population of this little kingdom.

Solomon answered, Thank you, your Highness. We did not exactly come as visitors, our plane crashed at your airport. But we shall be looking for a way to get to our final destination.

And that must be Africa, the man said.

How did you guess, Katherine asked?

The man did not answer, perhaps because Solomon said, Yes, Africa, near the equator, on this side. Not that far away from here, probably.

The man smiled and said, Do you plan to wait until the commercial airlines start regular service again? Because if you do, he said, raising his voice, you may have to spend the rest of your natural lives here.

Solomon was quick to respond, I was thinking there must be some boat somewhere that could get us off this island to another island perhaps, or... Even Solomon could not finish the sentence, there did not seem to be an “or.”

Katherine spoke up, First, I think we need a place to stay. From the air this island seemed intact. Can we camp here, or, are there other places?

Madame, let me show the way. He came from behind the counter, held out his elbow to Katherine, and so, slowly, regally, escorted the party out of the building, across a paved street, to a path that led to a house, hacked out of the side of a fairly steep mountain. The view from the terrace was the essential Caribbean dream view. King Saba showed them around, then said, as in an aside, This is not mine, of course. Or, perhaps it is, as the entire island is. Small, but it fits me.

This house has a water tank that is still working; gravity feed, they called it. Although I would drink the bottled water in the pantry, he added. There might be food in the pantry. The view is what we were famous for.

We brought food for at least a few days, but water would be wonderful A water tank, you said? Yes, and there are showers in this house. They probably work.

Katherine and Alive did a little dance on the terrace. Katherine saying I cannot remember when last I “took a shower.” In the woods we would bathe in the rain. In summer. And in winter we occasionally wiped our faces with snow. A shower!

Saba, as he had asked to be called, left them in the house Max and Guinée went back to the plane to get the food and what little they had of extra clothes. On exploring the place they found an abundance of fruit in the orchard, on the side of the house... The beds were made, and the linens seemed clean. There is enough water to take five moderate showers. Saba had said before he was off, down the path. The tank is filled by rain water, caught from the roof. We just had a storm pass over us with a bit of rain; the tank must be full.

The five caught their breaths. Well, Alive said, this really is a movie. Or a fairy tale! I cannot even see the airport from here, and our poor dead plane. Max interjected forcefully, Oh, no, she’s not dead! I’ve been thinking how we could dig out the wheel. Even if it is damaged beyond repair, we have all kinds of spare parts with us. There may even be another wheel.

Guinée joined the discussion, The trouble will be to lift the plane back on a flat surface so that we can see what the damage is.

Solomon, I imagine there are some things at the airport. If they serviced any planes, they must have jacks, or trucks, or whatever one would use to lift planes out of holes.

But first, showers, Katherine announced. I haven't even thought of showers for years! And then we eat a feast meal. Can I be the first to shower? Or, perhaps you want to shower with me, Solomon? And I've seen a liquor cabinet. This movie requires a party!

Even without a water heater, the water in the tank had warmed sufficiently to provide an unexpected luxury. The men had been used to quick wipes with cold water, this was a novelty. Max, who was last, complained that there was not enough water to even get wet, but nobody took him seriously because he came out dripping. They had found towels and soap, but those too, ran out.

Solomon said, One shower, with soap and a fairly dry towel, is more than enough to keep us healthy for another few years!

Alive, who had stayed in the shower so long that Guinée had joined her, "to save water," declared he.

They all agreed this must be the most memorable event of her entire life.

The after-the-shower party was even more memorable, and certainly more pleasurable than the adventures of the last two or three years each of them had lived through.

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The next morning Max had already gone by the time the rest got up.

To look at his plane, Solomon said. Poor chap, he must have felt badly alone last night, without a partner. Maybe we'd better join him, and see what we can do.

Alive, Not alone: we included him! A threesome. I'm hungry. Is there any food left?

Katherine said, Enough for today, and perhaps one more day. We need to forage on this island. There must be a town, or at least a village. And probably other houses like this one we can check out. Maybe Alive and I can look for food, and you boys play with your airplane.

Guinée, I'm a pretty good mechanic, that means I can work on engines. But fuselage, and wings, or wheels, are something else. I would not be much use at the airplane. Maybe I should accompany the girls (emphasis), they might need some protection.

Solomon had barely been able to contain his irritation with Alive and Guinée. Let's not bicker. As to your usefulness, Guinée, my guess is that at this stage we need your bulk and your muscles a lot more than your skills as a mechanic. In this new world nobody needs my brains. I work with abstract imaginary numbers. I should join the women, and you go down to the airport.

As if to end the discussion, Max came up, huffing and puffing. This path is steep; let me catch my breath! He sat down on one of the sofas.

Katherine and Alive went into the kitchen to serve a kind of breakfast.

Max reported, I'm afraid there is not much we can do about the plane, as I see it. One wheel looks bent or perhaps cracked, the wing looks all right, but hard to tell. I didn't see any

equipment at the little airport that would help us get the plane back on the runway. No other planes in sight. No fuel, that is the worst. For now we should explore the island and find not only food but a place or places to live temporarily. Or a boat.

Guinée, jokingly, You, from the heart of Africa, have you ever been on an island, and seen boats?

Don't islands and boats go together, Max asked seriously?

Katherine and Solomon Had drifted to another part of the terrace.

Solomon said thoughtfully, You know, when I first discovered—at least on an aware level—that I could communicate with humans without speaking words, and then with someone far away, I thought about the physics of that. We know so little about the brain, or rather about all those invisible energies we manufacture, to talk, to think, to commune, to see, to hear... The thing that bothered me most, of course, was that this far speech, as someone called it, seems to be instantaneous. That's pretty esoteric physics! Or, maybe not so esoteric. Einstein said things about instantaneous events, but not everyone took him seriously,.

Katherine looked at the real blue sky, a few clouds. A soft warm, Katherine thought to herself. She had listened to Solomon, of course, but only with a part of her attention. Now she interrupted, what she knew could easily become a lecture, How do you know it is instantaneous? On the planet itself it is not any more instantaneous than, say, telephone was. More instantaneous? When we talked in our heads, as I think of it, when we were in the woods and you in Africa, I never considered whether it was instantaneous or not. As instantaneous as a phone call, I thought. But you're the physicist, you must know about things like that.

Solomon smiled. He turned to look at Katherine. This light becomes you, you know! And, after a little pause, he added, Can you remember the first time when you realized what you were doing when communicating with someone in your head?

Katherine thought for a minute. Yes, it was more of a process than a moment. I always knew, I think, what some of my patients were going through. Not words, of course. But often I would know where something pinched, or when they needed water, or things like that. And once i had a dog that I was sure could understand me. She smiled, then giggled softly, He would tilt his head to the side, look m straight in my face, and I imagined he would nod, yes, he understood. When you live alone you talk to dogs and plants, you know.

I cannot remember that I ever talked to animals, said Solomon, but of course I have not lived alone most of the time. But I had what we used to call "interior monologues" about mathematical problems. It seems there were always people around, a wife, students, visitors. When I had a sabbatical coming (long overdue) I thought I would get away from people. Everyone wanted something from me, attention, ideas, formulae. I had wanted to go to Africa, study the San perhaps, or those other pygmies in Central Africa, but the Anthropology Department told me there were other people there studying them. They said, why not Papua? I should learn Indonesian, they said. The Department did all the work for me, getting permits, visas, and all

kinds of paperwork. I had a whole suitcase full of documents, books, permits, things I must write down, and so on. Solomon laughed, We used much of that paper to make fires! When I finally got to the particular tribe of Papuans they had arranged for me to stay with, they did not speak Indonesian at all, of course. I had not learned much either, so in a way that was a relief. I remembered as a child I had been able to learn enough Italian, and then American, to talk with the missionaries. Why not mimic these people and so learn their language? It was much easier than I had imagined! I remembered at night, lying in my hammock in a long house, quiet, and I could hear whole strings of sounds in my mind, not knowing where one word ended and another began. Frustrating! And then one word jumped out, the word for fire. I have no idea how or why that particular word, but I accepted it. It fitted in what little I had picked up. Mostly from the children, you know! Then, it seemed, in no time at all, I could understand what they were saying; and not long after that my tongue and mouth found ways to talk their talk. But no, it was before that, that I got the idea that I could hear their thoughts, and they could hear mine.

Katherine looked at the horizon, far, far away. And, when you talk, Solomon, I see you with those people. Imagination, of course, but it is so vivid!

Solomon leaned over and kissed her on an ear. Yes, he whispered, that was when I came alive again. A good year that was. Those people unlocked something in me that I had neglected. I had studied so much, thought so much... Too much thinking is bad, you know.

Katherine said, softly, But when you broadcast your “Anyone there?” it came all the way from Africa to us in the north woods. You learned, Solomon.

And I perceived something that told me that there was a connection, there was some kind of acknowledgment. The phone was ringing, at the other end. But nobody answered at first.

Katherine said, Perhaps, probably, humans have always known to do that! We were brainwashed, educated, to believe that it is impossible, imagination, fantasy. But there were always people who knew.

Guinée and Alive had joined them. And some people do it better than others, said he. I had such a shock when Alive first contacted me. It was as if she was inside my head. And I did not even know her then. Now I realize that before, I had been able to ignore glimpses of it. But when she was in my head there was no denying. She could make me see what she saw, and I think she could see what I saw. Only if I allowed it, though. That was the first thing I made sure of. Sometimes I hear Solomon “inside” easily, other times not. But I’ve improved, I think.

Katherine laughed. Yes indeed, you have. I think it is because you have let down some barriers. You had yourself so barricaded! Like a city under attack.

Max, who joined them said, That is what the world was like before all this mess happened. We had to barricade ourselves. I constantly felt attacked by people who wanted me to be more Maasai, others who wanted me to become Muslim, or Christian, and others who wanted me to get an education. I heard all that loud and clear, in words, but they also were inside. I think they did not know they were doing that. but I had to shut off my hearing.

Alive touched his arm, How, where, why did you get so attached to airplanes?

I grew up on the wide Veld in Africa, a typical Maasai youth. There were always light planes that broke down. I learned to fly small planes when I was still in lower school. Later, I flew bigger planes, and then jets. Oh, I learned all kinds of other useful bits and pieces, about weather, the atmosphere, storms, rain, ice even. But the best learning is always by doing. I don't have any piece of paper that says I am allowed to fly a plane (he laughed) but who's checking?

Guinée: Don't worry, we know you can fly. And, you know, my mother—she was a queer one!—used to say that anyone can learn any job in six months. Not the million facts and figures that you must memorize, but by doing. She was a physician, did I mention that? Among other things. She was many other things, as well. She used to tell anyone who would listen, that 95% of her expensive “certified” education had been useless, that she learned to heal, and other things, by doing. Guinée sighed, She was a real healer. But she could not heal herself, when all those strange diseases came, one after another. But she could tell me how to survive them.

Alive leaned closer, and said, her eyes glowing, She must have been a remarkable woman.

Oh yes, she was that. She could have been the queen of Guinée, but of course we were a republic. Hah! She fought for what she... Enough! What are we doing today?

They had been eating venison from the plane, stale crackers they had found here, mangoes that probably were not quite ripe. Bananas, and oranges aplenty.

Solomon asked Max whether he had seen enough of the island before landing (he did not say “crashing”) so that they might have an idea what to look for. And where. In which direction?

No, I was too busy saving the last drop of fuel when I saw that air strip and calculated that we could just make it, or perhaps make it. Almost make it. No, I did not see anything of this island, except that it is small. And very rocky. Steep I think. It rises out of the ocean like a mountain top. The airport was higher than I had thought, I was planning a wide circle. But at the last moment I had to land faster than I had planned.

They decided they would stick together. They were traveling light, after all. Nobody had any belongings. First get back down to the airport. There must be a road to a town from there. They would follow the road. Max walked ahead; with his long legs he was soon out of sight. Solomon reminded them that the two couples were sufficient unto themselves, which left Max very much odd man out. Solomon and Katherine brought up the rear.

Let the young people go first, Solomon said.

Katherine looked at him, Yes, we are the elders, do you feel that?

Well, yes, probably. My days of young student and the exciting times of being a physicist, mathematician, are over. I did not like teaching much, but I miss the intellectual stimulation of people around me who all are stretching their brains to the utmost.

But that must be years ago now. How about the years in Africa, not your childhood, but when you were in Nigeria? Not much “intellectual stimulation” there, was there?

No. None at all. It all happened so fast, I felt. That whole world died in a flash it seems. And we were left worrying about getting something to eat, and hiding from bombs and crazy people. And you know, Katherine, what was the worst? So many people turned to me for advice. How could I know how to survive in Africa? I had not lived there for more than a lifetime. I did not know anything, but everyone — almost everyone — leaned on me.

Katherine, remembering, answered, I was serious too, so intent on helping dying people to survive. And then, when you came, with a plane, no less, all the way from Africa, something happened to me. Somehow I lost that sense of having to be responsible for the world. Now, looking back, I realize that is also why I decided to leave. I had enough of being responsible. You know, to save them, I did... she did not finish the sentence.

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There had been road signs at the airport pointing to a town, or village, down-- they guessed a harbor of sorts perhaps. In places the road had been damaged, but it was easy enough to walk around the places where the ocean side of the road had broken off. The road went steeply down toward the ocean. Around a hairpin curve they saw a small town below. Quaint red-tiled roofs, and at least one three- or four-story concrete building. Everything looked damaged, glass broken, roof tiles missing, trees snapped off. Some of the houses higher up had swimming pools, which now were empty. One large building, a warehouse perhaps, was smoking, the remnants of a fire that had almost but not quite burned down. Metal sides had melted, or twisted, crashing what remained of the roof into whatever had burnt inside.

They heard a voice, nearby: Admiring the damage the last hurricanes did? Saba was sitting on a bench, next to Max who had his long legs stretched in front of him. Saba says that our plane was the first he has seen landing in many years. Even before what he calls “the War,” no airline had regular flights to this island. There was a ferry. And, before the end, all tourists left in a hurry, the economy of the island collapsed. Local people left. But he has seen planes flying over, a few times, not often, he says.

They had all found places to sit, looking at the desolate view.

Solomon asked, And what about ships, private yachts?

Saba shrugged his shoulders, Haven’t seen any. But perhaps there are some still afloat.

Alive asked whether there had been many hurricanes here?

Oh yes, some years, this lies in the path of hurricanes. Other years they go further north. This last one was not a real big one, but fierce. Did a lot of the damage you see. The town was deserted, and has been for years.

Is there any food there, Katherine asked?

Sure, if you know where to look! But isn't that true for everything in life? He smiled a big smile.

Alive said, If we ask nicely, can you show us where to find things?

Of course, let's go.

And you're here all by yourself, said Guinée? That is difficult to believe. Such a beautiful island...

Before The War, Saba said laconically there were a thousand people here. Maybe more, maybe less. Then, when every one left... I don't know how many stayed. Not many. Then nearby islands were bombed—big explosions we heard—more people left. Trinidad-- they had heard on some radio station that was still alive then--was the place to go. Close to the mainland, and so far undamaged. But then the diseases. They must have come on the air! No people came to bring us diseases, like they used to in the old days. First the hair disease: many people lost their hair, vomited, and died. Some survived to get sick from the yellow disease. And then other diseases, one after the other. We did not give names any more.

And you, you never caught any of these diseases?

I caught... but my constitution... I got well again.

After a long silence, Katherine asked him to show them one or two places where they could get some food. She spoke hesitantly, almost apologetically. Then she added, carefully, You're really the only one living on this island now?

Well... a few more is on the other side. But they sick. I no go there. Animals we have. No dogs, 127 but goats up in south side mountain, and I seen one chicken, maybe more? Goat, good eating! You've walked all over the island then, have you. said Solomon?

My island. I know all ways, Not so many roads now, dead cars, dead bulldozer. No cars, no benzine — you say petrol.

Alive entered the discussion. I need some other clothes! It is warm here, and I want something more appropriate to wear. Are there places to find clothes?

Plenny place for clothes. I take you. Here, no many clothes need!

Guinée laughed, took his shirt off, and an under shirt. Bare-chested he looked even more impressive.

Max did the same. Solomon took off an outer shirt, to expose a short sleeved pajama top, light blue silk, or some other shiny material.

Alive took off her shirt, Excuse me, men, I do not need to wear my under clothes. Never again another bra! Turn around you, pointing at Saba, who looked on with a big smile on his black face.



After they had all shed what they could spare, Saba led them to what had been a town, or village perhaps. Not much was left standing.

Many hur'cane, Saba said. One year, mebbe two year ago. Hur'cane come from everywhere. Not east, but south and west even. Houses destroy, hur'cane take da roof. But inside good so. Some time.

Katherine wondered why his speech had changed, from the pure English that he had welcomed them with at the airport, to some local patois. The people here, they spoke English, she asked?

Ya, an' Papiamentu, dem from Curaçao, an' Dutch o'course. Dis Dutch terr'tory. But Saba its own, own flag, own gov'men. And den some people come French, and Spanish from da sout' mainlan'. Many touris'!

What did the people do, Solomon asked?

Touris. On'y dat. Wen touris come, mo' peoples. Wen no touris, dey leave, go Curaçao, Trinidad, Jamaica.

Someone must have grown food, Guinée said. I saw some gardens on the way here. And they must have had horses.

Ya. An' horses we haf. No so good for eat.

They were walking around the little town, avoiding streets that were blocked by rubbish, jammed cars, trucks. They could see a little harbor, now empty. Not even a rowboat in sight. And strangely, no piers.

Solomon pointed, Was there ever a pier, for sailboats, over there?

Oh ya, but ocean she rise higher. Under water.

People must have had boats, Solomon went on. Where are they? How come there are no boats anchored here? Seems to be a nice little harbor, protected, clean.

All go away, Saba answered with a frown. Even row boat, dey t'ink dey reach Puerto Rico. Not'ing dere, all bomb'out. We see da cloud. Big black cloud ovah dere. Daht island dead. Da fishing boat dey go sout', find fish, de tell, but not come back. Mebbe mainlan' now.

And on the other side of the island, Guinée asked, more harbors? are there any boats?

Ya, two, t'ree harbor, no boat. No mo' boat on dis islan'. Mebbe later. after hur'cane season.

Is this hurricane season, Max asked?

Saba shrugged his shoulders vehemently. Don' know what season! But hurricane season da dogs go crazy, da birds too. No mo' dogs, no mo' birds.

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Having outfitted themselves with new clothes, colorful, light weight cottons, and sandals, the group foraged in what must have been a restaurant, or a delicatessen. They found a storage room that looked untouched, full of jars of preserves and a wall of large quantity canned goods, the kind used by hotels. Each one picked his or her favorite snack and the whole group found a way to a lovely beach. Obviously deserted, as the whole island seemed to be, but picture perfect.

As if we are the first to discover this place, Max said. Not bad, not bad.

Saba sat a little apart from the group, pressed against the rocks, smiling when they urged him to join them down on the beach. No, this my place, he said. He knew, of course, that the tide was rising. Soon the group moved to join him. Everyone eating the last tidbits of what had been an exceptionally sumptuous meal: Alive had eaten a whole jar of red caviar with reasonably fresh-tasting crackers, Guinée had found meat, Max had what he called blood sausage. Perhaps that is what it was, it looked bloody enough. Solomon and Katherine had found a whole cheese in a tin, and hard black bread, also tinned, and they had shared a bottle of wine with whoever wanted some. Saba had a fresh coconut which he had opened with the machete, he carried, drank the water and then carefully scraped the meat with a shard of the coconut shell.

Max broke the silence, licking his fingers, one by one, very thoroughly: This is a vacation. I can live here, it is warm enough, and there seems to be food. And goats according to the old man, moving his head in Saba's direction.

Don't you want to get to Africa, Solomon asked?

Yes. and also I needed to get away from the cold, and too many people. Katherine suspected he had wanted to say white people, she had heard the slight hesitation before "people". Max went on, Here, we have a whole island. If we're careful we can live here. There are mountains. We can probably fish. Or we can make a boat, or a raft perhaps. But meanwhile, we live. He looked around, almost dreamily. He stretched out flat on the beach, arms behind his head. Yes, I like it here.

Alive said, I want to go swimming. Is it safe to swim here, she asked Saba?

Oh yes, dis good place for swim. No curren', no shark fish. Dis beach for chilrun long time. Shallow, must go far to swim.

Come Guinée, last one in gets dunked! As she started to take off her clothes, she stopped, We forgot bathing suits, she said.

Guinée had already taken off all his clothes (not that many any more) and was running into the water.

Alive shrugged, took off her clothes and ran after him.

Solomon, caustically, I know what they are going to say: Come on in, the water's fine. Katherine, Well it probably is fine. Come on, lets all go swimming.

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Later they all sat on the beach again.

This water is body temperature, Katherine said! This is probably the most memorable time of my long, long life. A peaceful swim, with loving friends, on a tropical island. What else is there? Turning, she threw herself, still naked and wet, on Solomon's lap. I'm in love, she whispered.

Solomon, embarrassed, What can I say?

For once, Solomon does not know what to say, Max said teasingly. But you're right, Katherine. This is the life. If only...

Solomon: ...we were in Africa, you want to say, no?

No, Guinée said, ...If only he had a woman!

Max did not say, but his smile smiled.

Alive, This ocean is salty! How do we get the salt off? I feel sticky. In the old days there would have been showers on a beach like this.

Saba pointed, Over dere, no water no more. But, ne'r mine, rain, she come. Soon, as he looked at the sky.

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Solomon and Katherine found a house. Or, rather, a part of a house: two rooms still under a roof: a bedroom and what must have been part of the kitchen. The house was in the hills, above the little town. It had its own water tank, full. The faucets in the house did not work—the system needed an electric pump, probably—but someone had rigged a pipe with a stopper in the kitchen. They had found plenty of good food in a few stores.

Over a leisurely breakfast, when Katherine finally sat down, Solomon burst out, Now we have to talk!

Katherine knew, of course, that he had to talk. Solomon had to get to Africa. She had imagined her role to be the person who kept Solomon's feet on the ground, but after a few days she had known that Solomon had to be up in the air. How long had they known each other, anyway? Yes, perhaps not even a month.

Dear heart, I know you want to go to Africa. I am tired! I had some very difficult years up there in the woods. I took on responsibilities I was not really fitted for. Perhaps I have not quite gotten over the shock of our plane's "adventure," and landing here! Now, for however long it lasts, we have a little house, food, water, a beautiful ocean to swim in. What more can there be? Tell me, how, or what can I say, or do, to make you feel less frustrated? I'm serious. Help me to understand you. I know you, in a way. I can feel what you feel. But I don't know how to get you out of this mood of urgency. After a little pause, she added, Because I think at least part of you wants to get out of this mood, or this frame of mind. You feel as if you are responsible, as if you have to take the lead, or something. You feel that we, Max and Guinée and Alive and I, are too

frivolous, or not serious enough about getting to Africa. Maybe we are, dear. Maybe we, all of us—you included—have suffered so long and so much over the last few years that perhaps we have earned a day to frolic in the ocean, and gorge ourselves on stupid canned food.

Solomon nodded. Yes, all that is true, but... Suddenly he laughed. Maybe, after all those years, surviving has become too easy! I distrust it.

Katherine took his arm, You know, how I feel? When the plane took off, I was sick to my stomach. I felt like a mother leaving her brood that is not old enough to take care of itself. I felt terrible. I felt empty inside. As if I had killed myself, or—worse—those we left behind. It was bad. The hurricane shook it out of me. Or, woke me up, or something. I felt life coming back into an empty body. We were scared stiff—at least I was—when we were tossed around high above those huge, foaming black clouds. And then, when the plane went crazy, and the crash... But I survived. Again! Now I feel as if my life, from now on, is a gift. A bonus. I can start all over and make a new me if I want. And I want. I also want to be with you, and get to know you. I am so in awe of your mind, and at the same time scared of what the mind has done to you as a person. Darling Solomon, maybe I feel a little bit like a mother. I have always had a great need to nurture, to protect. In my old life (my life in the old world!) I often took care of stray cats, and what I thought of as “lost souls.” People who just could not make it in that crazy old world. Now, what I feel is different. I am totally and completely aware, I think, that this is a new planet, and we, humans, have to find new ways—or perhaps very ancient ways—to live.

Solomon looked pensive, he thought about what Katherine had poured out. His own feelings were not clear, he did not know yet how to express them. Then he said, first tentatively, then gaining strength, Of course I know all that. We’ve seen each other inside. I know who you are, and what you say is true of course. I just... it is so hard for me to throw away all the mathematics and science, and yes, gadgets, that were my life! I felt whole, and excited, and creative when I could write down a new formula to explain some esoteric detail of an even more esoteric theory. That was my reality. That is all I knew, know, do you realize that? I knew nothing about gardening, or shooting animals, or even cooking. I never even could make my bed, according to my ex. Hey, I wonder whether she survived. Probably not, she could not do without her television and... And, in Africa, after the horror started, I was beginning to learn to live in this world. And, when just staying alive took all my attention it was easier to forget mathematics. Now, life is too easy. I have nothing to do any more, so my mind goes back...

Why then, must you go back to Africa? What is there that is not here?

The people there are expecting me. I told them I would come back with more people, and... I guess I need people to need me. Is that it?

But, surely they knew and understood how risky that whole flying stunt was? How did they feel about you, and that crazy trip on an airplane?

I never told them. See, the airport where Max had this plane, was two or three days walk away from the village we just walked away. We did not say where we were going. We did not even know where we were going, only a direction,

And it probably did not even occur to you, to tell them?

No, it didn't. You know, in my old life, as you call it, if I had known you before all this craziness, I might have called you long distance, and said, I'm coming to see you, the twenty-sixth, and I would not have bothered with the details of how to get from where I was, in Germany, to wherever you were. Every now and then I would attend some conference. I would tell my wife, and my amanuensis, I would be gone for a week, goodbye.

Katherine laughed and embraced him. Eat your breakfast. I have to think about how we can use your genius. And in the meantime you must be content to just be the wise man. Eat! Then, between bites, her fork stopped in mid air, Katherine said, Are there people in Africa you can talk with? Now, I mean?

Solomon thought. No, I don't think so.

You mean you never...?

It never occurred to me. Maybe. I'll try. Later!

You know, dear, dear Solomon, one of these days you must tell me something about those people in Africa. What, who were they? Friends? A group, or all individuals, strangers to each other.

I don't really know. We weren't very many, you know. Maybe a dozen or so. Yes, from different places. A few people knew each other, but we could not even talk the same language. We...

And you never talked inside with them? Solomon, I don't understand! Solomon turned his face away; said nothing.

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They had planned to meet in the early afternoon, at the same beach. Alive was there before Katherine. At the last moment, Solomon had joined the men on a trip to the other side of the island, with Saba. To see the goats, "and a surprise," Saba had said. A surprise, on the other side? Katherine could not hide her curiosity. What kind of surprise can that be, she asked Alive..

No idea, I overheard Saba tell Guinée; "secret," he said. Maybe explore the island, or find the paths that Saba knows. We'll find out tonight, when they get back. So, now, here, it's just the two of us. Two women.

One of them pregnant, whispered Katherine.

And you, Katherine? When I first met you I thought you were "old," but you look so young now. Can you have children?

I don't know. I've been working on it. On my body, I mean. The equipment is still working! And Solomon is a powerful lover. Maybe I can have at least one child. Who'd ever have thought that Nurse Katherine would actually want a child? Do you know that I have actually forgotten how old I am! Or, rather, I don't know what year this is. I've lost count. But, it does not matter of course.

Should I worry, Alive said, about this baby?

Worry? Oh, because of... malformed, like the little coyote? Yes, that would worry me, but there is not much we can do, is there? Solomon said in Africa no babies had been born yet, or even conceived. But maybe he does not know. I am continually surprised how blind he can be to the people around him. He certainly has the gift, he has a powerful ability to project his inner voice. But he is not a good listener.

Alive smiled, You're really in love, aren't you? And you act as if this were the first time! You must be older than I; haven't you been in love before?

Oh yes, when I first... When I was young. Thinking back I cannot remember much; it seems so long ago, and it was so painful at the time. Unrequited love is a drag. It holds you down, holds you back. And nursing is not... It was not a job that suited me. I know myself well enough to know that I need to nurture: cats, dogs, people. As a nurse I found myself turning to stone, having to block feelings, blocking contact with other people. I didn't fit into the system. The damn system! Nursing is supposed to be nurturing, but it wasn't! Everything organized and every person a cog in the machine. "Hours!" Hours for work, visiting hours, staff meeting hours. And, above all, "patients." Being a patient was supposed to mean a will-less, thoughtless, emotionless chunk of meat. We could turn it around, put stuff up their noses, other orifices. The only thing that we were constantly warned against was "getting close" to a patient. Life, sickness, death. We were kept so busy that we could not even think about that, let alone care for people. But now, I am free. That's one of the reasons I look young: I feel young. At least younger. An old maid like me, suddenly discovering she can still love... I'm scared, Alive! I cannot see a future for us, for Solomon and me.

I cannot see much future for me and Guinée either. But for now it is the right thing. Guinée is a good man, you know. He's had a rocky life, bouncing and being bounced. But he is honest. He is what he is, who he is. Come on, let's swim. A bit of exercise is what I need after my splurge yesterday! Imagine, a whole jar of caviar. I was crazy.

We were all crazy. But who is there to notice, or object?

Yeah, that thought haunts me. It's an empty world, isn't it? But maybe it is that, that makes us feel like family, don't you think?

Remember, we don't know how empty it is. There may be whole populations somewhere. But yes, it does make us cling together. You're right, hadn't thought about that. You know, we need each other!

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It was dark when the men came back. Katherine and Alive had spent a quiet day together. They had laughed when they did some “shopping” as they called it. They even had found money in what must have been an upscale boutique. They had left handfuls of different currencies here and there. When it was dark they had made a dinner for the two of them, with wine and candle light, after deciding that the men could forage for themselves! No more Women’s roles. When they had finished dinner they were in a reflective mood when they saw lights come down a steep path. Torches! Two, no three torches, wildly swinging up and down and sideways. Thick black smoke, visible even in the night; there was a moon.

The women had burned two candles, now they lit a few more, to signal their presence. Katherine got up, I’d better see what kind of food is left for the men; they must be hungry.

Alive laughed, Katherine, you are incorrigible! I thought we had just decided to leave our women roles behind?

I know, I know. It’s just... I know where to find things. They would just make a mess in the kitchen.

Guinée was first, swinging two smoking torches, followed by Saba and then Solomon, each with one torch. Alive went outside to meet Guinée, who folded her into his arms, still holding wildly burning and smoking torches.

Stop that, she yelled, as Guinée kept swinging his torches. You are drunk! What have you guys been up to, and where is Max?

Saba showed Solomon how to douse the torch in a bucket of dirty water. They were obviously more sober, and certainly more tired than they let on. Solomon went to Katherine, who was fussing in the kitchen, Hope you have something for us to eat. I am starved. No, I am tired. That’s quite a trip, goat paths across rugged mountains. Just now Saba told me there is a paved road as well, but it is blocked at the pass by smashed cars and three buses. He snickered, Apparently the people from the other side fled to this side, and the people on this side fled to the other. They met in the middle, and crashed into each other. Must have been a jolly sight!

Saba had taken off his shoes and was washing his feet. He called to Solomon, Better wash feet, Sol’mon!

The men washed, took off most of their clothes, got rid of the smoky torches—coconut oil doesn’t burn very clean!—while the women cooked up what they had in the house. The table was not big enough, and there were not enough chairs in that house and nobody felt like going to another house to get furniture in the dark night. Fortunately, all of them were comfortable, sitting on the floor.

Max, the men said, had stayed on the other side.

Guinée completed the sentence, with a twinkle in his eye, Saba here, has a whole village hidden on the other side! That was the surprise! He took us to meet his family, he said. Hah! Family! People of all ages. Max attracted a lot of attention right away.

Because he was so tall, Solomon said.

No, little man, Saba began, but Solomon stopped him, Don't call me little man. I may be short, but...

Sorry! I no forget. He, Max, stay behine' 'cause him so black! Da fam'ly, us like'em black!

Silence. They looked at each other, and finally Katherine said, But Saba, I'm the only one who is not black. She looked around, Solomon, Guinée, Alive, and you, all black.

Saba laughed. You no look black, you pink brown, Solomon orange brown, Guinée he back but he no feel black, and Alive she black on the outside but inside pink white. I know, we get all da American mens and womens here in all colors but inside they all da same, dey no see us cause we's black. Mac like dat.

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It took a while to sort it out, but eventually the "village" on the other side of the island, was reduced to not quite a dozen people, who lived in shacks and one good house, up in the hills, with many goats, a coconut plantation, some gardens.

No planted, Saba interjected, jus' wild trees. Not planted, he said in perfect British English.

And fruit trees everywhere. Mango, a wilderness of banana trees, and other tropical fruit trees that none of the Africans had seen before.

And Max found two adoring girl friends, Guinée teased.

Children, Solomon said vehemently!

Saba: not chil'run! Da one Maria sev'teen, da otha five-, sikteen. Dey womens.

Solomon went on, They looked young. But, Katherine, you know, there were two older women who were pregnant! They seemed proud of it, they wear only the scantiest clothes, and some of them wore almost nothing.

Guinée, Well, in this climate, why wear clothes? We went swimming in the nude yesterday, didn't we?

The men talked until they were too sleepy to stay awake. The two couples did not sleep much. Saba slept outside somewhere.

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In the beginning, Saba, began his story, the Time of Confusion, we called it. First, the tourists left. The ferry never came back. A few ships came, one cruise ship and some smaller, private perhaps, but they left when the stores ran out of supplies in the quantities they needed. At first



there were radio stations from Puerto Rico, strong ones from Venezuela, and Trinidad. People listened, until it was clear that nobody knew what was happening any more. All over the world, it seems, crazy people were looting, bombs in big cities everywhere, black clouds hanging over America. Oh yes, for a while we had television. Rogue stations, they were called. Great confusion. Then one day PR blew up. We don't know whether someone did it, or accident, or what. For days it went on. Black clouds, big noise. Then people started sicking. No, first the water came. Or the sicknesses? Anyway, the ocean, she change. Slow-slow, we did not see it coming, but then we notice: no more piers. Many people leave. Maybe they t'ink dis island under water—he laughed, throwing his head back—then no more food like we used to. I t'ink better hide mysef. Dat time darker, sun he come up faded, you know. Dogs howl, I 'member. Den dey die. Alla dog die. And one day many fish jump on da stran': dead. I go down, but smell too stink. No eat. Many day I work hard-hard get cans in my cave dat I hide. Some mans com' but me 'scape. Nevah dey fin' da cave! Only womans come wi' me. Den de sickness come. Many sick, one behin' da otha' sickness come. Me sick long time. No eat, no see. Eye hurt, head hurt, ev't'ing hurt. Da ol' woman she take care me. You see ol' woman at fam'ly? Da's da one. She fine' med'cine in da rocks an' da sea. Good bakra woman, she know med'cin.

I would like to meet her, Katherine said.

Tomorrow, you me go fam'ly, Saba promised. After a short pause, he went on, Dan, me see 'gain. Go outside. Oh, da mess! House tumble down, road broke, roofs blow 'way. Long time old woman an' me, we walk da island. Plenny food, here, dere. Plenny house for sleep. Me try make baby, woman, she too ole mebbe? We foun' da marias. One, den anotha. Da two what like Max, dey sista. Us, we make fam'ly. T'ree man, den four, we try make baby. Womens sick. One moon, two moon, da womans bloodin', no baby. Yes'day we see two womens, mebbe t'ree, big wit' baby! Good-good. One say she sev'n moon 'ready. Good-good.

Katherine whispered to Solomon, I must go over there, talk to the women, find out what their experiences have been.

Saba watched her, then said, softly, Dem womens no speak engels, English.

The people here, they did not speak English, Solomon asked?

Well, ya, most people did, but not all. These womens not Saba. Dey come boat in da Da'k. Solomon immediately asked, And where are those boats?

Saba smiled. Sunk. Big hur'cane come, boat sink.

Later Katherine asked, casually, Saba, why do you shift from perfect English to a dialect that

I'm not always sure I understand? And the dialect changes. Obviously you speak perfect and fluent English, but then you shift to that other talk. I tried to figure out whether it had to do with what you were talking about, but cannot make a connection. Can you help me understand?

Saba, Most people on these islands, in this part of the world—maybe everywhere—we speak many tongues. When the languages are very different, it is not difficult to keep them apart. When

I had to speak French, for instance, I did not have much trouble speaking only French. But if we had German tourists, I sometimes got confused and talked Dutch to them, which is some the same to German, but, the spoken is different. I don't read. But speak probably six, seven tongue. Not well, but well enough. With you people I get confused because some of you are black, and I think of you as belonging to the Caribbean, or even the mainland. But you, Katherine, you white, and you look American. I see a tourist and I speak tourist English. When I see your face, I speak English. When I look at the men, they look so much like people from Curaçao, or my own land; my tongue gets all twisted up. The tongue from home, the tongue from here, from Trinidad, all different, and all a bit of English, but not really.

And you, Guinée asked, you were not born here, I think?

You think right. I was born... long ago, my land. I miss it so much! Saba's voice trembled, almost tearful. My land, Saba continued, so big! Food ev'where, animal ev'where, trees, rivers. Beautiful people... He almost whispered. So black. Big, his voice rising. Powerful people! Then, he said almost reverently, Anansi, she send da womens. She talk me.

And where is this Ah-nahn-see, Katherine asked?

In the dark trees. She da boss, maybe of all da granmans.

And these "granmans" (Katherine pronounced it grahnd mahn) are chiefs?

Ya, dey chiefs. Anansi chief o' chiefs.

And where is this, Alive asked?

Sranan. My land name Sranan.

Solomon turned to Guinée, You know where that is?

Never heard of it. But then, most people had never heard of the many Guineas either. Saba, this

Sranan, is it in Africa?

No, no, on mainland. Sout' Merika mainland. He counted on his hand, First Venezuela (the thumb), dan Guyana (pointing finger), dan Sranan (middle finger), dan French Cayenne— you know: Devil Island (ring finger)? And behin' all dose lands (tapping his palm) Bresil. But me mens deep da inland, da jungle. In da town, Java mens an' India and Jew mens an' maybe one, two white, dey live town. And black Sranan, too, an' da color of the professor here (looking at Solomon).

How do you know to call me "professor?"

I know. I know many t'ing. Anansi tell me.

You knew we were coming, Guinée asked?

No, Anansi see true me eye.

Katherine, She sees what you see?

I t'ink. She know.

Do you talk to her, Katherine asked?

Sometimes I can, but mostly she talk to me. I hear her inside. Cannot explain very well. You people have different ideas. We, in the jungle, always know where other peoples are. We no see, but we know. Now dis island... me blinded.

Guinée, said, Wait. Too much information. You're going too fast. I'm not sure what you're talking about.

They were all talking at once, until Alive got up and said, Obviously time for tea.

But as she stood up, Saba said quietly to Solomon, She know you: Famous professor, she say.

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Katherine and Alive were in a real bathroom, getting ready to sleep in a real bed. What do you think, Alive, should I cut my hair?

It's getting long, eh? But you've got good hair. Why cut it?

I feel conspicuous, I'm the only white on this island, whose few remaining people like dark, the darker the better. I thought maybe if I cut my hair real short, sort of chopped off, I might look at least not middle class white.

Alive walked around Katherine, looking from all sides. You know, when I look at you I don't see a middle class white woman. I see a sort of universal woman. And I'm sensitive about shades, you know. Lighter is better in some places, and darker is better in others. When can we forget that bullshit?

Yes, but I'm thinking of tomorrow. I want to go visit those people on the other side of the island. I want to ask them about their babies. That's a sensitive thing to talk about. When I was a nurse, I wore my hair short. "Casual" I think it was called. Made me look tough. My working class patients, most of them various shades of dark, seemed to trust me more when my hair was short. I haven't thought about "hair" for a long time: maybe it's time to do something about it..

Alive put her hand in Katherine's straight brown hair. Holding hunks of hair between two fingers. Hm, yes, that might not be a bad idea at all. Do you think I should do something about how I look when we go over there tomorrow?

You coming too?

Of course. You think I want to stay here by myself. I know the men all want to go and ogle girls. Don't think I cannot read Guinée. He's already chosen one or two.

How about we both cut our hair short. I cut yours, you cut mine. i saw a mirror somewhere, we can look at ourselves as the other is cutting.

I feel like a teenager, Alive said, breaking out of the mold! I did that, you know? When I was sixteen. I had finished high school, was supposed to go to some expensive university. But I saw all those kids having a good time. At least I thought they were having a good time. Anyway, I decided I would be an expensive call girl..

You? The mathematics genius?

Alive shrugged, I learned quickly that you cannot be a call girl without a pimp. And to get rid of a pimp is as hard as getting rid of your skin color. I got sick of it in less than a month, and found I could not get out of that weird web that we weave, and let others weave around us. It took a year to start my life over somewhere else. Making myself over. Now, looking back, I know that it was not a bad experience on the whole. I learned a lot about men. More than I ever wanted to know!

Katherine looked at the hair Alive had cut while she told a brief life's story. I look good in this shorter hair, she said. Alive stepped back. Younger certainly. And yes, not so middle class professional white do-gooder. Ouch, that hurts.

Nah, don't let it bother you. Now you look more like my sister. You want to cut mine?

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But the next morning Saba vetoed a visit to his family, as he called the little settlement on the other side. Dis day dey busy. Have to work, to get coconut, banana. Plant more you call "sweet" 'tato. Mo' wata'. Dey much busy. And Max he sleep! He busy all night, many womens.

Katherine tried to explain her interest in the aborted births some of the women had. As a nurse, maybe I can help. I've helped many women before. I was a good nurse.

Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Saba was quite firm. Guinée asked, can the men go back today?

Saba looked at him, No, maybe tomorrow. Solomon said, But we can help them work.

Saba could not be moved and they did not want to go without him.

That left them with an empty day. Katherine and Alive, with chopped hair, dressed for whatever they could find for a foot trip. Katherine had found a pair of khaki shorts and a floppy shirt, Alive had a long skirt that felt heavy like canvas. She wished she had chosen something else. They lingered over a breakfast of bananas and stale crackers. Alive had found a tin of instant coffee that did not taste much like coffee, but it was warm. The skies were overcast. No wind, but no sunshine either.

Saba, who had not shared the breakfast, sat back, looking over the ocean. Mo' hur'cane, mebbe.

What do we do in a hurricane, Solomon asked? Do we stay in the house, or go outside. Where would we seek cover?

Stay inside, Saba said. Mebbe small hur'came. Mebbe no.

Katherine asked Solomon, Have you checked in with Max?

He is sleeping the sleep of the innocent. He must have had a busy night.

Alive said, I feel guilty not “doing” something. Should we get more food if there is a storm coming? Do we have water?

Saba, laughing, Hur’cane come, plenny wata!

Alive got up, I want to walk around. Explore the neighborhood. There are other houses around here. I can’t sit still.

Saba nodded, Ya, hur’cane come. Womans walk aroun’, fo’ sure, now hur’cane come! Nobody knew quite what to make of that.

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Mid afternoon, suddenly, Katherine and Solomon looked at each other. Do you...? Voices calling...? Both heard voices inside, voices in distress. Help us! And another voice, It’s not far, I can see an island! We cannot... We must ...

Solomon, thoughtfully, They are in the storm. In an open boat! Or a raft or something.

Katherine saw the face of the man who urged them on. A strong very black face, almost like Guinée, but more so.

They walked back to the house. Alive and Guinée nowhere in sight. Saba said they went swimming!

What! With a storm coming?

Saba shook his shoulders. Crazy white people.

But neither Alive nor Guinée are white!

She wite inside, he half wite inside, Saba said with emphasis.

Solomon ignored the comment, Saba, we heard distress calls from people who are in the ocean, in the storm we think. They are in trouble.

Before he could say more, Saba stood up, stuck his arm out, hands down. Yes, I hear them.

They my people! My people! He got up, held his arms up, My people, my people, Anansí sen’ brada sista.

They are in the storm, Katherine said, reaching out. What can we do? Can we signal them? Can you see them? Are they near?

Solomon whispered, They can see an island.

Yes, Saba said soberly. I know where they are. Not far. Yes, the island they see is the south end of this island. They will be blown to the other side, where the wind will be less. The wind will guide them to the shore. My family there will meet them.

Solomon: You mean, they have boats on the other side? I never saw any.

They have. Now, I must go other side. You stay here!

Can we do something, Katherine asked? But Saba had already left, running to the path.

Do you think we should... ?

Did you notice that Saba spoke without an accent? And he... I worry about those two in the ocean when... Sometimes I think...

Stop it, Solomon shouted! We must stay calm.

Are you listening?

Listen to what?

They are coming here.

Who? Alive and Guinée?

The people in the boat, or boats. To this side, not the other. The wind is getting stronger, can you feel it?

Hope Guinée and ...

If we run, we can get there in minutes, come...

Hand in hand Solomon and Katherine ran down to the beach — no mean feat since Katherine was at least a head taller than Solomon, but their run was perfectly synchronized to a sort of average speed that both of them could maintain for a while.

Alive was just getting out of the water, shaking out her newly cropped hair, when Katherine and Solomon came, almost but not quite out of breath. Guinée was swimming in from the breakers. The wind had increased sharply. Not a hurricane, perhaps, but certainly a storm. The sky out to the right was black, laced with almost continuous lightning in the blackness. Alive turned around, waved to Guinée, pointing to the black cloud coming closer. Guinée put more muscle into reaching the beach.

The beach was at one end of a shallow bay. The point at the wind side was not high and did not seem to deflect the wind much, if at all. Guinée had to struggle against an undertow but the wind pushed him to the little beach.

Alive, Katherine and Solomon huddled, waiting. When he made it, Guinée was out of breath. Alive went to help him, holding him up as they staggered to higher ground.

Out of shape, Guinée rumbled, as he put shorts on.

Alive looked at him, You don't get enough sleep, nights!

They slumped together where grassy ridges began. The road only a few steps above them. Katherine and Solomon joined them.

The storm was now upon them, the wind howling. They had no choice but to get up: flying sand was scraping their skin and eyes painfully. As they struggled up the low rise to get on the road, protecting their eyes with hands or a shawl, or by turning their head away, they heard a voice.

Saba had turned back from his hasty run to the other side of the island when he realized that "his people" were coming to the bay on this side after all. He yelled almost incoherent fragments of sentences, they here ... must help ... there ... Ayee, ayee! He ran right into Katherine who had held on to Solomon, helped by Guinée. They all fell in the sand, over and under each other.

When they stood up and Saba had calmed down, they all looked to the end of the bay, where something was bobbing on the ocean, the wind pushing it into the bay. It seemed headed for the beach not all that far from where they were. Solomon tried to understand what it was they saw. It looked like a square platform, floating on what looked like oil drums, with four masts on the corners, tightly rigged together and to the platform. Shreds of sails madly flapped in the wind. In the middle of the platform they could just make out a huddle of people, holding each other. More details appeared as the raft rapidly floated closer, tilting and rotating. When the contraption hit the bottom, still some distance from the beach, it swerved madly before coming to rest, at an angle to the waves and the wind.

Saba murmured, All come Saba, crash! All crash, all crash! He looked pained, hurting. He was holding his stomach, then his head.

Alive put her arms around him. It's all right, your people are here. We'll help.

The huddle on the tilting platform had rapidly disentangled itself, people were sliding into the water—only a little more than chest-deep—and stumbled to the shore. Guinée and Katherine were already there, helping them to drier parts of the beach, taking the clothes off their backs to cover the shivering, soaked raft people. Saba and Alive rushed to the scene. Saba crying, unable to control his tears, his emotions. He looked at the men and women who had come ashore, four of them, then looked back at the platform where one—no, two—men were struggling with an inert bundle. Very carefully they slid down, holding the bundle high on their raised hands. Guinée waded in to help. Saba rushed in, sobbing now, Sista? Dat me sista!

Eventually the rescued and the rescuers sorted themselves out. Hard to tell who was most exhausted. Katherine and Alive had a brief exchange: would it be better to bring the people to the house, or perhaps first bring food and water down to the beach?

Nobody noticed that the storm had blown past. The sea was still churning, but calming. Solomon, who had stood apart with a dark frown on his face, now approached some of the

rescued, and asked whether there was something important left on the platform, because now it looked to float farther from the shore.

Oh, tide is coming in! Two men detached themselves to go back to the platform, bringing back a stout rope, walking far up the beach to a tree.. They motioned to Solomon, We can leave stuff on the raft, we'll get it later. Not important.

Saba started to walk away, keeping his hand on the bundle carried by two bulky men. Everyone followed in a ragged file. He took them to another house, a large house, nearer the beach. He turned to Katherine and Alive, This is a big house, with good water, but we need food. You know where to find it, no?

The women set off to "shop." Solomon went with them, At least I can carry stuff, he mumbled. I'm useless when it comes to rescuing people, but I can carry food. He was still frowning, grumbling, This new world! Very hard for someone like me. I can't do anything. I can solve math puzzles, make intricate fantasies in my head. But none of that is of any use in this new world. What is needed is bulk and muscle, and I never... He did not finish the thought.

Katherine felt his pain, but knew not to take notice. She said nothing. Let's hurry. Some of those people look starved. They must have run out of food days ago. The "shopping" went easier than they had imagined. They found a small shop, on a cross street, almost an alley, that must have been a distributor of food in quantities. Windows were still boarded up, the door locked, but a storm had to have rattled one of the window boards loose. They had little trouble pulling it off, then breaking the window, and reaching around to open the door. Fortunately not locked with a key, Solomon muttered. They found some large bags in a back room, and filled up with as much as they could carry. Tins of meat, macaroni and cheese, butter, even bread in tins, bottled water, soda water, some juices. Out behind the back door was a hand cart which they borrowed to carry the loot.

Saba's sister, a large, very black woman, was lying on a sofa. She seemed unhurt, but Katherine, who examined her, thought she might have hit her head on something. She complained of a bad headache, and pain in her eyes. Katherine whispered to Solomon, Dear, would you mind going back to that little store and see whether you can find some first aid things, and eye drops, perhaps bandages, whatever you can find?

Saba sat on the floor, holding his sister's hand. He sat very quietly, paying no attention to the other "my people."

After a hasty meal had been composed, water and juice distributed, it did not take long for most of Saba's people to fall asleep, on pillows, mats, on the wood floor. The large house felt crowded.

One man suddenly sat bolt upright, calling Saba, who translated, He say, bad people on the sea. Stole their boat, they quick-quick make this plank (raft) they found. But he think mebbe de bad man follow?



Guinée suggested a lookout.

Saba shrugged his shoulders. Where lookout? Here side, other side of island? Only one, two places dey can land.

Solomon said, I can search. I'll be lookout.

And not sleep, Katherine asked?

We search together, you and I. Maybe we can go to last night's house?

Most of the people were now asleep. Katherine and Solomon quietly left and spent the night, alone, in yesterday's house.

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Alive woke up with a start. Dream...? Something had startled her, she felt a sense of danger, no, a vague apprehension. She heard voices in the big room where all the people slept who had washed ashore on the beach yesterday. They were whispering very intently, in a language that sounded entirely foreign. Carefully she unfolded herself from under Guinea's arm. She looked for something to put on, found only a towel. Wrapped it around her hips, leaving her breasts uncovered. Still half asleep she walked into the big room. All but two of the men were sitting cross-legged by the door, huddled close, gesturing. Saba's sister was still asleep on the sofa. Saba had fallen asleep, still on the floor, with his head resting on the sofa. One other man was asleep. He looked like a boy, all curled up. She noticed again how large these people were. Yesterday had been confusing: the storm, the unexpected arrival of that bizarre raft. All of the new people had been wrapped in old and soaked jackets, coats, blankets. They had looked large, she remembered, but she had assumed it was all padding. Their clothes had looked as all clothes looked these days, she thought wryly: worn and either too big or too small. But now they were all nude. Except one, a woman who had a rag on a string around her waist. She and the largest of the men—he was a giant, what shoulders!—were arguing. Or perhaps not: now they were smiling, laughing. The woman spoke softly, Come, sit with us, inviting Alive.

Alive had barely sat down in the space they had made by shuffling aside, when the woman began. Yesterday we were in shock, so many things happened! We were surprised..., and thank you, she added reaching out for Alive's hand. Did we even thank you for saving our lives? We probably forgot to tell you that we may have been followed by some crazy people. First they stole our boat. And killed one of ours. We killed three of them, but... So we had to make that thing we... Well, anyway, they may have found fuel for that boat. It is very old, we found it in Nickerie, and it runs on palm oil. We talked this morning about having lookouts. Are there many of you?

Alive counted, No, we were five when we came. Here, on this island we met Saba. But there are a few other people on the other side of the island. I haven't met them, but the men have.

The woman nodded, then continued, Those people who are perhaps following us are crazy, I tell you. They have guns, and their leader has a big knife. That's what he kills with. We did not

have anything, except our hands, and what we could find to fight them. He (she tilted her head to the biggest man) has a knife, but it's mostly, what do you say, ceremonial?

The big man said a few words. He tells me, no need to tell the whole story. But he wants to warn the people here.

Alive looked for Saba. He had awakened and was getting on his feet. He would know where to post lookouts.

Saba stopped by the seated people, mumbled something about going out to piss, and was gone.

The spokeswoman of the new people spoke, He (again pointing to the big man) says we must post lookouts now. She had a brief discussion with the big man, Do you have a map of this island?

No, said Alive, but I saw some yesterday in the place where we got food. I can get one.

The big man said a few more words. The woman translated, He says we wait for—who you call Saba?—to come back. He lives here, doesn't he? Anansi, the woman he calls his mother's mother, sent us to get him. This here (motioning to the big man) is his brother perhaps, or cousin. A relative in any case. He's a granman, our chief. He also thinks of Anansi as his mother's mother. The woman smiled, leaned over to whisper in Alive's ear, All the men call her "my mother's mother!" Because she is old. She is not really old, but it is a name of respect, more than anything.

Saba came back, together with the sun popping up to illuminate the world in bright pink light. Da boat, on da beach now, he said. And he burst out in a belly laugh that woke up whoever was still asleep in the house. The circle made room for him, Saba talking, laughing, hugging the granman and the translator woman and the others.

Guinée came in, also naked. Then Katherine and Solomon (with minimal clothing hastily donned). Saba's sister was awake. She tried to sit up and fell back with a groan. Saba shot up. He and the woman who had translated for the granman walked to the sofa. Saba's sister waved them away: No, let me. I can sit up. Just dizzy, but now I'm all right. She spoke with a strong accent. The accent was harsh, but her voice a warm alto.

Katherine had a flash of her as a singer.

Alive whispered to Guinée: Get some clothes on!

Mais non, chérie, if guests can sit around without clothes, I can too. Here is not as hot as my country, but hot enough. And, he added, looking at Alive, you have also forgotten most of your dress, haven't you?

Alive looked down, realized that all she was wearing was a towel, casually knotted around her waist. She laughed, You're absolutely right. Katherine, Solomon, what say we forget clothes?

Solomon muttered something.

Katherine shivered, said, Good idea. I'll wait until the sun makes it hotter (and my skin darker, she thought to herself),

Alive, The people who came yesterday think there are some "crazy people" following them. They think we should have lookouts, to warn us.

Katherine turned to the big man, knowing that he must be their leader, We knew you were coming, before we could see you. We would also know when other people come.

The granman said a few words to the woman who translated, Yes, and we also shall have some lookouts. The granman turned to Saba, conferred with him.

Saba said to Alive, Can you tell me how to go to that food place to get the map you saw there? Let me get it, I won't be away more than five minutes.

The woman who wore a small wisp of an apron, approached Solomon and Katherine, who stood together. She began rather formally, We must thank you for helping us yesterday. I think without your help... We thank you for feeding us, and... She seemed to search for words. Then she went on, This (looking at the large man) is granman Yosef. And over there is his son, my son, also Yosef. But we call him Pikin, which means small in my language. Everyone laughed, Pikin was not exactly small! The woman went on, pointing to another man, and that is Heefoo, and Daf (or Dahvit), and Dobu, and she is Malia, another child of Granman Yosef. And I am Tilly. Don't particularly like that name, but have lived with it so long, that I hardly hear it any more..

From the sofa came the singing voice, And I am Mirelly.

Saba added, She famous singer!

Katherine turned to her and said, Yes, I imagined you must be a singer with that wonderful voice! And I am Katherine, and this is Solomon, and Guinée, and the one who went to get the map is Alive.

The woman Tilly looked taken aback. Yes, we see that she's alive. That's her name?

Yes, Guinée said, and my name is the name of my country. These Americans cannot say my name properly. I think you can.

Solomon said, indignantly, I am not American!

Katherine turned to him, You know, I've never given it a moment thought what you are. You are one of a kind.

The boy, Pikin, spoke up (also a singer's voice, Katherine thought!) Now we're all just Men. I mean people. Humans. No more countries, no more borders, no passports and all that nonsense.

Solomon whispered, The young understand so much quicker! And Katherine added, And excellent English!

Alive came back with an armful of maps, out of breath. Thought I might as well bring all the maps I could find.

Katherine and Alive went to make breakfast for the many people they had to feed now. Solomon joined them, grumbling. In the large room, all the new guests and Saba had spread the maps out on the floor, they were walking around, talking, asking questions. The mellow voice of the singer, Mirelly, joined in.

Walked in Max, a pretty girl on each arm.

Pandemonium!

Max backed away, Oh, I must have the wrong house. We looked in the other house, where... Katherine, Solomon and Alive walked in from the kitchen, their arms loaded with dishes of food: the usual crackers and whatever else they had found to go with crackers.

Max!, Alive cried out.

Guinée walked over, hugged Max, held him at arms length, and who are these visions from heaven? J'aurais dû mourir, voilà le paradis, I must have died, this is paradise!

Everyone got up, greeting the new arrivals. The girls clung to Max, would not open their mouths. Saba, whispered in a stage whisper, The girls have not seen that many people together for years and years! They're shy.

Solomon had left, sat alone in the kitchen, bent over as if he had stomach cramps. Katherine found him, sat on the ground in front of him, not saying anything. She looked back and said softly, Come, let's escape this madhouse. I've found a charming café where we can have breakfast al fresco. But, after a meager breakfast, Solomon said he was going for a walk. Alone. He needed some alone time.

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Smoothly, the people in the house sorted themselves out. Two men went out to points marked on a map, for the first 12 hour watch. Two others were cleaning up the house and would clean up outside after. A woman went with Alive to get more food, with special instructions to look for fresh vegetables in gardens. The granman and two men went to the beach, to see what needed to be done—if anything—with the raft. Tilly took Katherine aside, Your man, she said, he's not well?

Katherine smiled a bitter smile, Yes, perhaps that is the best way to say it. He feels... he feels "small" around big people, particularly when he thinks that only big brawny men are useful in times like this.

He looks smart, that man, Tilly said. Have you known him long?

No, but nevertheless we know each other well. I understand him, but I do not know what I should say, or do, or not do, or...? But yes, he is smart. More than smart, he is a genius. He was a

famous scientist. Katherine looked at Tilly, saw an almost naked, very black, large woman, with kind and knowing eyes. He, Solomon, she continued, thinks that the future belongs to people like you. And I cannot help thinking that he's right.

And... , your man, he is not white, what is he?

He is part San. The other part probably something close, Hottentot. Who knows? He doesn't really know.

Then we should revere him. The San are the oldest people. My people. we trust ancestors more than people from today. You understand?

Yes, Katherine said with a smile, I understand. I agree. Modern people are not to be trusted. But, you know, Solomon may be San by blood, by his genes, but he fought from the age of three or four to get a superior western education. That changes people!

Tilly looks thoughtful, Yes, but a racial memory is never lost. We know that from experience.

Katherine looked up at her—there were few women she had looked up to, she always thought of herself as a large woman. Maybe, but you don't know what a western education does to a man.

I know what it does to a woman, Tilly said. I have a doctors degree in biology from a famous European university. I assure you that I know. But I never lost the pride in my own people. They always came first. I never lost my identity. My specialty, by the way, was evolution as it can be traced in DNA. Some very interesting stuff. If I had stayed... in Europe, I mean, ... Oh I was tempted! Yes, if I had stayed I would have made a reputation as the woman who discovered the collective subconscious in our genes!

Katherine, not hiding her astonishment, You outrank me! I only got to be a nurse, although eventually I was a very good one. You should talk to Solomon! He has strong ideas about... But you should talk to him, I cannot do justice to what he told me.

Yes, I shall seek an opportunity to talk with him. By the way, the granman—who is not my husband, only the father of one of my children—does speak English, but he has me interpret for him. It gives him more time to think, he says. He does that very well. Thinking I mean. But he does not think himself into the kind of ugly knot your man has thought himself in.

They had walked away from the house as they talked. When Katherine looked around, she noticed that they had walked into a whole new part of the little town. Beautiful homes, placed in large expanses of lawn, now grown high. The road curved around a huge tree. Tilly picked up some mangos from the ground. Very ripe, and therefore very fragrant. Do you like mango, she asked?

Yes, who doesn't. It's messy eating.

Hm, that's why I eat it, Tilly said through a mouthful of mango, juice and orange flesh dripping down between her breasts. The rain will wash it off, she said when she had finished the

first mango. Strange, she said, it's not the season for mangos, too late. Maybe these islands are different.

She offered Katherine another. Here, this one is ripe and wonderful. I usually bite into the skin like this, and then you can peel the rest off with your fingers. She handed the mango that she had started.

Mouth full of mango, Katherine asked, You must be older than you look. I thought you were twenty, or maybe twenty-five, but with a degree...

Tilly laughed. I used to say I was twenty-nine, but very soon, at my next birthday, I shall be thirty-five. And you? You look like you're maybe late thirties or forty, but you sound older.

Let's sit down, Katherine said.

As she made to sit under the mango tree, Tilly stopped her, You never sit down under a mango tree. If the ants don't eat you, a snake will, or the monkeys will grab the mango right out of your mouth. They gathered some more mangos, Katherine holding them in her shirt.

You see what clothes are good for?

Touché! But you were going to tell me about yourself.

Where to begin? Have you ever been asked that? Yes, of course you have. After a short hesitation, Katherine began in the near present, working back. The plane flight, her feelings for Solomon; feelings she did not understand herself. The people she had left, after nurturing them. Perhaps saving their lives. She mentioned the Ancient One briefly. It was her cabin that seemed to draw people. Almost casually she mentioned that she had been able to sense when people were approaching. Sometimes reading them, listening to them.

Tilly interrupted. I knew it! There was something about you. When I first met you I felt something. I can't say, but the same I feel with Yosef's mother's mother (she giggled when she said that). We call her Anansí, which is not a name, but almost an honorary title. Nobody knows how old she is. In her sixties, probably. Who knows. She says she was Brazilian, she did not like the place where she was, so she started to wander. Eventually she found us, liked us, she says. And then she... She looked into the minds of old people, and read—heard?—the ancient stories, and saved them. She says she is our memory.

Katherine smiled, Yes, Saba mentioned her with... fondness. No, more like adoration. Like she is a holy person. Then she added, Although I distrust "holy..."

Yeah, well, we, my people, know that she is special, because of all she remembers. She's really smart! And powerful! Her body is wrinkled, but you don't even notice that. The name, Anansí, is very ancient African, a very smart spider. Tilly laughed all over. I heard stories about Anansí, the spider, when I grew up, but never dreamed I would know a woman we call, or think of as that smart spider. She looked closely at Katherine, You know, she, Anansí looks like your man. Same size, same color, that brown, sort of orange. They should meet. Then, reaching out to

put her arm around Katherine's shoulder, Don't worry, I won't take your man away. Do you want a child from, him?

Katherine looked surprised at the question, then pensive, I never had any children. Reasons? I did not like the people I found myself surrounded with. A deep sigh, Yes, I want to have a child from him, a girl. I love that man but I cannot think why. I cannot reach him, his brain. His thinking. I can see inside him, but I cannot understand. That feels very... difficult.

Tilly smiled. We think different from Westerners, you know. This love, you talk about... We don't have such a word. We know that we can like anybody or everybody, for something. Maybe wonderful sex, or talking, or caring, maybe eating together. She turned to look Katherine in the eyes, You, I can tell, have a mother feeling. You are mother to many people, yes?

Katherine thought, then smiled. Yes, you are right. And when a person is "difficult" I want to mother him more!

Neither spoke for quite a while.

Finally, Katherine said, Can you think of her, Anansí, do you have her face in your memory? Oh yes, certainly; better than that. I know how to find her. Look into me, inside.

Katherine recoiled. I don't want to intrude...

It's all right. I'm used to Anansí coming into my head. It tickles. I know she is reading me, or hearing, or whatever it is she does. I learned long ago that she never snoops, and she's not interested in small stumbles. She says it's her way to learn from me, what I learned in the Netherlands, in Germany, England, other places.

And that does not scare you, or freak you out, Katherine asked gently. What's freak-out? No, it does not scare me. Why should it?

Katherine shook her head. I have a lot to learn in this new world.

When the sun stood high in the sky, rain came to thoroughly wash the two women as well as Katherine's clothes.

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In a remarkably short time, life on the island assumed a rhythm. There were expeditions to the other side; some of the people from the other side even visited on this side. Mirelly was walking around, singing scales, and in the evening sometimes she sang a few songs accompanied by other voices. Alive and Katherine, often joined by Solomon, went swimming in the bay almost every morning, to be washed by the rain at noon. Alive now ruled the kitchen of the big house, although the many people used two other houses as well, where Tilly and others took turns finding and preparing food. They had found a few gardens that, despite forests of weeds, yielded some valuable fresh vegetables. They had begun to harvest the abundance of fruit more systematically. A crew, including Guinée—who now insisted that everyone learned to say Guenay—, was dismantling the raft, carefully saving the masts, the sails, planks, boards, and of

course the barrels; hiding what could be used again in what must have been a sort of warehouse or storage building close to the beach. They had looked at the yacht harbor, but found it lacking in facilities. The piers, now under a few centimeters of water, were much too wet and slippery to be safe. Max had moved to the other side, at least for now. Granman Yosef and Tilly organized the work force and saw to it that the lookouts were assigned and properly victualled. They lived in one of the new houses, the one farthest away from the house where the plane people had settled down.

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One morning Solomon said he was going to explore; he did not feel like joining the women at the beach. He needed to be alone, he said. Katherine could not change his mind, but he allowed, that if he had not come back shortly before dark, they could go looking for him. Where would we look for you, Alive asked lightly.

I think I can promise not to leave the island, Solomon said with heavy irony. He had not given much thought to where, in what direction, he would “explore;” he just needed to get away from the press of bodies. He needed to think, and experience had taught him that he thought best by himself. He found himself walking in the direction of the path across the island. He turned, took another road. He would stay on paved roads, he decided. There must be paved roads he had not walked. He did not even know what he was looking for, other than a boat, a plane, a way to get off this blasted island. He was angry. He must get some clarity in his own head about what it was exactly that he was angry about. What did he want? He discovered what must have been a nice neighborhood of cared for, uncluttered land with pleasant houses. Not big, but it was easy to imagine the spectacular gardens there must have been. He fantasized that local people had lived here, not tourists. There were no houses that looked like inns, or Bed \* \* \* Breakfasts. There were clotheslines in some gardens. Cars in the driveway. A peaceful scene: he began to expect someone to come out on a porch, or children to come running into the street. He sat down on a bench, probably a bus stop. The houses seemed so appealing that he walked up driveways and peeked through windows. Nobody home, of course, but most of the rooms he saw looked untouched. He saw an easy chair with a foot stool, newspapers scattered on the floor, an open magazine on a little table.

What happened? Why did people rush off? Where did they rush to? He tried the door of that house. Locked. Walked around the back, where the kitchen door also was locked. But the sliding doors to a little patio were not quite closed. At first he could not move the door. The metal had corroded, he saw. With effort and judicious jiggling, the door squeaked open. He walked into what must have been a children’s room. Toys, dolls, all over. He found his way to the front room where magazines and newspapers cluttered the floor. Now everything was covered with a layer of dirt, or dust. And the newspaper, as well as the magazine, were in a language he decided it must be Dutch. Not similar enough to the German he could read, but with some effort he could make some sense of it. The newspaper had screaming headlines on many more than the front page. Or, maybe these were the front pages from many newspapers? The magazine had few illustrations. A literary magazine? Or perhaps some esoteric specialty? He began to sneeze: the



room was stuffy and dusty. He decided to take the magazine and go outside. He found his way back to the bench at the bus stop. He sat down, worked to make some sense of words he almost understood.

A voice sounded in his concentration. I'm afraid, Professor, the bus is late today!

Solomon looked up. The granman stood in front of him, smiling. Solomon started to get up, but Yosef motioned, don't trouble yourself. He sat down next to him.

You called me professor, and you speak English!

One could not mistake such a famous face, the granman made a little bow. And yes, I speak English. I had my education in England and the Netherlands.

But your... wife? the woman, Tilly, she seems to be your interpreter.

We play that game, yes. She thinks very highly of your friend, Katherine. How fortuitous that I found you on my morning stroll.

Somehow, Solomon had the impression, that Yosef had been here, on this island, before. He asked, You are familiar with this island? You know this neighborhood? It seems so pleasant. I expected someone to come out and invite me in, any moment.

Yes, they left rather precipitously, didn't they? And, I see you are reading Dutch? You find it sufficiently close to German?

No, I have to analyze words one by one. I find some words that remind me of Scandinavian, particularly Danish words, many English words, and some that could be German. I had already deduced it must be Dutch. This island was a Dutch... what? Territory?

Something like that. Independent, but speaking Dutch. Not many lived on this island, maybe a thousand. I too have wondered why the panic that sent people out of their houses so suddenly, leaving things lying around.

Yet the doors were locked, Solomon pointed to the house where he had found the magazine.

Yosef, looking in the distance, said, These last few years have been shockingly different from anything anyone had ever experienced. We, my people and I, are lucky to live in the heart of Sranan, which is off the beaten track. In the deep jungle we were not shaken, only when we got to the coast and saw what had happened. In the towns—even the small cities and towns we have in Sranan—to be without electricity and water became a major catastrophe. People must have lost their minds, or at least their sense. Who had guns, emptied them shooting neighbors. Why? Heaven only knows. For food perhaps. One finds it hard to even imagine such scenes.

I too was in the hinterland, during most of the craziness, Solomon said, thinking back to his stay with his friends.

And where was this, if I may ask?

Nigeria. I was on a sort of sabbatical, rediscovering Africa, when the Chaos began. Staying with friends deep in the interior. Until we had to flee... Solomon shivered. I still don't like to think about that. I made it to a safer place just south of the equator, we think. On the coast. We, there were three of us left at that time, found some others, then more came. We established a sort of village. And a second, when other people came.

You've come a long way, professor!

You must have heard our story... the plane, our crazy idea to recruit survivors from a place I had... Solomon stopped abruptly. Too complicated to explain in a few words.

Neither of the men spoke. A silence enveloped the peaceful scene. No birds, Solomon noticed, wondering what wild life had survived? Mice, perhaps, although they had not seen any. Lizards? Insects? Yes, there were mosquitoes!

Yosef began slowly, carefully. Perhaps who you call Saba has told you of his mother's mother, in Sranan? A most unusual woman. She claims to be my mother's mother also, although nobody knows the facts of it. She is not of my people. She says, and I quote, "I inhabit a Brazilian body," for what that may mean. At a young age, I assume, she began a wandering through the Amazon basin, and somehow crossed mountains and found us. She liked us, and stayed. She has become a mother to our tribes. She is not really our mother's mother, of course. But, that too is a title of respect. She prefers the name Anansi.

I know nothing about your country, Solomon admitted. You have tribes? Yes, well, it depends on how one counts, or rather who one counts.

Saba talked about his country. He misses it, I think. And yes, he did mention his mother's mother. A remarkable woman, according to him. Very old, he said. Of course he is not exactly a youngster himself.

Yosef looked thoughtful. Then, as if making up his mind, he said, rather cautiously at first, The old woman is unusual. Are you familiar with the ancient African stories of Anansi? Solomon signaled, no. Yosef, continued, In any case she is much revered because she has made the whole history of our people her domain, and so, when she speaks (which is not too often!) she speaks with the voice of all of us, we know. These last thirty, forty, perhaps more years, she has been instrumental in making our people strong, and proud, in a world that did not tolerate indigenous peoples. We deliberately kept ourselves apart, deep in the interior. We were hard to reach. And invisible from above: that was one of her commandments, invisible from the air, and whatever spy eye passed above in the air.

The still morning that enclosed the two men, calmed their minds. Yosef continued, What I want to say is not easy to express in a western language. She has the unique talent to reach out to other minds. She speaks to some of us "inside," as I think of it. Not through my ears, but directly in wherever it is I experience. And she hears our thoughts. And, for some reason, the thought came to me that you perhaps should get to know her.

Solomon grimaced, looked away, not sure how much, if anything, he should tell this wild man from the deep jungle of somewhere in South America. Then he thought of the very cultured voice this wild man spoke. He turned to Yosef, You said you were educated in England? What do you mean by that?

Yosef smiled, You mean am I an educated savage? Yes, I'm proud of being a savage but I also have a degree in ecological systems. I myself was surprised that I actually could use insights I got in a classroom, in my own jungle. That too, by the way, was her thought, that I study "ecology." Ananasi is an exceedingly knowledgeable savage!

Solomon said, very quietly. I was a mathematician, theoretical physicist, and eventually got interested in anthropology. And... He did not continue. After a long silence, he said, Mr Granman, I feel useless now, in this new world. The things that occupied and excited me—all the things I know, but also the only things I know—are irrelevant now. My strength is my thinking, imagining even. When you and your men came on that contraption, and I saw how all those powerful men and women picked up, did what needed to be done, apparently having survived a severe storm and perhaps other extreme situations, then I truly realized that my big head is not what is needed. Your quiet leadership is needed, and I suspect that your size has something to do with that, too.

Professor, Yosef said, I am certain that you are quite wrong. We learn early, and throughout our lives, that power is in right action, not in muscles, nor even in the mind. Isn't it our mind that brought our species to seemingly own this now strangely empty planet? But our minds also gave us much important knowledge that we need now more than ever if we are to survive.

Solomon could not sit still, he stood up, paced a few steps, paced back, Exactly. And it is essential that those of us who survive will do it right. We cannot walk that same path.

You sound like Anansi! Even your words are the same. She has taught all of us that. She is without a doubt the most powerful and knowledgeable person of my people, not because she is big and black. Her skin color, I wouldn't know how to describe it. More like your skin than mine.

She's tiny. He put his arm out, at the level of his waist, maybe a meter and a half above the ground. Among her favorite words are, Our lives depend entirely on what the earth gives us, NOT on what we steal from her. She knows you are here. She knows who you are, professor.

She told you to talk to me?

She asked for the honor to be introduced to you. She thinks of me as her ambassador.

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The two men—so different in appearance, yet so alike in interests that went far beyond the immediate—talked for a long time, interrupted only when Yosef brought out some crackers and cheese he had brought for lunch. They found a bottle of mineral water in one of the houses nearby. It was late afternoon when Yosef said, We had better start back. The women will worry if we don't get back before dark.

Solomon muttered something about, let them worry... but walked ahead anyway. He realized he did not want to walk behind and have to look at that mountain of a man in front of him. He liked the man sitting down. Standing, he felt himself shrink into insignificance.

Yosef gave a few hints now and then. I think we should turn left here, or, I remember that path, it is a shortcut to the beach. When they were almost in sight of the big house that had become a sort of gathering place for meals, Yosef walked close behind Solomon, said, Excuse me, and lifted Solomon up under his arms and without further ado put the professor on his shoulders.

Solomon waved his arms wildly, objecting loudly, I am not a child!

No, you are most certainly not a child. This will show the others who you are. You are above me, do you understand?

Solomon was still thinking of that as they walked onto the path to the house, where most of the people on this side of the island seemed to be lounging, sitting in small groups here and there.

When Yosef walked up with Solomon on his shoulders, an abrupt silence fell. All the Sranan people got up, then bowed down deeply as Yosef strode slowly through them to the terrace, where Tilly, Katherine and Alive were setting tables.

The women looked in amazement at this show. Katherine began to smile, then realized this was a serious occasion. They all stood up, faced Yosef, as he approached, then gently set Solomon in front of Katherine.

He bowed to Katherine, and said, loud enough so that everyone there could hear him, Your friend, the professor, has told me that you are a Healer. He emphasized the word.

Katherine did not know what to say, so she said nothing, but gravely nodded and so accepted the title.

A low murmur of voices slowly filled the silence.

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They served a huge dinner. Perhaps not what a nutritionist would recommend for people who had done hard physical work, but under the circumstances, the best there was. Tilly mentioned that it was obvious that they had to find other sources of food than the little shops and one bigger supermarket, that was almost empty anyway, could provide.

We found a few gardens, and pointing at three large turrens with a variety of vegetables, but for this crowd it is not enough. .

Yosef nodded, spoke Sranan tongo, Tilly translating, Yosef says it is time to plan what we are going to do. Some of us perhaps want to stay here. Others may want to return to Sranan somehow. We have done what we came here to do, we have found who you call Saba. Now we can return. We know that at home, in Sranan, finding food is no problem.

Many of the men laughed at that, It flies in our mouths, one said. Another said, we reach up and there is a fruit in our hands. A third, smacking his lips, Ooh, I can taste a juicy pig!

Solomon had been silent since Yosef put him on his feet again. Katherine had done her best not to “hover,” as Solomon called it. But she was concerned. She knew he had not liked that ride very much, but he allowed it, so he must have gone along with whatever it meant.

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Most of the night Solomon was deep in thought; he did not sleep much. The next morning he looked haggard, and preoccupied. Katherine was ready to go to the beach, which had become a pleasant routine. She urged Solomon to join her. Peaceful, she said. But before they could slip out, a man approached them, not quite bowing.

My granman told me I could ask the healer woman for help. For a friend who is sick. We worry about him. If... could you come to see him? He cannot move, he is too sick.

Katherine turned to Solomon, who said, go ahead, dear. I'll follow soon.

No, come with me.

The young man brought them to a house they had not seen before. A cottage that could as well have been in the south of France. The sick man lay on a day bed in what must have been the living area. Someone had put plants in pots, healthy looking, all around, giving the room a warm, welcoming feeling. The man tried to get up, but obviously was too weak to do more than grin. The Sick, he said. Me, the Sick.

Their guide went over, put his hands on the forehead of the sick man. He thinks he has the sickness you call Aids.

Katherine kneeled next to the man, Why do you think that? He opened his shirt to show marks on his chest.

How long have you had that, Katherine asked?

Two day, three day. Get sick fast.

Katherine looked at the man who had guided her here. Does he know about Aids? Have you seen it before?

Oh yes, we all see it before. Many die. But before. Not now. He my brother.

Katherine stood, looked at Solomon. Yes, it could well be HIV, although it came on too suddenly. But, of course, who knows what has happened to the virus? I have to think, what drugs did we use. Some of the symptoms could be treated I remember. We have to find a pharmacy. What would they call that here? She had turned to the man who had brought them. We want to look for medicine. There must be pharmacies here. You know, where you buy medicine?

Yes, here Apotheek—he spelled it out, letter for letter.

Katherine and Solomon walked to what they thought must have been the center of this little town. Hoping to find an “apothecary”. She was trying to recall the names of drugs, dosages, other care. Cover the sores? No, leave them to the open air. They spread, but nothing is predictable about Aids. Certainly not now. She turned to Solomon, Oh, how I wished I had studied more medicine!

You too?

What do you mean? You wished you had studied medicine as well as math and physics and anthropology?

No, but all my studying does not help me be useful today. You’ve had years of experience as a super nurse, and now, here, you feel unprepared. How do you think I feel?

Maybe what we both need to remember, Katherine said fiercely, is, how could we possibly have prepared ourselves for this?

True, but then, what can I DO? I feel I want to do something useful, I want to be able to help, I’m not even sure how to explain to myself what I want. What I feel frustrated about.

Maybe our expectations are...?

Solomon touched her arm, and pointed, Is that what we’re looking for?

Ah, yes, “apothek.” Of course the door was locked and the front window covered with plywood nailed down solidly. The little shop was part of a row of other little shops.. There was no side door, but there must be a back door. They followed the building, found a sort of alley that led to a lane behind the row of shops. The lane was blocked in several places with cars, carts, and a small truck. Solomon had counted the stores between the Apothek and the alley, he pointed at a door, That must be the back door.

There was a parking lot with two cars, both of them vandalized, windows broken, seats ripped. The door was closed, but looked as if it had been forcefully opened before, and forced close. They found the crow bar that had been used by earlier burglars, right by the door. It took only a light tap, to open the wide door. The interior was dark, except for what light came in through the door. They found themselves in a storage room. There were freezers and refrigerators; a few stood open, their contents thrown about.

It’s a little too dark to read labels. But, by systematically taking boxes on one shelf to the light, reading, they managed to check on the contents of three refrigerators (now musty) and a cabinet that had been locked once, now stood open. All the while Katherine thought frantically, ... Kaposi’s sarcoma is not painful, I remember ... but he has other signs of Aids, his listlessness, he could not even get up from the bed... but so quickly. Usually these signs came after months, years of being exposed. Yes, and tomorrow we must also talk to Yosef about this. If the man really has Aids, we all...

When they explored further it was obvious that whoever had broken in had wanted narcotics, in the locked cabinet. The lock had been smashed. The thief had not been able to carry out all the narcotics: boxes and pills were scattered all around. She went back to the shelf with thick books on pharmaceuticals available in different languages. She looked through the American version, by far the thickest. Found elaborate instructions about treating Aids, and a section on different diagnostic procedures, and a “warning” that because Aids basically was a viral disease available drugs could only treat some of the “opportunistic” manifestations of the disease (the HIV virus weakened or even destroyed the immune system, making the patient more likely to get other diseases; it was these other diseases that eventually killed). The more she read, the more certain she was that her patient had something that was perhaps related, but not the Aids that she knew. She picked up a bag of a few of what had been the most effective chemicals. Fortunately they were packed with detailed instructions, side effects, etc. Lots of water seemed a universal advice. Hope they have good water there, she mused.

Reluctantly they trudged up to the little cottage. Katherine dispensed the capsules, with careful instructions. And with every one she added, And drink much water; is there good water here?

Yes, she was told, the water was clean and plentiful.

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Early the next morning Katherine went back to see the patient. The patient and his brother were not only awake, but sitting at a table in the kitchen, eating some kind of porridge. As she walked in, the patient said gaily, Your visit yesterday cured me! See, I’m well again.

And those spots, Katherine asked? Have they gone?

No, but fading back into my skin, he said proudly.

His brother was more subdued. And you, Katherine asked, you are all right?

Maybe now I catch the Sick, he said slowly. I am very tired.

Katherine sat down with them, at the table. No, she declined sharing the gruel they ate. What is it, she asked?

It is something we brought from home. It is the last of the cassava we brought with us. You may not like it, it does not taste good, but we’re used to it. Hard work to make it; they both nodded. Yesterday’s patient added, And our healers say we must eat other things with it, but we don’t have these other things like papaya and banana and...

But, I know where there are plenty mangoes, Katherine said. I shall get some for you.

Tilly walked in. Ah, you’re still here. Good. I see you have already done wonders with Seem.

No, I just arrived, and we were here yesterday, but I didn’t do anything. The patient looked much sicker yesterday, could not sit up in his bed. He healed fast, but I can’t take credit for that.

Tilly sat down, Our people are strong. Then she looked at the brother, and said, Now you don't look so good. What is it?

I'm tired, he said. I so worry my brada — now I sick.

Tilly reached out and clasped his hand. No worry. Now we have a healer. She look out for us. Rest, both of you. I tell granman you need another day rest.

Katherine and Tilly left together, Katherine still carrying her bag of drugs. You know, she said, I am quite stumped about that sickness. When Solomon and I came by yesterday I thought that the man had Aids, or, at least one of the symptoms of HIV. But it bothered me that it had come on so suddenly. Usually it begins quite differently. And then to find him this morning, sitting up, eating, is even more of a surprise. Now his brother is sick, the same fatigue. I don't know what to think. I went to the apothecary and studied some books on all the drugs used for treating symptoms of Aids, and the more I read, the more I became convinced that what these men have -- had -- is not Aids as we knew it. Although, of course, viral diseases can mutate rapidly. You called him Seem, what is his brother's name?

Seem is not his name, just a nickname. His whole name is Simoro and then something long. And the other man is not his biological brother: they grew up together and are friends. Thick friends, we say. They do everything together. They both married the same woman, Tilly laughed.

As they approached the big house, where most of the Sranan people were only now starting their day, two men walked away, each with a bundle of food and water, to relieve the night watchers. The granman Yosef came down the path to meet them. He said something rapidly to Tilly, who left, speaking over her shoulder to Katherine, Must settle a dispute in the kitchen, she said laughing.

May I escort you to your house, Yosef asked Katherine?

I am honored. Then she added thoughtfully, Hope you forgive me for any impolite or wrong words or acts. Americans are not used to royalty, I feel uncertain how to address you, or how to be with you.

Yosef put his arm around her waist, nudged close, and whispered in her ear, You got that wrong, I am not royalty. We are the proud descendants of slaves. Now, and for the past several hundred years, free and proud.

Katherine stopped, turned to face him, Slaves? You certainly don't act like slaves. Did you tell Solomon about this, he has a thing about slavery and all related issues. One of the reasons he is so down is that he had planned to go back to Africa, to "his" people, and raise them in some way so that they would never be slaves again. He thinks slavery, the whole idea of classes, of worker ants and bosses..., all that he sees as a fault in humans. He is obsessed with doing something that will erase that from the species now that it seems we may have a chance to start over.

He, your Solomon, is thinking like a westerner. Let's join him then, and we'll talk. May I ask you a personal question? Are you and Solomon... eh, married? Coupled?



Katherine laughed lightly. Not married, but yes, coupled. I've only known him for a short time, it is I who is smitten with him, and I don't even quite know why.

They found Solomon sitting outside, dressed only in a very brief brief, scribbling in a notebook he had found in the house.

How is the patient, he asked with real concern.

Strangely, the patient seems to be much better, but now his friend has similar symptoms, he is very tired.

Katherine sat across from Solomon, Yosef remained standing, I don't want to interrupt your calculations, but we need to talk about this illness that two of my people have. It could be—probably is—infectious.

Solomon closed his note book. There are chairs over there; please sit down.

After getting the chair and sitting down, Thank you. Katherine is the expert in medical matters on this island. He made a slight bow in her direction. She tells me that the symptoms look like a stage of the disease caused by the HIV virus. We, in my country, have had experience with that, of course. I doubt that any country escaped that pandemic. Early, when our people became ill—and I'm talking now about my tribe, in the dark tropical rainforest—we, a small group of us, did research on treatments. As you know, western medical scientists could only think in terms of fighting with chemical weapons. That meant any treatment would be expensive. We thought, in the ignorance of "primitives" (he allowed himself a slight chuckle), that we should do our own kind of research as well. The woman we now refer to as Anansí has many talents, among them a remarkable ability to heal her body. She asked to be infected with the HIV. Then she cured herself. From the western literature we had learned much about how the virus is transmitted. That, after all, was the first defense. Abstinence, or "protection." That kind of protection does not work very well where we live, and how we live (again he chuckled). We have a society without money. It is true, the tribe as a unit --a "corporation," you would call it-- had a goodly income from various arrangements with governments. But we had better things to do with that money. So, when the old woman, Anansí, cured herself, she offered herself as a sort of maker of vaccine;. Not as simple as I make it sound, of course. It took more than a year to find a combination of natural substances that, with what Anansí contributed, turned out to be an effective cure as well as protection.

Solomon listened, literally with his mouth open. Katherine leaned forward, nodding.

Yosef continued, So, when Katherine said that she had recognized the symptoms of HIV disease, I was not too worried about the patients. But I am worried about the people we found here. None of them—neither of you—are probably protected, as we are.

Katherine said, When I first saw the man with spots, I thought it very strange that he could show symptoms of the disease, after surviving what must have been a harrowing and physically demanding trip over the ocean. I could not help but think that perhaps the HIV virus had mutated

into another form altogether. Now I must consider that at least this symptom was a sign that, you say because he had a vaccine, or something, he is resistant to the virus. That is quite remarkable. The new me knows that whatever theories, observations, diagnoses I had is no longer valid. Now we must start anew, with what we have.

Solomon turned to Katherine, Can you think of a way to immunize us, knowing that the people from Sranan are protected by that jungle vaccine?

Even if I were a biologist, or other kind of medical scientist, I don't have the facilities and the tools.

Yosef, Maybe I can help. The medicine we developed was scratched in the skin, much like the old small pox inoculation. And both Tilly and I are blood type O.

Katherine, amazed, impressed, whispered, You've thought about this, then? Yes, that may be a possibility, although simple blood type was not enough in the dead world. I can find iodine or some other skin bactericidal in the Apotheek we found. I'll see what I can find.

Solomon sat back in his chair. Everything I hear about your people makes me more curious. Who are you? There is a feeling about all of you that impresses. I'm not sure what it is. Your bearing is ... regal. Proud, certainly. And all your people have that. You seem very sure of yourself. I have known people that have that same assurance in their own worth, and a sort of detachment. You don't need to be "accepted" by us, westerners, strangers, who have—had!—a superior civilization. I thought it is because you are so large. And (with an embarrassed smile) so black. But of course I know other people, in Africa and yes, even in Papua, who are as black, and as big. But... Yes, he said slowly, I must say the Papua people are as fiercely proud. They stand straight. Or did—until, in the last century, they were invaded, educated, fought with and over. They are not as free as they once were. It shows!

Yosef, My people are certainly not unique, but we are proud. Usually we tell this about our history, very briefly: we are the descendants of runaway slaves. In the 17th century, and perhaps before, what is now the country of Sranan, was a British colony. The colonists did not think much of the native people: Amerindians, Carib and Arowak. They were lazy, they said. Every colonizer everywhere has said that. So they brought slaves from Africa. Perhaps because of the wildness of the land, a majority—we like to think perhaps 80%—escaped immediately upon landing, before becoming used to being slaves. It may have helped that the trip from west Africa was shorter than to North America. Ever since we have kept a kind of 17th century African culture alive in South America. That is, of course, too much of a simplification. But one of the things we have carried from generation to generation is an intense need to minimize contact with western people, or even with westernized people. For at least a century we have had various treaties, so-called, with the various, and changing, rulers of Sranan, guaranteeing us a kind of sovereignty in our forests. Occasionally we have had to fight for that. Then, the last however many years, when the whole world went crazy, we have withdrawn as far inland as we could. Before, some of our people would go to the towns, but never for long, and they knew to be always alert. Yosef laughed deep in his chest, We have left our seed in the city, but I don't think

many civilized people have given us theirs. One obvious disadvantage of that is that our gene pool is becoming limited, Anansí thinks. She encourages mixing now.

After a short pause, he continued. We have warred and exchanged seed with the Amerindians who live around us, but, you see, we have been able to keep ourselves largely aloof from the whole western world. That, perhaps, is unique. Most other indigenous people have been overrun by westerners. It has amazed us that so many indigenous peoples all over the world, have evidently not been able to maintain their ancient cultures. Now, Anansí has said, it is time to come out of hiding. Yosef laughed out loud. That is why, he continued, I am hereby inviting you to join us when we go back to Sranan. I can assure you, you will be welcome. Not only welcome, but much appreciated, revered even. Both of you! We badly need a healer, someone who knows procedures. We need your skills, your knowledge. And Anansí probably wants your genes! We are the descendants of probably Ibo and other tribes from West Africa. In the last hundred years, we learned about the San. And for sentimental reasons perhaps we have come to revere them, as Ancients, as a people as proud as we. Ananasí says that we, ancient people, have not forgotten how to be human. Before Solomon had a chance to say anything, Yosef added, the Anansí herself told me to bring you to Sranan. We must protect you, and bring you, even before we return who you call Saba. She insists we need your brains.

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Katherine asked Solomon to help her find some medical supplies, she needed. Solomon, who had been silent and withdrawn most of the day, reluctantly joined her. At first neither of them talked much. They went back to the Apotheek, then went looking for another, Katherine leading the way. After a few hours Solomon lagged behind; Katherine suggested they get something to eat somewhere and then find a beach. Or perhaps there is a park in this place? Almost as if they had created it, around the next bend of the road, was a two-person park, as Katherine called it. A big tree, five or six benches arranged around the tree. Some open mesh rubbish bins, half hidden in the vegetation that had shot up since the people left, and the little park was no longer maintained. From Tilly she had learned to look for snakes and vermin, by looking up in the tree, and for good measure, she hit the tree a big whack with a branch lying around.

It's safe, she said. But we forgot to get food! You stay here, I'll get something; that house over there looks promising. The house turned out to be an apartment building of sorts, with a tiny store on the ground floor, with a sign, All Day All Night... What it was the shop promised all day and all night had faded too much to make out. Of course the place had been visited, probably many times, before. But Katherine had become expert in finding hidden treasure. Under the counter she found a package, neatly wrapped. There was no writing on it; perhaps someone had ordered something delicious and had forgotten, or not been able to pick it up. She opened it to find tins of sausages, a jar of tomato jam that looked home-made, two tins of sardines, a large slab of dark chocolate, and a box of tiny round crackers. The chocolate showed its age, the crackers looked and smelled all right, but they were almost certainly stale and tasteless. Nevertheless a fine lunch, Katherine thought. She would worry about vitamins and other essentials another time. They washed the meal down with mineral water, Katherine had found,

(which, of course, had lost its fizz, and now tasted like vaguely salt water). The tomato jam placed between them, was for dessert. Katherine said,

What do you think of Yosef, dear? He is so sure of himself. I must admit I am curious about his people. Although, at the same time, I have never experienced being the only white person in an all black world, particularly where people have a strong aversion to my kind of people. I would face that in Africa, perhaps even more. I don't know.

I feel something like that, said Solomon. With a difference. I cannot get over the feeling, conviction really, that I cannot adapt to this new planet. My whole life, it seems, has been a struggle to be accepted by the western world that destroyed itself. Even as a child, in Africa, I remember being around white people. Africans would not have raised me so well, but there were no Africans who wanted me. I adapted, and even excelled, in several fields, from the time I became aware—I think of it as, “when I awoke”—I knew that I could only survive if I developed my brain. My first memory goes back to when I was maybe three, or perhaps four years old. I was about to starve to death. It was as if suddenly I woke up and decided, NO, I am going to live. I found some food, probably rubbish, but it sustained me sufficiently until I managed to be noticed by some missionaries. From that time on, my whole life seems to have been dedicated to be smart, as smart and educated as I could get to be. I could not deny my skin color, or, my size. So I invented this fable that I might be San.

Katherine interrupted, Aren't you?

I have no idea! How can I know? I don't even know who my mother was, let alone a father! What I call my waking up begins with me as a starving child! I saw those missionaries, learned a few words of Italian. They passed me on to German, then American and other missionaries, and I always educated myself. A wry expression brushed his face, Even then I knew that my intelligence did not mean much. But it was what I had to work with. I learned to talk like them, dress like them, even think like them. I learned to survive! Money? Making money in the western world meant having some to begin with. When I figured that out, I got some—don't ask me how. Don't you see, I have no other skills than my head! Until Papua—now twenty years ago—when the whole western way of being became only too clear to me. That was my second awakening. That is why I stayed so long, a whole year... But the Papua people never were “my” people. They were wonderful, fascinating people. Oh... I've gone on and on, and cannot even remember where it started.

Katherine said very softly, ... These last days I have had fleeting thoughts that I should have stayed up in the woods... I am like you, in that all I know is how to be “western.” I not only talk like them, think like them, but I certainly look like them!

Solomon looked at her now. Yes, I forget that. Katherine, I don't know who “I” am any more, either. Am I that dying African orphan? Or am I the famous professor—no, that is ridiculous. Katherine, We are both lost. Deraciné, as the French say. Uprooted. We have no roots here, or in that jungle country. And probably not in Africa, or in those woods where I found you. There must be other people who feel as lost as we do. Survivors, I mean.

Yosef and Tilly—oh, and Saba—seem to be “at home” on this deserted island, and probably more so in their jungle, Katherine said tentatively.

Solomon turned all his attention to Katherine. Have you noticed, when they talk about that old woman, they don't seem to mind being bossed around by her. And yet, obviously, they are a very independent kind of people. She is a strange one, Anansi! It is we who don't fit, Katherine. You might fit up north, but I would not fit. That is probably the reason I have not tried to reach that old woman. She scares me, and I'm afraid to be rejected. Yosef told me a few times that she wants to meet me, talk to me. He seems to know that she can talk and listen inside.

Neither of them said anything.

Katherine finally gathered some thoughts. You know, when I heard a brief history of Yosef's people, a tribe of Africans in Yosef's country, I understood that surviving must be better—safer? less stressful?—in an indigenous culture, certainly if that culture has been able to keep itself apart from western influence. They still live in “survival mode.”

After a short pause, Solomon said, My people in Africa... I don't mean “my,” of course, I mean the people I knew, were a complete mess of different backgrounds, different tribes, different education, even different physical type and skin color. Some were Arabs, I think, a few others even lighter than I am. I don't remember any whites, but many who must have had a colonist or two among their ancestors. They were not a tribe, nothing bound them, except the need to survive. They could not even talk to each other, Solomon burst out with what sounded like frustration..

And that is why you want to go back to them, Katherine asked softly? Because you feel that you can help them?

Solomon shrugged his shoulders, Yes, perhaps. No. It came so naturally, we were all individuals, or small groups, and we found each other on that beach. Perhaps because I was less confused and tired, I started to design a kind of structure for that community. Organize. Now that

I think of what I did, I know that was wrong. Yes, a good thing that I left! Surviving, I know only too well, is a personal thing. And you don't “organize” a group of people. That too is a thoroughly western idea.

There has to be a wantint, said Katherine, sitting up straight. What happened in our group, in the woods, showed me that what we all yearned for was community, a family. We were all very different individuals. But yes, we spoke the same language, that is true.

Well, perhaps, Solomon said. Yes. My own struggles, when I look back, were always to find a family that I could belong to. And I am using the word “family” not as a biological, or even social concept. We in Africa, too, were seeking a family. We need to belong to something.

Katherine looked up, Solomon made no attempt to hide the tears that ran down his face.

He whispered, Our world is gone...

What are our options, Solomon? We could stay on this island, it feels friendly. Or, we could find another island. Or go to Yosef's country. Or back to the woods...

A desert island. And live our lives for another ten, twenty years, without seeing anyone else?

No thank you.

You are right. We too need a community. There is a sort of community here, although all of us feel we are transients, visiting here only until we can get off this rock. Maybe on the other side, but I still have not been there. Tomorrow, Solomon, let's walk to the other side, just the two of us. I still want to know how those women are doing with their pregnancies. And, as an afterthought, From what we've heard, they're not all black and huge.

Solomon: There's another alternative. I am bone weary, tired of this life. It's been long enough.

Katherine did not answer. She gathered the remnants of their meal, saved what could be saved, and put the rest in the rubbish bin. The bottle is good, I think we should keep it, don't you? When Solomon did not answer, Katherine went on, It's too bad that you cannot practice your physics without some very powerful and exotic machines, but surely you could study the anthropology of this odd group of people, under extreme circumstances.

And publish it where?

Is that why you study and do research, to publish?

Of course. Yes, that was the way the western world was set up. I know no other world. Katherine mused, I find it fascinating to observe how we relate to each other, most of us strangers until only a short time ago, and then being invaded by a very tightly cohesive group of people. Perhaps our uncertainties and confusions are coming up because we are thrown together with this tight group of very self-assured people. They make me feel small, insignificant.

Exactly what I feel!

That's one of the reasons I want to go to the other side. Are they a community? Have they grown a culture?

Grown, Solomon said, tilting his head?

Yes, because a culture is not made. I don't know exactly how people develop ways of living with each other, but it must be a slow process that just happens. We, in the north woods, developed some kind of beginning of a native culture.

But they fitted better that I did, Katherine said wistfully.

Solomon added, And when a culture was formed, an individual emerged, sometimes well-meaning, other times power-hungry, with an "idea," a man-made idea of how this group of people ought to be. The story of religions, and all the different systems of ruling we had. The history of western civilization is about those individuals.

You're right, Solomon—what did people call you? Solomon seems so ancient, so old. Didn't you ever have a nick name?

Solomon laughed, Yes, of course I did, but like many nick names, they were not very flattering. Like what? Give me an example.

When I was a student in England they called me Shrimp, in my first year. When I finally convinced them that I did not answer to that, they called me Curly. Because of my hair.

Curly. No, that does not tell me anything about you. In America Solomon would become Solly. Yes, that too. I do not particularly like that. Do you?

No, you are not really a Solly. How about Sol?

The sun?

They both laughed. Katherine held out her hand, Come let's walk a little.

Hey! Katherine, you gave me a new interest. You know, he continued, I feel my roots were chopped off. I spent many, perhaps most, of my fifty-some years in a world that I got to know, and with all its faults, it was the only reality I knew. The western world. A very complex world, immensely varied, but with some powerful base ideas. Now I feel cut off. Floating rudderless on an immense ocean without a compass!

Katherine shrugged her shoulders, Yes, I'm sure all survivors feel that. You are not alone. And both of us were in some upper percentile of our society. Middle class, educated, privileged. We were free to live where we wanted, go where we wanted. Food was something you bought in a store. Neither of us had food-gathering skills. I went through that whole transformation. You cannot imagine what it was to be living in the dark for a year, two years? Who knows how long. And all my thoughts were on staying warm and food. I never thought I would ever think so exclusively about feeding myself and a growing number of others.

Solomon (Sol?) said, That is one thing these savages don't seem to give much thought to at all. And actually, nobody yet knows in what shape the planet is today, what our climate is like, what plants and animals have survived, perhaps mutated, like those big rats that destroyed Rat's face. We seem to have lost dogs, and cats. Why? Are there new animals that can be domesticated? To tell the truth, we don't even know whether our own species will survive. Have any children been born yet? I know, both of us think about that.

She laughed a deep belly laugh, We are not alone, Sol! We have a whole colony of fellow travelers. Let's join them! I want to be with them, I have so much to learn. And they know so much more about finding food and the essentials of shelter. Or even, especially, about living. Wonder whether they wear any clothes in their country?

The Papua with whom I lived did not wear clothes. But they adorned themselves. They had elaborate attention-drawing devices for their genitalia, how is that for clothing?

They began to walk back to the big house, or their “own” house as they thought of it, or wherever they found people. Katherine remarked, We did too, you know. Women wore bustles, to pretend they had huge bottoms. And they tied their middles to have their breasts show more.

Solomon, And, at one time, men wore elaborate covers for their genitals over their pants. Saw that in a museum somewhere. In the Middle Ages, I think. A cod piece — what an odd name!

Until we became puritan. How did that happen? 168

That filtered down, didn’t it? Sometimes things move down in a society, but usually they float up. Dialect and new expressions tend to float up, from the lowest castes up. Puritanism moved down to “the masses.” it seems.

Katherine, No, I don’t think the masses, or the lowest classes were ever puritan. It was just that such a big chunk of society became middle class, always striving to be higher. The masses were not the majority any more. The poor still had many children, born in and out of wedlock. Oh, that damned language! What stupid, inhuman ideas we had, I always rebelled against the many prejudices our so-called civilization had.

And now we come full circle. That is why I want so much to see that those who survive don’t fall into the same trap.

Sol, “the sun of my life,” from what they say, the people of that land where Yosef lives in the wild, are strong in their own way, not tainted by television and all the rest.

They were able to escape the trap somehow. How?

Yes, I wonder how Yosef—and Tilly—can remain so untainted, and yet they had a European education. How do they do it?

Well, aren’t we saying the same thing? Let’s stick with those people! They both laughed. (Finally)

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Not long after they had set lookouts one of them had caught a goat, which was more or less secretly slaughtered, cooked and eaten. That may have been at least one of the reasons why the party that had washed ashore had moved to the Big House, larger, but not that much larger than the house “the Africans” had chosen. Usually the Africans included the two American women, but not Max, who was assumed to have decided to live on the other side. When, however, a goat appeared on the menu every other day or so, word got out of course. Saba got nervous. Those goats belong to someone. Who? Of course he didn’t know. But, surely, someone must “own” those goats? Unless they are wild.

Yosef was asked to dispense justice. The Africans were included in the deliberations: by now they had shared the every second or third day goat. Yosef sat in a straight chair with arms, the community sat or lounged where they could.



Tilly translated.

Yosef says little, he lets the community talk. When there is a silence, he may pose a simple question, to get the conversation going again. How do people know that a certain goat “belongs” to someone? Are the goats marked in any way? Or, Are goats known to wander everywhere, or are they tied up, any sign of where a piece of rope could have been? Are goats territorial? In the end, the consensus was that a few goats could not make much of a difference, because Saba said that in the old days the island had lots of goats wandering everywhere. Yosef formalized the consensus, and added that he and a few others would go to the other side, where the people lived who reportedly owned, or at least raised goats.

Katherine saw her chance; asked to be included in the cross island expedition.

They left the next day, with some excellent barbecued goat meat, and an abundance of fruit. And, of course, water — although the island perhaps had springs and small streams (very small) some were hesitant to drink water that was not clean looking.

Even before they reached the village, “Saba’s family,” they had seen goats and goat herders: a young boy with a long stick, and an older boy with a bigger stick. As they came closer, it was obvious that the goats only seemed to be running loose, in fact they were tied with a long chain to pins stuck in the ground. That strongly suggested that the goats they had eaten were indeed wild.

Max was deliriously happy to see them, sticking to Guinée. He confessed that the two girls who had hung on his arms on his visit to their side of the island, were getting much too possessive for his taste. As he expressed himself, “a little goes a long way, double little is more little.” He wanted to return with them.

Guinée laughed, Of course, you can live where you want. Max only said, And Africa; are we going back there?

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The people on the other side of the island were shy, They were not used to six strangers descending on them. Did they expect to be entertained? Fed? They had made little gardens, spread rather haphazardly around the hillside. Because of the soil, they explained. Most of it is rock, there are a limited number of places with enough soil to grow vegetables like corn. That seemed their only starch.

The visitors drifted apart. Katherine sought out the pregnant women, who were hiding. She talked to the youngest, with the help of Saba, who translated. This woman, she say, no vomit, no pain. Katherine could see that she looked radiantly healthy.

The older woman (Saba thought she was about thirty, or twenty-five?) did not want to come out of her little hut. Saba declared. She shy.

Katherine asked Saba to ask some questions through the closed door, but he refused.

Not polite, no can do..

Katherine persisted, Can you at least find out what they plan to do when it is time for the baby to be born?

He looked at her strangely, Do? What woman do, they do. They know. How can I ask? Katherine made a mental note that, although Saba spoke his most British English with her, now he alternated between the local speech and English.

Meanwhile Yosef had gotten together with some of the men. No, no one here had lost any goats. They did not have too many, they kept them for meat. And, Oh yes, there are lots of goats on this island. The goats they had now, had been wild when they caught them. Better catch them young, they added. They grow fast! Their main concern was that they needed more chain. The goats ate rope, then they had found some long chains. Might there be some more of those long metal chains on the other side, where the visitors lived?

Evidently, they had no desire to travel beyond the dry, rocky coast where they were relatively comfortable. They were not Saba's family, of course. Perhaps someone might be related to him. They had smiled, Saba had many children on this island! Who knows where they are, or even who they are? . This had been a fishing village "before."

Solomon had found someone who spoke excellent English, who in turn introduced him to two men who said they had boats. They went to see them. A sailboat, small, the kind a young boy might have owned. The other was one of the old fishing boats, a wide sloop, with a mast rigged precariously, but the sail had "melted" the owner said.

Melted?

Yes, maybe a little coal had fallen on a corner and it had burned quickly and fiercely, melting to ashes that blew away.

Ah, a nylon sail! Or, some other artificial fiber.

The two boats were hidden under some dense trees and bushes that grew on one side of the little cove, below the village.

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They did not stay long. Saba suggested they return another way. There were paved roads, although we may have to climb around stalled wrecks of cars and buses, he said. Sight see, he laughed!

Solomon walked with Yosef. Max loped far ahead. Tilly, Katherine, Guinée and Alive followed Yosef and Solomon.

Solomon was thinking out loud. Yosef decided to let him ramble. His lecture said in three or four different ways, that there might be decisions the village, and perhaps all of them, had to make about how they wanted to control their communities. Solomon noticed, of course, that

Yosef was not responding. Maybe busy with his own thoughts, he thought. No, perhaps he's not interested? But he is a leader, he should...

Don't you think, he said?

Yosef had to say something. By nature he was a silent and even secretive man. He said with dignity, but very clearly, My friend, we never had ambitions to convince others of our virtues. Our neighbors, several tribes of Indians, as you call them, have their own way of surviving in their environment. Isn't that what is important? Before western thinkers and agitators came up with all kinds of ideas about how all societies "ought to" be, people all over the world lived in their own ways. They survived, or perhaps not. Some peoples survived for millennia. We live within the laws of nature. That's enough for us.

Solomon, took his time to reflect on that. You're right, he said. People all over the world lived their own way, but... for instance, slavery. Many peoples knew slavery, either internal or external. Don't you think...?

But before he could finish his sentence, Yosef interrupted, No, there is not much to "think" about slavery! Societies that mistreated slaves never survived. And, as we discovered recently, a powerful society that grossly abused, plundered, destroyed, changed their environment, cannot survive either.

Solomon quietly said, You have a long perspective. That is one thing, I will admit, that westerners had lost. They had a very short view. May I ask you a question. Katherine and I have been wondering about. From what you and Tilly, and others have told us, we get the impression that your tribe, your people, have escaped being sucked in by the temptations of the west. How did you do that?

Yosef laughed. Excellent question, I've been waiting for someone to ask me. We too have thought about that, of course. We have a small population, compared to almost every other human group, ethnic, religious, or national. So, we know each other, or, at least we know of each other. We do not restrict anyone's movements. If someone, or a few people, wanted to go to town, they're free to do so. When they come back they may have acquired some "things" that were new and wonderful, but things cost money. Our society is not based on money. Of course, some of us have used money. We, as a group, had an income from leases and other arrangements with various governments, and private corporations. The Council of Granman dealt with that. What I think are the two most important aspects of our successful isolation was that we knew what that other world, the so-called civilized world, was like. And we are very aware of our roots: runaway slaves, Even though that was three hundred plus years ago, we remember. Our stories keep that alive. Never slaves again! Slavery in whatever form it is presented we reject. That includes working "for" a person or a government, or a business. We too have had some of the new sicknesses. We too, of course, have been affected, but not as much as the people in the towns. You don't miss electricity if you've never had it. Or telephones, or newspapers, television.

But you and Tilly lived in Europe! Surely you must have experienced the difference between living in a modern world...

Yosef interrupted, “modern?”

Don’t you miss the intellectual stimulation, the art, the concerts, the stage, books, and all that? Solomon seemed to have run out of steam. Not much of that left, he added with a grin.

No, we used the conveniences, perhaps enjoyed a book, but both of us always knew that we would return to the forest. I hope we can convince you, Solomon, to at least visit us on your way to Africa. To us, Africa is almost a holy word.

Yes, but one more question. You had to adjust, didn’t you?

When Tilly and I were in Europe—not at the same time—we made efforts to be part of that world. We read, of course, we went to conferences, we met many interesting and intelligent people. But it was always evident to us that their way of living was only possible on the backs of slaves, workers—and consumers, who are enslaved in a different manner. You know how we think about any form of slavery! I cannot say I miss anything at home. We tell stories that are every bit as fascinating as books, because they are real, we know the people the story is about. We have our friendships, our duties, in short, our community! That is something westerners lost.

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On the way back, they met one of the lookouts who came running up. A ship! We saw a ship, from the south. Maybe even two. Too far to tell what kind of ship it was, but the one I saw clearly had smoke coming out!

Yosef asked whether the man had warned the others who were still on that side of the island. Oh yes, most of them went to that part of the island, and in the hills, to get a closer look.

From where you saw them, were they coming here, to this island? Could you tell?

We’re not sure. It was too far away. Probably too soon to tell. If they come on the other side of the island they might sight the village. On this side it looks pretty uninhabited from the sea, I would think.

The others had caught up, and had heard most of the discussion (Tilly translating, which she did without thinking).

In a moment of silence, Solomon said, How do your people deal with strangers, perhaps violent strangers!

Both Yosef and Tilly turned to look at Solomon. Oh, first we’ll hide. We’re very good at that. Then, if we must, we’ll fight, Yosef said with a broad smile!

When they reached the houses everyone worked to make it appear as if no people had lived in it for some time. Katherine had already found some good hiding places further up the hill. Alive and Guinée found a car that had a drop of gasoline (petrol, benzine) in it. With much hilarity

Guinée started it up, and drove it down the road that led to the houses, jumped out just before it crashed into a tree, strewing wreckage all over the road. Alive looked at Guinée admiringly,

Yes, that looks very convincing! Hope it cools down before the invaders come!

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A few hours later it appeared that the boat (there was only one) was indeed smoking, but it looked more like a fire than the smoke of an engine. It did not move much at all, and did not seem to come any closer. Lookouts at several different points stationed on the top of the island kept a sharp watch, but at the end of the day, they drifted back to the houses where food was being prepared, leaving only two lookouts. Later that evening they would be relieved by two fresh watchers. The moon was almost full in a clear sky, so the view of the ocean was good.

At the evening meal Yosef took Solomon aside, Tomorrow, if there is no boat coming, we should make an expedition to the airport and check out what your plane looks like.

Solomon said, surprised, Why? The plane is wrecked, we left it because there was no way we could get it on the runway, to even look at the damage.

Yes, you told me. But now we have more manpower, we may be able to right the plane, and take a closer look.

You have plans for the plane, Solomon asked? His eyes lit up when they talked about the plane.

Perhaps, Yosef was cautious. One of my men found a considerable tank with what looks like airplane fuel. Untouched. If we could get the plane in the air to fly even to Trinidad, which is not far, we are that much closer to Sranan. Perhaps we could get someone from my country to come pick us all up from Trinidad. We were there on our way here, the island is a disaster, but the small airport—not the international airport—was untouched when we were there.

And from your mysterious country, Sranan, Solomon said, it is not far to Africa, right?

Yosef, pensively, My geography is rusty. Where in Africa? I know that we are not far from that point of South America that sticks out in the Atlantic, and that point is not far from the indent in Africa. I remember looking at maps and thinking those two continents obviously fitted into each other at one time, maybe long ago. So, I would say, perhaps not too far.

Solomon had come alive in the last few minutes. My village is right in that big indent in Africa, straight across from the bulge of South America.

Yosef turned to him, and said, And have you talked with the Anansi?

Solomon's face shut up, No, he said curtly.

Katherine, who had come closer, added, Not because she hasn't tried to get through your wall!

You are stubborn, Sol!

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The plane, of course, was as they had last seen it. Tipped over, one wheel off the concrete runway. The door stood open, also as they had left it. Yosef walked around it a few times. Looked at the runway. Can we get a beam under that wheel and lift it? Guinée and Max looked closer, tested the soil, which was solid rock under a thin layer of sand.

Maybe a steel beam, Guinée said. Where are we going to find a steel beam?

Any idea how much the plane weighs, asked Yosef?

All of a sudden, Max looked up, I think there is a book inside with all those specs. Can someone help me up, I'll look.

Guinée and Yosef easily lifted Max up. When he came back out he smiled his broadest smile, showing them a thick book of finely printed text, with hundreds of pictures, schematics, tables. The whole works, Max said. It even has a diagram of the fuselage, and what's under the skin.

He carefully closed the door, after checking that there was an outside sunken handle to open the door again.

Guinée and Katherine walked back to the big house to get some more muscle to the airport. Katherine stayed, to help cook for the large work crew.

Max and Solomon poured over the book. The total weight of the plane was less than they had imagined. Well, yes, of course, after all, it had to fly! Guinée was impressed with the strong skeleton underneath the outer skin. Maybe it is not as bad, as we thought, he said?

When most of the Sranan men arrived, a team of searchers was sent out to look for something that could be used as a lever, a big wooden beam? or, preferably, some kind of steel beam. Maybe look on construction sites?

Or, Guinée called after them, a big car jack, or a jack for heavy trucks.

Katherine, Tilly, Alive and the two friends who had so miraculously recovered from their mysterious illness, prepared a feast with a newly slaughtered goat, two baskets of greens that the friends insisted were vegetables, a heap of mangoes, and a bunch of very ripe bananas.

Dinner was served late, when the work party came back. They had found two car jacks, another kind of jack that must have been used for raising a house perhaps. And there were other pieces they might try first thing tomorrow.

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Everyone, except the lookouts, went to the airport early morning. Two men had found a beam that Guinée thought would be very useful, and some other stout iron poles, solid steel. At the airport, Guinée and one of the Sranan men created a sort of ramp, and with the use of the two car jacks and lots of people power, the wheel of the plane smoothly lifted and was carefully planted on the runway.

Everybody cheered! Hard work, but worth it. Only Solomon was quiet.

Yosef turned to him, Solomon, you all right? Solomon did not respond.

Yosef moved closer, touched his shoulder, looked in his face, Ah, he said, Finally, he is talking with Anansí!

How can you tell, Alive asked?

Because I know the old woman, she does not give up. She has tried to talk to him and he has not wanted to hear her. She must have broken through when his mind was occupied with working on the plane!

Solomon winced, then smiled.

Katherine was concerned. Is he all right?

Oh yes, he will be fine, just leave him “meditate,” let’s say, for now.

Max, Guinée, and one of the Sranan men, who said he was a mechanic, went all over the plane, looking for visible tears in the skin, any evidence of a break or even a dent. After looking all around, checking whether the wheels were aligned properly, the three helped each other up to open and then enter the door.

Everything was untouched.

Max checked the instruments.

Even the batteries still work, he yelled out of the cockpit window he had slid back. He pushed the button that let down the steps. That worked. Max was tempted to try the engines, but thought it wiser to first push the plane and see how she would roll on the runway. Pushed with people power! It took great effort to overcome the first resistance, then the plane rolled smoothly, Max could steer with the nose wheel. Soon they had it rolling. There were other tests he could do, but they needed fuel to turn on the engines.

Yosef and his men had found the depot with a large tank of what looked and smelled like airplane fuel. But how to move it to the plane? Saba, who had been mostly an observer, said he knew where there was a hose cart. It was strong, four wheels. But it was in the mountains, they would have to bring it down to the depot and then up to the airport.

Suddenly Yosef said, Saba, think back a few years, when planes came and went at this airport. There must have been some fuel around here, somewhere. Where could it have been? Usually they make those underground. Or, maybe you can remember when they built this runway? They must have done some digging. Where did they dig?

Oh yes, Saba remembered. The digging provided great excitement on the island. Before, tourists had always come with the ferry, now they would be coming by plane. A better sort of tourists, the newspaper had shouted! Oh yes, he remembered the earth moving machines. They had to blast rock out of the side of the mountain! Ah yes, that was a big project. For a while he

had lived in the little house above the airport. Or, not “lived in” exactly, but he had been the butler to the boss man and his wife of one of the companies that were hired to build the airport. Suddenly he yelled, I remember! There is airplane fuel in a tank above the airport, up there, he waved up the side of the mountain. And there was a pipe line or something going down. Because, I remember that the boss wife said she wanted to see it, and the boss told her too dangerous for woman. They had a big fight. Of course she win, and the next day they climb up there. They come back she was still bossing the boss, You think that is steep? That is a morning walk, man!

Nothing to it. Only one question, How are these people going to get the fuel to that tank?

The boss he smile, like he know big secret, they are cutting a road up there, from other side, where da harbor is!

So the fuel would run by gravity. Clever idea, when you build in the side of a mountain.

And safe, too, Saba said. Boss, he proud of the safe of that tank. Enough far from planes, but easy to bring the fuel down.

So, where does it come out down here, Yosef asked?

Saba was deep in thought, eyes closed in concentration. Suddenly, his eyes wide open, he walked determinedly to the side of the airport building.

In there, he said. He pointed to a door. Locked. But it did not take much man power to open the door. Inside was a four-wheel hose cart, the hose rolled up flat, but attached to a heavy copper wheel, set into the cemented rock face.

They carefully rolled the cart closer to the plane, which had been rolled almost in front of the building. Someone carefully opened the big valve, and what certainly smelled like airplane fuel was flowing into the plane’s reserve tank underneath the cabin. The main fuel tanks were in the wings. Max said he wanted to be sure this stuff was good, before he filled the main tanks.

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Solomon snapped out of his inner space, looking at Katherine who had sat down next to him, on a bench inside the station building.

You talked with her, Katherine said softly?

Mostly she talked to me. She is a determined woman. Powerful. He did not say more. Katherine wanted to know what they had communicated to each other, what did Solomon think? But she knew she had to leave him to work it out himself first. Every day she realized again that she had chosen a “difficult” mate. A good thing they were mature, and had learned some skills dealing with human foibles. She chuckled inside, who would have thought? Not she, certainly. What a man, what a man! She looked sideways at Solomon who still looked preoccupied.

After a long time, Solomon said, I’m hungry. No, thirsty. Do you think there is anything to drink here?



Alive and some of the others had gone back to bring food and drink. They had brought baskets filled with bottles of various fluids.

They all ate as if they had not had a meal for a week. Everyone needed a rest.

Come, Katherine, let's take a little walk, Solomon offered his arm. I need to move. They, pointing at all the men around the plane, can do what they need to do without me! You want to know what that woman said to me, he asked?

If you want to talk about it. You'll tell me when you're ready.

I'm ready now. She talked me into at least visiting her before going on to Africa. She shared with me some things about the people she has chosen to "guide" — is that a word? She said the people we have met here have a healthy society. She understands my desire to help survivors of the Chaos. She convinced me that I am too impatient. No, I'm putting words to what were not really words. In any case, it seems a good idea to see her first.

Katherine smiled, You know, I was beginning to make an adjustment to staying here; on this island. Not a bad place to be. Did she say anything about how we are supposed to get to Sranan? The plane, of course. She thinks that we can find enough fuel to fly to Trinidad, or even some places in Venezuela. Her people know. Once we are on the mainland, they can walk. They'll come and get us, he told Katherine.

But, we are too many for the plane now. How many can go in the plane-- six, seven, not counting Max?

Solomon said airily, We can make several trips, ferry people to the mainland of South America, wherever we can land, and fuel up again. Depends how much fuel there is here. Trinidad is very close. I understand Sranan is not far from Trinidad, maybe an hour from here. Not far at all by plane.

I am tired of adventure, Solomon! No, I feel out of place as the only white woman, the only white person, in this world. I'm ashamed of myself saying that, but I don't know how else... These people certainly look healthy, and I like them a lot. But I feel so white among all of you! Wistfully she added, I should have stayed up north.

Once we find fuel—and if the plane can be made to fly—we can fly you back there, if you want. You want that? He sounded doubtful. Katherine did not make demands, but he felt she trusted him, seemed to like him. He knew well enough that she had joined him in part because she liked him, but also because she wanted to leave the group in the woods. He had not imagined that he would have a new lover, but they were comfortable together, and the sex was surprisingly wonderful! His mind worked best with abstract concepts, not people's feelings, uncertainties, hopes and fears. Good to know his body still worked well!

Solomon turned his most serious face to her, Katherine, let's explore this strange new world together. We seem harmonious, despite our comical appearance as a couple: a little dark man and a large white woman...

Katherine smiled, but did not answer.

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It took the group several more days to fill the fuel tanks of the plane, test the plane on the ground, with engines on, without engines. The wheel seemed all right, the fuselage felt fine. The wings did not creak. They could not find visible faults.

All we need, Max said, is to test fly. Everybody off the runway! I am going to taxi to the other end, take off, circle around, test the plane, and come back down.

Nobody said a word. Yosef slowly nodded. Yes, that was the obvious thing to do. Max was ecstatic!

As the plane taxied for take-off, Katherine, who found herself standing next to Tilly, said, I feel I want to cross my fingers, or say a prayer, or...

Tilly bent down, and said, At times like this, we touch the earth, briefly touching her fingers to the sand around their feet.

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The plane performed perfectly. Max felt sure now that they could begin to ferry people to Trinidad, or to Venezuela, or even to Sranan. And then, Africa. For a moment he was aware that the word, Africa, was not a decision, but simply a thought he had had before. But now he was flying, he felt free as he had felt as a boy, running all day through the Veld. Not thinking, just being in his body. Things would sort themselves out!

That evening over yet another feast created around a roasted goat, they talked about who should go in the first flight, who could wait. They agreed that someone should go to the other side, to talk to Saba's family. At least give them a choice. If nobody from the village wanted to leave that was their choice, of course.

Max had not found any useful aerial maps of this part of the world, but they had plenty of tourist maps, and from what Max had seen on his test flight, the islands formed a path straight to the mainland, and from there, the Sranan people said, you just follow the coast for less than an hour, and they would be home. Several of them had knowledge of the almost hidden runways in the interior. Or, they all agreed, once on the continent, they could walk. The two women from the north woods were swept up in the excitement. But, as they left the big house to go to their own houses, Alive walked a little way with Katherine, Looking forward?

Katherine thought, then carefully said, Yes, probably. I feel a bit out of place, but... Alive leaned close, kissed her on the cheek, and whispered, It will be a great adventure! As if I haven't had enough adventures, Katherine said.

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Next day, more preparations were made. Last check of the plane, fuel topped. There was not much to “pack”—nobody had even personal baggage. Yosef and Saba and a few others had gone to the other side of the island, to talk to the villagers. Late afternoon, people began to get restless, little groups went back to the Big House, as it was now called, Max would not leave the plane. He insisted he would be fine, if someone could bring him something to snack on. And water, of course.

Guinée and Alive promised to bring him back a meal, and, if he did not mind, they too would stay with the plane as well.

Solomon suddenly turned to Katherine: You remember what we talked about? Have you thought about going back to the woods?

Yes, dear. I’ve thought about it. I do not want to leave you, and, anyway, they’re no longer there.

You talked with someone?

Yes, I talked with Brown! Very briefly, and it was very vague. But from what I understood, they all left to go north. I had the impression they were going to join others at “a lake” although I’m not sure what lake, or where..

So, we go to this Sranan first, and meet with the old woman, and... And then, Katherine finished the sentence, we shall see.

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They would all leave the island. Even Saba would leave, to return to his mysterious mother’s mother. The talk, that evening, was who would go first, and who would wait for the second trip. A few people claimed priorities, most of them did not care one way or another. They joked about the rigors of their trip down, and now to get a plane ride back was like a miracle. Yosef took no part in the discussions, except very occasionally when he mumbled something when asked a direct question. And so it sorted itself out, without much disagreement. Tillie would go on the first flight, with Solomon, Katherine, Saba and three of the Sranan people, including the mechanic. Yosef would go on the second flight with the rest.

Tillie whispered in Katherine’s ear, He is sweet for the singer!

Saba pleaded for the village on the other side. He traded places with one of the women from Sranan (not the singer!), so that he could go to the other side again, and try to convince them to leave. When the delegation had gone earlier, the villagers had been shy, but determined: No, they wanted to stay. They had a good life, a little community.

If needed, Max could make three trips. Yosef said he would go to the other side with Saba. Maybe some others could join as well, while waiting for Max to return the next day.

The unmistakable sound of Mirelly, the singer, came from another room in the house, Can I come? I'm not used to walking very much, but I better get my breath working again. That ocean voyage was not what the posters used to promise!

Everyone smiled, or giggled, Yosef called back, Have no fear, we'll carry you!

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Realistically, the plane could easily fly from here to Sranan and back on less than half of what the plane could carry in fuel. And there was more fuel in the tank above the airport. They might even find fuel in one of the air strips in Sranan, or Venezuela. Suddenly, there were so many possibilities! When everything was arranged, and Tillie had translated the important points of the discussion, Solomon asked, But shouldn't Yosef go on the first flight?

Yosef began to answer in Sranan tongo, then switched to English: My friend, we felt Tillie would be a better escort for you, she is a much better interpreter than I am. And she knows Anansi as well as I do. As any of us do!

Should we bring food, Katherine asked? Then she made a gesture of disgust, trust me to feel responsible for feeding these people who can take much better care of themselves than I could. To give it a more acceptable twist, Katherine confessed that she had found a small tin of coffee. She could make coffee in the morning for who wanted it.

Tillie was the only one who took her up on that offer. My people, she said, are not used to coffee, although perhaps it grows where we live. Some of us like cocoa.

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The morning was clear and bright, with a slight breeze. The weather looked perfect. The whole group went to the airport, where Max, Guinée and Alive were busy getting the plane ready. Nobody had much in the way of baggage, farewells were said, tears were shed. The door of the plane was closed, Max revved the engines, ready for taxiing to the end of the runway.

He leaned out of the cockpit and yelled: Until tomorrow, or the day after. I'll be back! And under his breath, Strange, to fly without good maps!

## Anansi

The first flight was uneventful. It seemed only minutes until they flew over Trinidad. The city looked deserted, the airport badly damaged. They flew a little east of south, the mainland was in sight. There they followed the coast, going east. All the towns, big and small, they could see, seemed badly damaged, many burned, all looked deserted. Max flew high; they had a clear sight of the coast. Tillie joined Max in the cockpit, We must be close to the border of Sranan; look for a river.

We have passed many rivers already, he said. And there's another! A little town, and off shore what looks like abandoned oil drilling platforms.

That must be Nickerie, Tillie exclaimed, follow the river upstream, we're almost home!

A little later they could see a lake some distance east of the river.

Tillie looked very intently for other landmarks. Can we fly slower, she asked?

Max laughed, Not much slower, but I can go lower, maybe that helps. What are we looking for?

Either of two landing strips, on the edge of the forest. We're still flying over fairly open land, there are two airstrips near where we live. The one farthest south would be best.

Not much later they spotted the first, and then the second. Max spiraled down to the airstrip.

Shortly they were on the ground.

Outside, the silence roared. Everybody looked at Tillie. Now, where do we go? They looked at the dense forest that bordered the airstrip. On the other side open prairie, with tufts of trees and scrub here and there.

Does anyone live here?

Yes, we do, Tillie said, with a smile. Now we walk. There is a path, and I am certain that they have heard us, if they were not warned by Anansi to look out for our arrival.

Indeed, almost immediately they were met by a small group of laughing people, followed by more people. What little the group carried was carried by the welcoming committee: deep dark faces, flashing white teeth. Obviously clothing was optional, and minimal. They stopped at a settlement, a few huts on the shores of a fast running river. A large "talking drum" was broadcasting the safe arrival of the first group. Tillie introduced Solomon and Katherine, then Max — the Sranan people had already left; "down river" a woman said. In the midst of a babble of welcoming voices, suddenly silence. All could hear another talking drum answering. They looked at Solomon, and an awed whisper hissed through the crowd: San, San, San... Then Tillie turned to the travelers, Katherine, a healer; Max, a Maasai. The crowd was quiet now, moving

back a little so that the newcomers stood almost isolated in the middle of a circle of admiring people. Max broke the spell by starting a wild dance. Soon everyone joined in.

Then there was a loud discussion about where the travelers would be housed, who would cook what for the party tonight. Eventually it sorted itself out. The village was too small to house so many people. Canoes were readied to take people to the next village down river, and perhaps to where Anansi was at the moment. The feast would be held in a village downstream, but Max said he wanted to stay near the plane, he wanted to fly back to Saba the next day, to bring the rest of the group. Now that he knew where to go, it would only take an hour or less, from here to Saba—return the same day. There was more than enough fuel left in the tanks, and he could take on more on the island.

The next village was not far from this one, so in the end there were two parties, that merged at times, people going back and forth with their canoes. It must have been after midnight when Max begged off, he had to fly in the morning, and did not want to fall asleep at the helm!

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At the very last moment Saba had decided he must stay on his island. Everyone was in the plane, on its second trip, Saba stood at the bottom of the steps, looking in space. Max, who was standing in the door, said quietly, Saba?

I've forgotten something, Saba said.

Important? We can wait a little longer... What is it you have forgotten?

I'm staying here. He looked up, I'm not going back with you. Have been here too long, this is my land now, and...

A woman, Max guessed.

Yes, sort of, and...

Yosef came to stand behind Max, Something is holding us up?

Max looked at him, Saba decided he wants to stay.

Max and Yosef both had to bend way over to fit their heads in the low door opening of the plane.

Yosef looked at Saba, who smiled a secret smile. So, Saba, you want to stay here?

Yes, Yosef, this is my home. My...

Woman, Max finished the sentence for him.

Well, and Saba burst out laughing, two women. You see, I married to them, I b'long here. Yes, I certain.

Yosef asked quietly, And Anansi, your mother's mother?

My motha motha say, Good make many baby here, he answered with a laugh.

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The second flight to Sranan was faster than the first. They landed at the airstrip, after having stopped at an abandoned airfield in what they thought must have been Guyana, where they filled up the reserve tank.

There had been no way to let anyone know their “time of arrival” of course, but people who lived near had heard the plane and others knew it was coming. As soon as the plane had come to a full stop, a swarm of people surrounded the plane. The door opened, the steps lowered, Yosef stood in the door opening. A loud cry came from the people. Yosef turned his head to someone behind him, saying, They are happy to see us!.

He stepped aside, and Mirelly stood at the top of the steps. There was a murmur in the crowd. She burst out in song. Her warm contralto rolled over the people, who stood listening in silent awe. Mirelly had composed a new song, a ballad. Four verses, and a refrain. After the first verse, people joined in the refrain in glistening harmonies.

Katherine and Solomon had joined the reception, standing at the back of the crowd. Katherine whispered to Solomon, with tears in her eyes, This scene will be engraved in my memory. What a voice!

Solomon said very quietly, What a people!

Mirelly slowly descended the steps as she sang. Now she was hoisted on large shoulders, two men carried Yosef, and, singing, the crowd engulfed the other passengers and all of them slowly walked to the forest path that led to the small settlement, where canoes were waiting to take as many as could fit in the available boats downstream to where Anansi was waiting.

Before they left the airstrip, Yosef discussed with Max how they could best safeguard the plane. Is there a way we can tie it to something sturdy, Max asked? Yes, there were rings in the concrete, obviously meant to tie down small planes. They rolled the plane to one of these rings and tied the plane to a small hook inside the front wheel well that seemed made for such a tie-down.

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That evening there was a feast in a village further down the river, for all the granmans who could attend. And their families and helpers, and curious others. After a sumptuous meal, dancing. Toward morning, when the dancers were danced out, a silent group came out of the jungle: Anansi, on someone’s strong shoulder, Solomon following, Katherine struggling unsuccessfully to get out of the human carrying chair in which two men kept her firmly in place.

I can walk on my own two feet!

Yosef answered, Of course you can, we all know that. It is a sign of respect with us, to carry honored guests on our hands or shoulders, wherever they fit best. Now that you are here, we can

all get down on our own feet, and sit down on these trees that seem to have fallen here for our comfort.

Anansí spoke first. Speaking in Sranan tongo, it sounded like a prayer, or an invocation. A warm singsong, that went on for quite a while. After that the talk was mostly in English, and obviously most of the people who wanted to speak could add their voices.

A few people asked questions of Katherine, who by now was known to all as “the healing woman.” Anansí now and then nodded, to express her approval of the very sensible way Katherine answered questions and briefly alluded to some basic hygiene and treatment generalities.

She leaned over, touching Katherine’s hands, lying in her lap,

You do that very well, dear, she said in accented but excellent English. You belong here! We need you, not only here, but wherever we can reach. Then she looked at Solomon. And you, she said with emphasis, have a brain that I want to get to know better, much better. We can’t let you go to Africa yet. I can sense your impatience, you want to go on, get back to what may well be an illusionary situation. But not yet. Stay with us, at least for a while. A few moons. Get to know us, and give us a chance to get to know you and listen to what you know.

But I am no teacher, Solomon said indignantly.

Of course you are, Anansí insisted. You are now. Someone who knows a subject well can explain it to a child. It is half-wits who can stand in front of a classroom and “teach.” It seems you know how this world fits into the universe far, far around us. We, who live in this dark jungle with tall trees, rarely see the stars. We want to know.

She stopped abruptly. Looked over her shoulder. Yosef? Do you hear?

People. People coming.

Strangers, she said. Quietly, she stood up. Everyone stood. We disperse, she whispered to the visitors.

As if this was a well-rehearsed play, there was a blur of people moving this way and that. The fire was partially covered with ashes, to make it appear almost gone out. People melted in the surrounding forest. Some men escorted Katherine and Solomon into the dark. Yosef and Anansí disappeared. Only three men and a woman remained, quietly sitting around the embers. Moments later the crashing sounds came closer, a ragtag group of men came dashing into the clearing, hesitated. One man asked a question of the few people seeming sleepily sitting around a dying fire. He spoke a language they did not understand. The man said a few words in badly accented English but was pulled by another, urged on, and the group ran on toward the river.

At that moment the sun suddenly lit the tops of the tallest trees. Dawn. The jungle came alive with the songs and cries of animals waking to another day; night predators slinking to their holes.

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Max had remained at the landing strip. After all the commotion of the second plane load of people had died down—they had all gone downstream in a flotilla of canoes—Max heaved a big sigh, and looked around at who was left.

A woman holding a small goat in one arm and a melon in the other, looked at Max, smiling. You came on the plane with us!

Yes, and goat I bring for my mother. She old, cannot come here.

Max looked vaguely around him. You live far from here?

No, she said. My name Maria.

Max laughed, Yes, I heard the men talking about the marias, I thought they meant all women, not a specific woman.

Yes, that true. But my name Maria. Have other names, but cannot say them.

Well then, Maria, do you live far from here? I want to stay here, to watch the plane, but I can help you with that goat, if you don't live too far.

Who cook for you, she asked, as she looked him straight in the face.

I... I haven't thought of that. I just think someone should guard this plane.

As they were walking this path, then another, Max wondered how he would find his way back.

Maria, it turned out, lived not far from where they had left the plane.

Maria's mother came out of the low hut, grinning and exploding with laughter when she saw Max.

Maria translated, She laugh you so tall! She like tall man. She ask bend over, she can see your face.

Max bent over, the woman took his face in both hands and brought it closer.

My mother, she see blind.

Max gently touched the mother's face and hands.

She stepped back, said some mumbled words, He good, Maria translated.

They insisted Max stay. At least until tomorrow, when one of Maria's brothers would come back from somewhere. Then they would think about what to do with the plane.

Max asked Maria, How can I let Solomon, and the others know where I am?

They know, she said firmly. They know.

Like his earliest home, Max thought. In the East-African deserts people also always “knew” where relatives and friends were. He did too, he realized. He thought maybe tonight, he would try to find Solomon, or Guinée. That kind of finding worked best for him in the night..

The little goat had munched most of the leaves that had been packed with her, and half the melons. She had also fouled the elaborate wrapping, of course. Nevertheless she seemed content when tied up to a tree nearby, happily munching on jungle plants.

Maria’s mother decided to keep the goat; maybe she would give milk. They could always eat it later.

Maria cooked a simple meal, with fish from the river, a baked root that Max had never tasted before. They ate from squares of banana leaves, held cupped in their hand. Loose, raw greens, were served on a larger square on the ground between them. Maria and her mother sat on the ground, Max was forced to sit on an uncomfortably wobbling carved stool.

To make you honor, Maria explained.

But, I would prefer to sit on the ground, now I am too high to bend to get the food.

I feed you, she said resolutely. She did, literally.

Sensing his discomfort, the mother laughed, and said something. Maria smiled, My mother say tomorrow you can sit with us, tomorrow you family. Now you are honor guest.

With all three in the low hut, Max became a husband it seemed.

No more ritual the next morning. The family trooped to the river, where they washed, bathed, washed their clothes, spreading them on bushes to dry.

While they were finishing up, they heard a noise. Maria shouted, My brother, he come!

An outboard motor?

Yes, that him. His motor, she said proudly.

Introductions were made. The man was not as tall as Max — few people were — but certainly outweighed him; he was built like most of the Sranan men Max had seen on Saba, broad shouldered, muscular, very black. Max helped take the outboard motor off the primitive looking canoe: a section of a large tree, the inside burned out, it looked like. The outside had been roughly tapered, but far from streamlined. When they hauled the boat up on land, Max was surprised how light the boat was: it looked much more solid than it was, apparently. Now he wondered how the flimsy canoe and a tough outboard would work together.

The man, whose name Max could not pronounce (he decided to just call him Brother) seemed irritated, out of sorts. He frowned.

Walking back with the outboard on his shoulder, he confessed to Max in halting English that his friends did not want him to use the outboard any more. Because it scares the animals, was what Max could make out from the story.

But, can you still find gasoline, he asked?

Gas-o-leen? Oh, ben-zee-nuh (benzine), Brother said.

He nodded, Yes, he knew where to find that.

Max asked, where, how far from here?

It took a while for Brother to understand what “how far” meant. He said something rapidly, a name, which Max did not understand at all.

Maria and her mother had gone on ahead, carrying water and some food they had found along the way, as well as some articles of clothing that needed more drying.

Brother say, go to coast, find more benzine there. But, she added, the people don’t want him go by their places. Big noise scare all animal.

She and Brother both looked expectantly at Max, as if to say, Isn’t that awful? Impulsively, Maria gripped his elbow, and said, You help Brother go?

Max realized this was a big issue, and feeling much too new — an outsider — he certainly did not want to have an opinion either way. He shrugged his shoulders, put out his hands, palms up, How can I know? But going down, do we need a motor?

Maria and Brother agreed, Not necessary.

A few days later Max and Brother went down river. Brother promised not to use the outboard until they had left the forest behind. From there to the little town on the ocean, Max understood, they would speed! Max, of course, hoped to find a source of fuel for the plane.

They never came back.

Maria told how she had gone to look at the plane, which stood there as before. Perhaps the jungle had started to grow vines around one of the wheels. But obviously Max had disappeared. And Brother. She feared the worst. Crazy people on the coast, she said, talking to herself. Crazy, crazy people! But Max, he make good baby; she knew she was pregnant, that made her feel a little better. At least she had his baby.

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When Solomon heard first thought was, Now, how do we get to Africa, but then he was struck with the tragedy of a lost friend, someone who had piloted him across the world and halfway back, the man he had known longer than any of the strangers now in his life. Solomon and Anansi tried to search for him “inside.” He was always difficult to find, Solomon remembered; his barriers were formidable. Anansi suggested they search for “Brother,” after Maria had given her a signature of what her brother was like — had been like, she tearfully added. No sign of either of the men. They must accept that they had died. Perhaps in an accident, more likely in the continuing violence both Anansi and Solomon felt on the coast.

The other people who had flown with Max were called from the villages where they had found even temporary refuge. A few days later a fire was made in a large clearing the forest, and a large group of people assembled. Anansi said a few words. Solomon told the story of how he and Max had found each other, the plane, the trip to the north woods, their stay there. How Max had gone off to find fuel for the voyage back to Africa, how he had been attacked by a mad man. Katherine had taken care of the bad wound when he finally managed to get back to the north woods. The hurricane over the Atlantic when they first left, finally making a sort of emergency landing on the little island of Saba, where the delegation from Sranan had joined with what had been the Africa Group. Their trips to these forests. Max's disappearance. The assembled voyagers listened intently. Max had been so modest, but such an essential part of the whole adventure. What would they have done — could they have done — without Max? Everybody had their private remembrances, thoughts, but all of them felt a deep thankfulness for the role Max had played and for the person he was, had been....

Maria, bashfully, added, But he left a baby! That brought some smiles. He probably left other babies on Saba, they remembered.

And then Mirelly sang, making up what was more a chant than a song. She caught the mood, sadness, grief, thankfulness, the miracle of it all...

The people of these woods knew how to mourn, with sounds, tears, touch. Katherine and Solomon sat closer, in tight embrace, until Anansi joined, and then Yosef.

Very late that night — very early morning — the first light found a clump of people tightly close. Silent.

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The "Americans," as people referred to the four who had been on the plane that came from Saba, dispersed after the memorial for Max. Alive and Guinée decided to go further down river, where, rumor had it, someone had started a little clinic. Katherine was invited to visit many villages to do healing. Solomon, who felt he could not be useful anywhere, stayed with Anansi who had made very clear that she wanted him near to her. She wanted to know everything he knew, she said. She wanted him, she had whispered in his ear.

She had a comfortable house, looking like a native hut, but larger. The first two or three moons had been a busy time for all. People came from everywhere to see the Healing Woman and the San man, a black American woman, said to be extra clever, and the man from Africa! People here thought of themselves as African, but many, many generations removed. Africa had become a word, but hardly a concept. Probably the only thing they knew about Africa was that people there were black as they were.

At first Anansi sat in the background when Katherine saw people. Katherine was very good when it came to clean out wounds, even without the paraphernalia and chemicals she had been used to. Boiled water cleaned old sores and wounds just as well. Anansi had given her some cloth that she tore into long strips to act as bandages. Anansi also had given her some local plant

medicines that worked for infections and some common diseases. It was soon evident that her caring and cleaning were medicinal.

Solomon had been given some books that were written about the people—sometimes called Bush Negro, or Djuka, or Maroon, although he learned right away that the people did not use any of those names for themselves. Anansi apologized with a grin, Books don't do well here in the forest. It is too damp, there are too many little things that love to eat paper! Solomon remarked after he had read most of the books that he was learning more about Africa than about the people here, because the books usually talked about the amazing survival of an African culture (even though the authors did not agree on which culture it was) that had been more or less preserved in these woods.

Oh, the books you read are old. Only the last few generations have we been much more aware of our unique nature, one of the men remarked, who had come to visit. We know that our forefathers came from what you call the Dark Continent, but that was several hundred years ago. Many generations have passed, and of course we adapted to these woods, these rivers, the plants and animals here, and certainly the people around us. We are few, proud of our identity, but very aware that our neighbors are Indian — natives, they were here before us — of two or three different tribes. And the people on the coast, he guffawed, are from everywhere! Our great hunger for identity has made us leery of becoming like the people on the coast. We don't like what we see there.

You sound as if you have been to the town many times, Solomon said, surprised..

No, not many times. A few times, but we hear stories. And few of these stories are about good things, mostly about the craziness of living as they do. As they have to, perhaps..

But your English is good, Solomon exclaimed. Where did you learn? The man looked a bit embarrassed, but then he smiled, Well, you see, Yosef named me King Arthur, so I had to learn who this famous king was, and he, Yosef, and Tillie, and others, said the stories must be told after I knew something about the background of that faraway country, so, long ago, I learned.

Solomon looked around him, sighed a deep sigh. You people continue to amaze me. You live like savages... Oh, I did not mean that. But you live like primitive, uneducated people, and so many of you are smart. You know languages, have read—or heard—some history of the west.

The silence after that remark said more than any words could have said. Most of all they were proud of their uniqueness; proud without showing it. A deep inner pride.

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Alive and Guinée decided to explore further down the river where, they had been told, there was the beginning of a little settlement. In Anansi's village (No, she said, it isn't "mine") they were outfitted. Two pairs of sandals each, made from the very tough skin of an animal, a cooking pot, some cloth, and half a canoe full of young coconuts and other food. Anansi blessed them as they got into the canoe, You young people must explore but don't forget us here! And we want to

know about your baby, she added with a twinkle in her eyes. We have had few babies always, and now, for many moons, even fewer.

Alive stopped the men who were about to cast off, You know?

Of course we know, Anansi said. Maybe it does not show much in your belly, but it shows in your radiance (she pronounced it as a French word).

It was only a day and a half down two rivers in a dugout canoe. Alive nudged Guinée, Now I know why these people have such shoulders! They live in canoes. It is almost as if they've become one with these slender and fragile-seeming contraptions. No hips, bulging shoulders.

When they reached their destination, no more than a hamlet, not far from a large man-made lake they were told, they looked at a strange landscape. Rather flat, with the dark wall of the forest on one side, a vague mist shrouding the view in all other sides. Almost eerie, a place out of time and out of place. It was obviously unfinished. There was one structure that looked almost like a house on one side, but had a bamboo extension in the back. There were other structures made of whatever material had been available nearby. Mostly wood and bamboo, the odd piece of faded plastic. One structure had one patch of corrugated roof iron, the rest of the roof was thatched with what could be coconut palm leaves, thickly applied. The place seemed to be empty of people at first, but as they got out of the canoe a few people came to see who or what had come. Alive held on to Guinée, not sure they were welcomed or...? Until a determined-looking woman came with outstretched arms, smiling, calling out, You have come! You have come to help me with the clinic, no?

Yes, we came to see whether we could be of help, said Alive. Guinée added, we heard there was the beginning of a new village here, that appeals to me; I am a builder of communities, he said with a big laugh.

The "house" they had seen with the bamboo extension was the beginnings of a small clinic, now spotless again, "almost open for business," Sossy, said, after she had introduced herself. As they walked to the little building, Sossie talking in a rapid English with an accent Alive and Guinée could not place, explained that she had come from "the big city," was a trained nurse practitioner. She had remembered this sleepy little place from when she had made regular inspection tours of interior clinics "before". This had always been in the middle of the tour, a place to rest, as well as see sick and wounded people. Then it had been the lonely home of an eccentric retired nurse and her ragtag family of "children" she had adopted over time. Some of them obviously not her children, Sossy added with a smile. A good place to rest, she said. Now, she did not know what had happened to them. When she first came, with a few of the others — she smilingly swept her arm to include the few adults who had gathered around them — the place was deserted and not in very good repair. Half the roof had fallen, perhaps in a storm? But now it was almost ready, she finished proudly.

The others were introduced, the men who had manned the canoe introduced themselves and Alive and Guinée in the local language. Explaining where Alive and Guinée had come from took

longer. As they talked, it appeared more a fairy tale than truth. From America, from Africa, now here? Why here? A plane had brought them, and now the plane...? Then the bad times must be over, one old man said. Well, nobody knew. Maybe.

As they were talking the group of people had moved to what was to be the clinic. Other than Sossy and now Alive, there were only two other women, and maybe five or six men, not counting the five men from up river who had brought the newcomers.

One of the women spoke up, I have some half-finished beer, she said. We should celebrate.

What is half-finished, Guinée asked with a grin, and a quick approving look at the woman who could easily have been from a city in Africa, he thought. Slim, young enough, she carried herself with a certain something that spoke “city”.

Well, it is coconut water and the juice of some berries I found, that has been fermenting now for some days, not many, but enough days to make it drinkable, she said hesitantly. I tried it last night, she said, and it does not taste bad. I have enough of it — quickly looking around to count heads.

It was quite a party.

The clinic-to-be was the front two rooms of the small, but sturdy house. There was a big garden area in back, still overgrown, but Sossy planned to clear it and grow sweet potato, and some greens. Eventually she wanted to grow medicinal herbs.

The woman who had donated the not-quite-finished alcoholic welcome beverage — closer to wine than beer, Guinée had pronounced — had two husbands she said, who had built a beautiful house from bamboo near by. Her name was... there had been a pause when that came up during the party. She had had several names, she went on. Now that she was here, after a gruesome time fleeing from the town, she called herself Chocolate.

To which Guinée had responded, A light milk chocolat, pronouncing it the French way, Shokoláh. Everybody there agreed that was exactly the right name for her now.

Sossy confessed that that had been her name always; yes, it was short for something much longer, but she could not remember answering to any other name. And she was happy with it.

Sossy had introduced whom she called the “head man” of the place as a good friend. A hunter, he always before had brought her enough meat for a week, at least. She did not know his name, called him Granman, although he was Portuguese, “mixed with all the groups that had been in Sranan for a while,” he said.. He did not say much, talked in grunts, but obviously liked Sossy. And she liked him. There was not much to say, she knew. Her mind was on the clinic, how to practice with the simple tools she was left with, an old-fashioned glass-mercury thermometer, blood pressure cuffs, a few scalpels for boils. Local were useful as pain killers and to battle infections. A good thing, she knew, that she had grown up in the bush: she knew what to look for, and she was more than willing to learn from whoever could teach her about herbs, plants, anything else that could be healing.

Despite her warm welcome, she had been careful when these two strangers came. She liked the woman. A city woman, American, what was she seeking here, so far from home? And the man? He said he was from Africa, spoke with an accent, but otherwise looked local enough; what was he doing here? They were not helpless, however. They had moved into a shack not far from Sossy's clinic. The man, Guinée, had asked Headman about hunting. They had gone hunting every other day, it seemed. Headman still had a gun, and some ammunition, but had not shown it to the stranger; they had hunted with bow and arrow, the kind they used here.

Alive asked Sossy whether she could ask her something, professionally, so to speak. Her pregnancy was just into the second trimester, and seemed completely normal. After the briefest examination, Sossy declared, Nothing to worry about. You're healthy, young. And, why are you here, she could not help asking? You were tourists, when it first started? Why..., but she did not finish.

Alive had learned to downplay her story, it sounded too bizarre to the people here. She had smiled, and said, Well, yes, she and Guinée were stranded, but under the circumstances... What could they say? And they really liked it here! They planned to stay.

Sossy did not know how many people had actually lived here, before. The eccentric retired nurse had many supposedly adopted "children" who were not children. But probably no more than a dozen, twenty people? Maybe as many as there were now. The canoe people had gone back up river of course, so now there were only the local people. And nobody knew who would be staying more than today and tomorrow. It was still all in flux. Sossy's clinic was the fixed focal point for now. And the Headman who is not really a granman of course, she added shyly.

In the evening Sossy told her story. She had left the big town, which had gone crazy when the bad, bad times first began. Now that things had calmed down, she thought that most of the people of the town had been killed, or had fled, as she and Chocolat, and a few of the others who were here now. It was better, she said, not to talk too much about those things. The past for almost everyone was so strange and confusing. Easier, she said forcefully, just live now. A new life, eh?

A few people had started to build more permanent structures to live in. The place was growing into a village. And what was more important, the people began to know each other in daily contacts. We all have gone through so much, Sossy said, it is hard to get close to people when it is people who made the craziness. But it must be done. We were all strangers, now we must become... friends?

Family, Alive said softly. That is what we became after our flight from the old world. She could not help shivering when she thought of her old life, and the time of fleeing from the madness. Perhaps, she said hesitantly, that is why I attached myself to Guinée when we first met. He had his own fleeing, I did not know much about him, but somehow there was something that bound us, a tie, and a strong feeling of starting anew, a new life with a new man. In the north woods we were almost family, after a while. But I left that also. This seems almost more real, a place growing into a village. All strangers again, who are groping to be a ... what? A community?



Chocolat, who had joined the two women, added, And a baby will help tie us down, not only to place, but to each other. I wish I could have children...

Sossy looked at her critically, You are young enough, and two husbands. Why not? 200

I'm afraid, Chocolat said. Afraid of childbirth. I've had two very bad experiences.

When you were running away from the town?

Yes. I was raped, again and again. Held captive. My first forced pregnancy was beaten out of me, the second I don't even want to talk about. It still hurts. Silence. Each woman reflecting on her own experiences.

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Guinée had found some machinery, parts of an old car. He was happy tinkering. He had a talent for "fixing" any and all machines. Here he was working on a jumble of machines and parts that would, he assured them, eventually generate electric power from the fast streaming water. No, without effecting the stream, he told Headman.

Why, Sossy had asked? What would we do with electricity?

It had been two, no, three or more years since they had power. They had grown up with it, taken it for granted. Electricity was something like air and food, it was there to use. Now cooking on a little fire, then sitting around a fire, had come back. She for one did not miss the old days. She laughed uproariously, And then? You want us to pay for your electricity? No, my man, I'll do without. I like this new world we have now.

Alive nodded. She said, You know, I have noticed something. Before, when I lived alone, I thought the darkness frightening. The darkness felt too dark. Now I know that nights are rarely completely dark. I see more at night than I ever did before.

A young man had joined them, or, rather, had sat down a few feet behind them. And the stars, he said softly! I think I also hear better now. I lived in town, and it was always noisy! Now I enjoy the quiet, and I hear animals talk, and perhaps a tree groaning.

Sossy, who knew the young man, continued quietly, without comment or introduction, If it weren't for some diseases, this life is healthier too. People are looking better, muscle tone is better, their eyes clear.

Alive, in the same matter of fact tone, You must be a good nurse. You notice things. You're right, I had not noticed, or at least not consciously. But now I recognize that we are healthier. Guinée says he has gained weight, but I don't see that. And I'm pretty sure he has not actually weighed himself.

Their pleasant chat was rudely interrupted when two men burst into the almost-village from the bush, panting, breathing deeply. When they could speak they called out for everyone to hear,

There is an army coming this way. People. Many people. They have machetes, and perhaps guns. The Anansi says to disperse, move away from your houses, go in the jungle.

People gathered around, asking questions.

No time for questions. No, we don't know who these people are, or what they want. But the best thing to do is get out of their way. They're coming this way, on the road. We took the shortcut through the bush. It looks as if they are heading for Parbo, or perhaps the harbor, or... But, disperse. Now!

There was hardly time to disperse when a band of crazies raced through the place, knocking over one of the houses still being built, trying to set fire to another, but they were in too much of a hurry to do much damage.

Guinée said, They speak French!

One of his neighbors overheard, and said, Yes, they must be from Cayenne, maybe Devils' Island. But why would they want to go back?

Another said, But not a mob, only five people. Men. Five men' 202

They must be fleeing from someone or something.

Later, it was almost night, a messenger came from Yosef. The people we might have seen rushing down to the coast, were in turn hunted by what seems white men with guns. They got lost in the jungle, however, and now they were talking. Nobody here can understand their language. It may be Brazilian, but we don't think so, some of us know a little of that language.

Guinée said, Maybe I should go up there if they speak French.

The group had a short meeting; they agreed that would be a good idea. They promised to take care of Alive, while he was gone.

Guinée left that night with the messenger to talk with the people Yosef had seen.

When Guinée had listened to the strangers, he reported to Anansi, Yosef, Solomon, and of course twenty others who had magically appeared out of the jungle. Yes, they speak French. One is a missionary, who may be defrocked, he does not wear his cassock. One is a planter, who is from upland Cayenne, where his family had a coffee plantation for generations. He's not really white, Guinée said under his breath, and the third, he seemed a sort of soldier of fortune. Perhaps not even French, he spoke French but with a strong accent. Maybe Berber, from Morocco? He is the only one who has a gun. But the important part is, that they are (were!) chasing other men who had escaped from a jail somewhere. The escaped prisoners are dangerous because they have a disease I had never heard of. I'm not sure what it is in English, or even in French. It eats up extremities, fingers, toes, noses, ears.

Katherine said under her breath, Hansen's disease. No, that is not what they said.

Leprosy?

Ah yes, that is what they said.

Why were they hunting them, it is very contagious. One of them infected the priest, and they think those men would spread it further, and...

Anansí, But that seems a very peculiar way to prevent the spread of a disease.

Katherine, well, it always was one of the ways. But leprosy is not very contagious at all, and it takes a long time for the symptoms to appear, usually. But now everything has changed. Who knows what leprosy is like now? And the way these people acted, both those who fled and those who were after them, makes me think of hysteria. They didn't seem to be rational.

Guinée said, uneasily, But the men said there was great urgency, because apparently the disease is very contagious, and it spreads very fast.

Tillie, who had joined the group only now, said, Maybe something like the new form of HIV we had here. Hansen's is an old disease, but bacteria mutate. Everything has mutated it looks like.

Katherine and Tillie joined Guinée, going back to Sossy and Alive. There, they talked, discussed, asked questions of each other and someone who said he came from neighboring French Guyana (Cayenne), on the other side, now empty of people, it was rumored. In the end they had to accept that planning was impossible. They had to take each affliction as it came.

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For quite a while Katherine and Solomon had been treated like royalty. For days, weeks, people came from all over the forest to meet these famous people: a man who was rumored to be San, and a woman who was a healer!

When nobody remarked or commented about it, Katherine almost forgot about her white skin — in any case not that white any more: after being burned a fiery red, now she was getting a deep tan. People came to her with rashes and cuts, and even without any western medical supplies she managed to do a fine job making people feel good.

Solomon —Sol, Anansí called him—had a harder time. Being a San was not enough to keep his mind busy, particularly because he doubted that he really was San. He was short enough, and his skin color, almost orange, might pass, but his hair was all wrong, he knew. His hair was almost curly, not the islands of tight swirls of the San. Here the people were all very black and for the most part large, so he stood out. "Just like Anansi" people said fondly. They were indeed almost the same size!

Katherine and Solomon stayed in an empty house in what everyone called Anansí's village, made comfortable and colorful with what scraps of cloth could be found, some very beautiful carved stools, a bed of animals skins on a base of rope in a bamboo frame. Solomon spent time, at first, trying to find, or make, paper, so that he could write. He gave up after a while; what was

there to write about? He felt more and more useless. Both women, Anansi and Katherine were busy almost all day, he felt lost.

Anansi invited Solomon for a short excursion to a not-too-far settlement up stream. Solomon grumbled but accepted. The trip proved farther than he had expected, and the second half was not by canoe, but walking up a trail that was steep in some places, muddy all the way up, always up.

They came to a narrow shelf. Here we rest a bit, Anansi said. The people we go to, she continued, are very special. I spent time with them for a long time, maybe a year, when I first came to this land. I was fifteen or sixteen, and needed to rest, finish myself before going where I felt I must go. You, from early childhood, knew that you had to get out of Africa; I too knew I had to get away from a very poisonous situation. My mother died when I was very young, before I became fully conscious. The people who took care of me did that only after they had taken care of their own children. I was hungry most of the time.

Solomon stared at some unseen landscape. Later, he said, I had to find myself again, back in Africa. What a strange and convoluted path it has been! And you, Anansi, do you think you must go back to Brazil at some time?

Oh no, I found where I belong. The people of the forest are my people now. Maybe not by blood, but they have adopted me, and I them. I know so many of their stories.

She suddenly looked straight at Solomon, with an almost fierce look in her eyes, one hand squeezing his forearm,, What is it about humans? They can be so wonderful and interesting, rich in nuance and color, but they can also be so very, very cruel. I don't understand that cruelty. Animals don't have that, I think,

Solomon whispered softly, Cats and other animals play with their prey.

Do they? I have never seen that. The jaguar pounces, kills. Mercifully. We don't have many sorts of cat here, no lions, no tigers.

Suddenly Solomon sat up, fully engaged, No house cats here, I noticed. Do you suppose it is we, humans, who have made house cats play with their prey?

What a thought, Anansi said, staring off in the distance, then moving closer to Solomon, shivering. Without thought Solomon gently moved his arm around her shoulders. So they sat for a while, until Anansi sat up straighter, Come, we have to go one more level up, preferably before it gets dark. They both stood up, shaking some dirt and gravel from their clothes. Anansi took his hand, Come my friend. She giggled a little, Did you know that some of the People have decided you too are an Anansi?

But...

Well why not. They talk about the man Anansi, and the woman Anansi.

It is not a name then?

No, a sort of title. Anansi is the Spider in many of their stories. Small, looking so harmless, but smart and sometimes very dangerous. They say there is something mysterious about spiders. They are everywhere, see everything.

But the People are not afraid of you.

No-o-o. But they do know my power. And they know that I see much,

I don't have that power, Solomon said.

Oh yes, you do. You just hide it from yourself. You were the one who broadcast all over the world your "Is there someone there?" And then found a plane, a pilot, fuel, and flew straight to where you got an answer. If that isn't power!

You know, I did that in some separate part of my brain. I cannot remember much. In fact, I worry, because I cannot very well remember the people I left in Africa. Only that I promised to return to them. But why I should return there, I am not sure now. He visibly sagged as he finished, Now, here, I feel really lost. Why am I still alive when so many millions, billions, of human died as far as we know? What good am I? My brain is useful only for abstractions. And that is the last thing we now need. He shook his head, as if throwing off rain drops. Anansí, what am I doing here? What good am I?

Anansí said nothing. She looked sideways at him as they were walking up the path again. Not long now, we are almost there. And in a cheerful voice, You will enjoy their food! Rich with flavors and always magically balanced. I used to wonder how they did it up here, where, I think, not too many things grow.

But, that was not the reception Anansí had expected. The small village was deserted, nobody greeted them. Eventually they found an old man huddled in the corner of a house that smelled of rotten meat and excrement, holding what must have been a girl on his lap — now, a barely breathing skeleton. The girl did not move, did not blink, the right forearm was broken, her belly swollen. Anansí rushed inside, Solomon hesitated; he had seen starvation in Africa, this was worse. The old man mumbled something, seemed to reach out to Anansí, who carefully took the girl, walked outside, where the brighter light, made the girl shiver. Perhaps her eyes moved a little; perhaps the pupils of her eyes shrunk. Anansí whispered to Solomon to go inside and see what he could do for the old man.

Food, water? Solomon asked?

For now, just get him out of there don't you think. They must have lived on insects and mice, small snakes — that is what it smells like in there.

The old man did not want to move. The smile he tried, ended up in a rictus of pain, confusion; a last farewell.

Solomon found a house at the edge of the small village, a cave almost, on the side of a hill, that seemed the least disturbed. They tried to revive the girl, found some blankets to keep her

warm. They even managed to get her to swallow some warm water. They made a small fire, ate the food they had brought as a gift for the villagers. The girl died in the night.

We must bury these beautiful people, Anansí whispered; she could barely talk, her eyes shiny with tears. They talked softly through another night, Anansí in Solomon's arms. Making love hesitantly, too gently to be called anything but caring for one another. A touch of the skin: calming, soothing.

The next morning they walked the village again, looked in all the houses again. No clue to what might have happened here. It did not take long to inspect the ten or twelve houses, a hut that had been used for storage, the well, some shelters for cooking fires. How did these people live, Solomon wondered. Nothing much grows around here, they had good water, but did they carry food up here?

Yes, I remember they brought the things they harvested down from further up the mountain. Maybe we should go up, before going back to our own people — Anansi shivered. Suddenly she stopped, reached out to touch Solomon's arm, These people did not bury their dead, they lay them to rest in trees, for the birds to eat. And we should burn down the village, to cleanse what must have happened here.

When they moved the corpse of the old man they discovered that there was a big hole in his back, raw, now black with congealed blood.

Rats, Solomon whispered. I saw that in Africa.

The remains of the old man and the girl were wrapped in blankets they found. The bundles did not weigh much, they carried them easily further up the mountain which, not far from the village, flattened out to a wide valley, green with trees and plants. They found trees with branches not too high to reach; tying the girl in one tree, the old man in another, next to it. It took them the rest of the day to burn down what would burn in the village.

When that was finished, Solomon suggested they not stay the night, because someone down below may have seen the smoke and might come up to look. They walked to the valley above, found a sandy spot near a little creek with crystal clear water. There Anansí made a kind of nest from branches and grass. They had enough food for several days yet, but they decided not to make a fire. Again they slept in each other's arms. Early morning Solomon whispered in her ear, Old woman, this old man is not used to such gymnastics! She answered, speaking to his chest, This old woman isn't either, but we did well enough, don't you think?

In times of great shock and suffering, sex is the first reaching out for help. The most primitive, Anansí added.

And therefore the most abused and perverted in the so-called civilizations we invented over the centuries, Solomon finished.

After a long silence, Anansí mumbled something... I miss the people I knew from here; they must be dead; I did not tell them we were coming.

Solomon got a dark look as he answered, You talking inside again?

My dear Sol, I don't understand why you shrink from it now, after you were so loud before. Maybe I shrink now because I was so loud, as you say.

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The People of the Forest, as Anansí called them — involuntary migrants— were strong. The natives, Amerindians, were afraid of them, but more afraid of forests, dark places with abundant life, much of it not very friendly. They were people of wide open space, far horizons, blazing sun.

The two populations were aware of each other and had learned to avoid each other, Anansí had tried to make friends with tribes of Indians, but it soon became clear that they were not interested. They felt strongly about having been pushed further and further inland by the many new people that settled on the coast, and the runaway slaves who started their own nation in the forests just added to their degradation.

Anansí and Solomon were talking around a few smoldering branches. From the desolation of the dead village, Anansí and Solomon had walked to the fertile valley, further up the hills. She told Sol what she knew about the Arowak and other tribes of Indians.

They are the original people of this land. We, the black people, are surrounded by them. Most of the time we tolerate each other; occasionally there is a skirmish, but even those are more or less ritualized. This settlement—maybe because it is so isolated and relatively hard to get to—is an exception. The people here are mixed. Indian and black, people of the endless empty lands, and people of the forests. They were an unusual people. Very peaceful, very deep. In the old world they would have been called spiritual, I think.

How, “spiritual.” Solomon asked.

Well, they were fiercely peace-loving for one. They avoided any kind of confrontation. They smiled, sang little tune-less, word-less songs. They found food where we could not even go, I think. I knew them when I first came to this land. I learned from them to heal, to read what is in people's heads, and, strange as it may seem, from people who were also Indian, I learned what the black people's African stories were. They had studied us, their neighbors, for hundreds of years. Not just to know what we might be up to, but our background, religions, our stories. It was they who made it possible for me to be accepted so easily when I finally walked on down and met those who have become “my people.” They say about themselves that their flesh perhaps is like the flesh of the Indian tribes who live all over these lands, but they are the final descendants of much more ancient people.

Final? Solomon asked.

Yes, that is what they said. They had very few children, and when children were grown they often left. To find a life partner they said, a husband, a wife. They had several words for these children. They were “gifts,” and during the time I lived here they really were that. Unusual

children! They were also called something like “new sticks,” and when I asked them what that meant, they just smiled. Sometimes these grown children were referred to as seeds.

And did these seed children ever come back to visit their parents?

I don't think so, but of course I cannot know. It has been so many years. I only saw them, as now, when there was some special reason, when things changed, when I had the need to be with them.

And, what is that special reason now, Solomon asked. You are.

Why me? I probably could not even talk with them; what language do they speak?

Anansi looked at him in surprise. The language in your head, of course. You, and your friends who came down from the sky above...

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Life easily settles in patterns. Guinée had become the engineer of the settlement, Sossy the healer, of course. The granman who was not a granman became the face of the village; he refused stubbornly to make decisions, but everyone looked to him for approval. The hunter began to take younger men and women, with him on the now weekly hunts. Alive was helper to the healer, but she also taught some of the other women and one young man the rudiments of the science of numbers. But her attention was centered around the life she was nurturing within. Sossy thought it was a girl; she dreamed about a boy. One day she surprised Guinée by asking him, Would it be all right with you if we call this child Max?

But of course, chérie. But, what if it is a girl?

Well, Maxine, or Maxy, or...

You know, Guinée said thoughtfully, I learned something about names these last few years. So many of us have new names that were given to us—or we created ourselves—to fit who we are now. That seems a good system. The name at birth should be considered just a temporary name. To be changed later, when needed.

Sossy, who had come out of the clinic and heard the last sentence, said, That is how we always do it.

She sat down, put her hand on Alive's knee, How's today?

Alive smiled. I've been thinking of names. Maybe it is time?

Sossy looked at her, felt her stomach, Not quite, I would say. You have some time to go yet.

But you're doing very well!

Guinée turned to Sossy, I'm curious, you say your people always changed names?

Well not always. But we never felt that a name was glued on a person forever and ever. If someone came up with a fitting name, we gladly adopted it. I was not born with this name,



Sossy, you know. I had two, three other names. I took this name because it was the name of a woman I admired very much. She died in the Confusion, the Chaos I heard you call it. She had no education to speak of, but she was very smart. She taught herself reading and writing, did examinations, became a nurse's helper. And somehow, I don't know the details, she got to be regarded as a "real" clinic nurse. She ran a clinic in the bush, all by herself. Did everything, including surgery—minor probably—if that was needed. I met her not far from here. Sossy looked up, Hey first Sossy, are you there, up in Heaven? If anyone earned to be there, it is you! Then she stood up, stretched, I'm going to get myself something to eat, and then I have to go in the bush to visit a woman who thinks she is pregnant. From the description I'm not sure that is what is going on with her. She says she cannot come to see me here; I have to go there. Oh, it isn't far, she said when she saw Alive's concern. The granman has offered to accompany me, it is probably less than what we used to call an hour!

Guinée said, half in jest, Well, I was going to offer to escort you, but I don't want to come between... friends!

Sossy poked him in the ribs. Remember what I told you? When you get tired of this beautiful pregnant girl, I am here! But the granman is a fine man. I like him a lot. We like each other in the way older people like, perhaps even love.

Alive stood up, Why don't you come eat with us. I have some good things I cooked earlier today when I felt like cooking and nobody to cook for!

And how about me, Guinée said?

You were gone this morning, remember?

Yes, and I brought back some excellent meat.

We'll have a feast, Sossy said. A short feast, then I must go!

Sossie came back the next day, the sick woman on the granman's back, obviously in pain. Alive came out of their hut, looking questioning at Sossy.

Yes, she is pregnant but not in the right place. Outside the uterus. Somehow we must get that non-pregnancy out of her belly without killing the woman, she whispered in English.

Surgery?

And fairly major, too. I have seen it done once; am trying to remember all the details. Wistfully she added, Wish I had an anatomy book...

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Anansí and Solomon:

Solomon: — It is too different. I knew something would happen, but I thought it would be something the planet suddenly did, like a really huge earthquake, or a sudden change in the Gulf Stream. In any case something sudden that would wake us up. And then, I imagined, we would

all wake up, work together with all the technology we had, and... But this? I don't even know what happened. War, it seems. Maybe several wars all at once? Katherine told me that large parts of North America are radio-active. But in Africa we did not know anything, except that suddenly we were cut off. Telephones, the internet did not work. It had gone or something. We were isolated. Rumors, of course, but I could not understand those. And then, things in Africa also collapsed. I don't know what went first. Money, maybe? I remember something about money. And, you know, I cannot even remember what all happened then, a few years ago. No, an eternity ago. But I do know it was crazy. People went crazy. Maybe I did, too. Maybe that is why I can't remember.

Anansi interrupted, Is it important? The details of what happened, and then and then? Is that important to remember? Now you are here, and here is all there is. Surely, you understand? (She sounded almost as if she were reading a script, her words came out very clearly enunciated, exaggeratedly so). All there is, is here. You, who are accustomed to think in enormous abstractions, this is not an abstraction. This is real, tangible. It is your experiences, what you feel, see, hear, that is your reality.

Solomon, the professor, sputtered, But, but we know, we comprehend, we understand, that there is a whole planet around us.

And Anansi interrupted again, softly but again crystal clear, Yes, and you and I and that tree, and the ground under our feet, all that is one great whole. I am just a tiny part of it. You are a part of this whole that has energies and dimensions we cannot fathom. Your science measured all that could be measured. You, as a theoretical scientist, Solomon, know that there are immeasurable measures to this planet and the universe as well.

She stood up, for emphasis perhaps, or because it gave her freedom to stride and swing her arms. Solomon, what is it, today, here, that you miss most of your old life? Take your time. Think; feel; weigh.

They were silent. All around them the dark green of high noon in this equatorial forest. Anansi's house—a hut, really—was nearby. Other huts were scattered here and there, upriver. Now and then a human voice sounded in the distance, laughter, a scrap of a song.

Solomon, who had not moved, bent over, straightened up, reached for one of Anansi's hands, laughed, and said, You know, I can't think of a thing I am missing. Not any of the basics, in any case. I am well fed here, I have shelter, for now anyway. I have friends like I never had before, intimate, deep, rich friendships! I am not sick, or even uncomfortable. The absolute only thing I could think of that I miss, is my computer. I know, I haven't had one for years, have not even seen one. But, at one time, I thought of the computer as an extension of myself, a hand, or a voice, or something. And then I realized that it was the computer that fed me information. What little I know about what happened before it all collapsed, I got from the internet. And then I remembered how I felt less and less need to get more information that was usually not even real information but somebody's interpretation of someone else's interpretation of information. It got too confusing. Another reason why I decided to take that sabbatical and go to Africa. I decided

that on a Tuesday—funny, I remember that!—and the Monday after that I said goodbye to my then wife, got on a plane.

And, Anansí asked?

Well, I answered my own question. I really don't miss my computer. At least that function of the computer.

What other function did the computer have for you?

Oh, email. I used to have friends everywhere. Many I did not really know, but we emailed each other. Yes, I guess, I miss that. I am curious whether they survived? Not very likely, eh?

Why not, she asked.

Because most of them lived in big cities, or university towns. Yeah. I don't know of course. Maybe some of them survived. But without phones, without the internet, without computers...

Anansí calmly reminded him of the communication they had when he was still on the little island.

Solomon looked surprised. Yes, but so?

Anansí added, And I understand you had long conversations with Katherine, and some other people as well, when you were in Africa, and they were somewhere in North America.

Solomon, held his hands in front of his eyes. And, do you also know where I learned that? I learned that from very primitive people, who thought it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

Anansí answered immediately, As, of course, it is. Most of the people here can hear and talk inside, as you call it so quaintly. Did you ever have a dog, Solomon?

He shook his head, You jump around, I can barely follow you. A dog? No, I don't know much about dogs.

Anansí said, We have to get you a monkey. No dogs here, but there are monkeys who really like to be with humans.

Why would I want an animal? I don't like pets.

Who said anything about a pet? We feel strongly that we cannot "own" another being. No, not as a pet, as a companion. Or a sometime companion. The reason I thought of dogs is that in your old world it was quite normal, and mostly accepted, that humans and dogs communicated. The reason you learned it from primitives, is probably after you had lived with them for a while. And your western conditioning had worn off a little. Westerners, on both sides of the Atlantic, and wherever western culture spread, were conditioned from the first day of life to be alone in their heads. We, poor savages, knew from before birth that we are never alone in our heads, unless we want to be.

Solomon: Even here in this jungle? Not many of you, I think. There must be times when...

But professor, I'm not talking about people only! Remember, we are tiny parts of that whole that is this jungle, the snakes, the trees, the monkeys, crocodiles in the rivers. We are all parts, aware of each other all the time. When the nuns taught me about cells making up the physical body — the “physical” was something we were not supposed to think of — those poor nuns, but they taught us right. Anyway, I used to imagine me as one cell in the whole body that is the planet. Me-as-a-cell is aware of the cells around me. And I am also aware of cells farther away. And I always knew, I think, that there are connections that I have no name for. But what I wanted to say is that my identity is in being a part of all there is. My identity is not in being a unique individual, as western people used to think.

But, Solomon said, of course you have an identity, the one we name Anansi. Your name is the label of an identity!

She laughed uproariously. Anansi is not a name! That is not who I am, it is something I wear! You, as an African should know Anansi, the Spider. Were there no ancient stories about Anansi when you grew up? Anansi is an Archetype, as C.G.Jung would have said. What the fox is in parts of Europe, the dwarf deer in Southeast Asia, the coyote among Native Americans. The trickster. A small animal that does heroic and marvelous deeds because he is smart. Now that I think of it, we should call you Anansi! After you learn how to be smart and funny at the same time. You are the right size, but you are too serious. When you learn, dear friend, to be a trickster, I'm going to pass on this title to you. Come, let's get something to drink. One of my little ones can get us a fresh coconut. The water in a young coconut is the best thirst quencher there is!

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Katherine had gotten a nice tan on Saba, but now, in the dark forest, it was already beginning to fade. She made some comment about it to Tillie, who offered to accompany her on a little expedition that was being planned.

Rumor had reached someone that a whole town, three or four days journey from where they were, was surviving. Or, more likely, survivors from all around were congregating in a real town.

What would that do to my tan, Katherine said?

Most of the time we travel as we were born, it is only when we reach... but all that is gone, isn't it? It was a custom, let's say, for us to be naked, unless we had to wear something in a town.

Then Katherine looked up, asked, in town? Why afraid of the sun from out under these trees? Skin cancer?

Tillie laughed, I don't know where to begin answering that, but, the short answer is, No, I don't worry about skin cancer, or any other cancer. After what we've been through... She left the sentence unfinished.

Katherine didn't say anything, nor did she need to.

They began immediately with the details of the expedition. They might as well leave tomorrow morning.

And, food, Katherine mumbled.

No, we eat what we find. I'll see to it that you don't starve. And we need an escort. What do you think? Three men, four? Yes, we'll ask King Arthur, he has a son who must be old enough. And he speaks excellent English. That's not his real name, of course, but he likes it. He also knows the area where we're going, Oh, we even have a Hamlet in our people, but he says Hahmlit. I heard stories about him, he lives far away. Maybe Brazil.

Katherine looked at her shoes. She had two pair now, but neither was for walking long distances.

Tillie noticed, she hugged Katherine, With a grin she said, You know, I forget that you're a guest. You've fitted in so easily in Anansi's compound, that I forgot. We go by boat most of the way. And going downstream. Easy. If there really is a town, maybe we can find some boots for you. We are too used to go barefoot. We don't fit into your kind of shoes.

Is there another kind then, Katherine asked?

We sometimes make a kind of boots for ourselves, out of leaves (I'll show you the plant, very tough leaves), or some animal skin. We wear those for special occasions, when we are in the compound of someone respected, and there is something going on. The shaman arranges those.

Early next morning Katherine looked around, as if looking for something. Then she said to Tillie, Now I feel lost. Going on an expedition to somewhere several days away, and we take nothing with us? I must bring my other outfit, or...

No, you're fine. I told you, we don't wear clothes usually.

Katherine still was acutely aware of her hands, going on a trip with nothing in either hand! They walked to the river, a few minutes away. Two men and a dugout canoe were waiting. The men were naked, except for a string around their waist, with a knife and other things hanging from it. Tillie stripped out of her panties: the only thing she was wearing.

Katherine took her blouse off, stepped out of her skirt. The rest will come off gradually, she said. Give me time.

As soon as she sat down, the men took off. Tillie said over her shoulder, the only thing is not to move when you are in one of these. They tip over. But not likely, these men are good!

To Katherine they looked more than good. They were large, heavily muscled. From paddling these skinny boats, Katherine realized.

They had started out on a fast-flowing stream, now they were in a much wider river that flowed leisurely. Katherine felt the men relax, felt the boat itself relax into a smooth ride.

Mid-morning the paddlers sat up, and steered the canoe into a smaller stream, and soon into an even smaller stream, not much wider than the boat. King Arthur and his son were waiting with another canoe. A brief and exuberant discussion followed, Tillie carefully stood, the men holding the two canoes steady, and stepped over into King Arthur's dugout that looked smaller, but wider. After they had settled, and were returning to the river, Tillie explained, This way, the men carry equal loads. But we'll travel together anyway, so it does not matter much, we can talk.

Floating down the river had a dreamy quality, so that no one felt the need to say anything for a long time, until they went ashore early afternoon. Maybe a small island, Katherine thought. She felt stiff, had to stretch and move. The men lugged the canoes on land, not saying much. Obviously there was not much to say, they all seemed to know exactly what to do. Their movements were sure, accustomed, and extremely efficient.

With some roots Tillie found, and the water of a heap of coconuts that appeared out of nowhere, it seemed, they had a quiet picnic. Tillie said, The men think we can overnight here. In a little while two of them will hunt something to eat. For now, relax.

Katherine said, I'm not used to sitting still for hours and then suddenly getting up. My muscles are tight.

Tillie chuckled, Well, let's walk a little. I'll show you what edibles can be found here, in addition to the coconuts, of course.

Is this an island, Katherine asked?

Yes, at one time this was where a granman lived, he probably burned down the trees that were here and planted these coconut trees. See over there? You can still see the fire pit. We'll use it again this evening, when the men come back from hunting.

Shortly thereafter the men came back, carrying a small tapir between them. The animal was still alive, squealing every now and then.

It's a baby, Katherine exclaimed!

No, it is an adolescent, able to take care of itself. We don't need much for the few people here. He looked around, grinned, Four men, two women, we have to fight!

Don't we have anything to say about it, Katherine asked? It sounded light, but she was obviously serious. Tillie sauntered closer, Does any of these men, and one boy, appeal to you, Katherine?

Well, I don't know what to say. All of them look gorgeous, even the boy is not really a boy any more, of course. I'm not used to this bartering, or marketing, I don't know what to call it.

King Arthur came up to Katherine, gently touched her. Very formally he asked, Would you be content to sleep in my arms this night, madame?

King Arthur looked like a king, Katherine admitted to herself. He had a regal bearing — all of the men did!

Do we have to choose partners, she asked shyly?

No, we don't choose. But for safety, as well as comfort, we always sleep in a huddle. If you don't want to make sex, you just say so, Tillie said. We don't think as much about sex as westerners used to. It is just something we do, like eating, or talking. Some of us like it more, a very few don't like it. We respect that. It's not really important. On this trip we all sleep in a knot, and you find yourself next to someone who pleases you for the moment. That's all. It won't make any difference tomorrow, and the day after.

Katherine turned to King Arthur, made a sort of curtsy and said, I look forward to sleep in your arms. She looked at the man's powerful arms, and added, quietly, Those arms look very safe to me!

The animal was quickly killed, skinned, quartered, and put on a little fire that the other two men had made. Tillie had wandered around and came back with an arm load of some roots, and some branches with bright green leaves, that were put on the fire without further ado.

After eating they sat around the dying fire, quietly, now and then someone would say a few words, a joke, a comment on the night noises and against the background rustle of the water. Yes, there are snakes and other beasts in the water, and all around; King Arthur, who had sat close to Katherine moved closer, circling his arm around her shoulder. She leaned her head on his chest, under his chin. They all moved closer. When the fire had died down to barely glowing embers, one of the men heaped some firewood in a rough circle, all of them moving into the circle, making a tight huddle of mostly naked bodies. They mumbled something that Katherine did not understand, Tillie, who had moved on the other side of the circle from her, translated sleepily, The men agreed that one of them would at all times be awake, taking turns. No schedule, it will work out. We're used to this, a man's voice said.

Katherine was very quiet all next day. Every now and then Tillie would call from the other canoe, Are you all right Kath?

Yes, fine thank you. Thinking.

They rested for a short time around the middle of the day at a fairly flat open space. Very hot and humid. The forest had been getting thicker as they went further down, with sudden patches of open prairie. Katherine thought perhaps cut, but as they landed, she looked around and didn't see signs of tree stumps, to indicate it might once have been jungle. The men walked around, swinging their arms to relax the muscles. Going down stream had been relatively easy. Mostly steering, King Arthur said. But she knew better, she had seen them strain to stay in the current, swerving to avoid floating debris.

After they had all relieved themselves, they drank warm water topped off with cool coconut water; even though the outside of the coconuts that had been in the bottom of the boats was warm, the water was cool.

As they got in the vessels again the men changed boats and changed position. Now King Arthur had the seat behind Katherine. If you don't mind moving backward, you can face me, he said. Then we could talk a little he said.

Katherine turned around before they pushed off. Yes, this feels very different, but I'll try. Is it all right if I want to change and sit facing forward again, she asked?

Of course, just say the word, we'll stop paddling and keep the boat steady while you turn around.

After they were in the stream again, now wider and seemingly slower, although there were more floating obstacles.

King Arthur said, Well before dark we'll reach a settlement where some of your friends have settled. The man who calls himself Guinée and the woman Alive. I think they came with you on that plane?

Yes. It will be good to see them. How do you know they are there? Oh, we keep in touch, he grimaced.

You mean in your head?

We have drums that send messages. And, yes, in our heads.

You are a mysterious people! I've never met people like you. In some ways you seem what we used to call "primitive," which I only now realize simply means "not as advanced as we are," meaning all the trappings of what we used to call civilization. You wear hardly any clothes, which is surprising to someone who has lived in a western country all her life. Now I find that without those trappings you have a rich and a very alive culture here. It's a great adjustment for me. Last night I could not sleep for a long time. I had never slept with five other naked people in such a close huddle. We sleep alone, we have our own room, our own bed. Now, on the ground, in the arms of a black giant (she smiled, first tentatively, then fuller). You are quite a man, you know. Before all this I would have said "quite a gentleman," which would be high praise in our world. A world that fell apart, while killing who knows how many millions, perhaps billions of people.

And doing great damage to the planet, King Arthur said softly.

Yes, that also. I feel turned inside out. I cannot begin to come to terms with the violent changes in my own life in the last two, three, however many years it is since it all fell apart. Last night first I thought I had hit rock bottom. But then I realized that rock bottom was when I was at the cabin in the woods, as I think of it. When it stayed dark for at least a year, I think, I lost track of time and place. There was no food, and I had to feed a growing group of people. I thought that



was my job. Maybe some of them would have died if I had not... She stopped abruptly. Yes, that was rock bottom. You know that expression?

I can guess, King Arthur said. We might say, the floor.

Yes, the floor. From there to here. King Arthur... they tell me that is not really your name, but... Can you tell me, why?

It goes back a long time, he said. When I was younger than Prince, here (he motioned with his chin, pointing to his son), someone thought I was strutting, perhaps. Somehow the name stuck. We do that. We get a name some time when we are born, then have other names given to us sometimes for what we do, or are. Or perhaps for something we are not. I am not a king, nor a granman. I call my son Prince, but so far I am the only one. His name, Prince, has not stuck. His birth name is Kossee. In our language that is the name of a plant that grows very strong and upright. In the tongue of the country it can mean when you do honor to a person, like this (he made a slight bow to Katherine, without interrupting the rhythm of his powerful paddling). But, laughing, it can also mean yelling at someone. I prefer to think of him as the strong plant.

He is quite a boy, a strong paddler, Katherine said. Hardly a boy, though. We would call him a young man.

He is that. I am proud of all my children.

You have many?

Oh yes. And some died, when baby, or young child. After Kosí perhaps one more alive, doing good..

After a while Katherine said, almost whispering, You did not have sex with me last night... No.

After a silence, he continued, Did you want me to? No, I know you were afraid.

Not afraid, perhaps. To make love — what a strange expression that is, I never thought of it before — in the middle of other people. I think someone else was doing something, but...

Don't... I don't know the word, don't think about the strange. Nothing will be done to you that you do not want. In this land no man will do you harm. We all look out for you. Perhaps you are the first white woman we see so close, without all those clothes they wear. Our women, when they go to town before, they have to wear underwear, little white panties, and what you call it to cover your breasts?

We say bra.

We think that just draws attention. Black woman wearing two white flags! He laughed uproariously. Katherine could not help but join him.

Tillie called from the other boat, Can you share the jolly?

King Arthur was telling me about when the women went into town they had to wear panties and a bra, just drawing attention, white underwear against a dark skin!

Tillie laughed, Yes, that was fun. That was the first day. If they stayed longer it was easier to wear a kotomisi, a one piece gown big enough to cover you from shoulder to knee or below. Loose, very cool, particularly when you wear nothing underneath. What is this thing you people had about underwear? Why wear clothes under clothes?

I've never thought about that, Katherine said. Maybe it began in cold countries where layers gave warmth. And we were taught as children to change underwear daily, outer clothes could go longer without having to be washed. Or cleaned. You know, that is one thing I am learning here: we had so many customs that nobody questioned. I never thought about walking around naked before. Getting dressed is something we did every day of our life. That is the first thing we did to a baby, perhaps even before putting him to the breast. No, in the end we did not even do that. Babies were put in a box with a lid on it, with air pumped in. Supposedly hygienic, to protect the newborn from our bad germs. Yes, our control, our conditioning, began the first minute of life. And we never questioned any of it! Strange, strange indeed.

As an afterthought, she yelled to Tillie, How did you learn to wear clothes when you first went to Europe?

We were taught by an old missionary woman who lived near to where we are going, but not in town. She taught us how to dress, how to walk, how to eat, how to talk. And even so, we never felt quite at home there. Yes, we adjusted, but the strangeness never wore off.

Late afternoon, they reached the little settlement — almost a village — and met with Alive, Guinée, and Sossy. Soon others came by, curious no doubt about a scantily dressed white woman visiting with an escort of woods people.

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Anansí and Solomon sit by the side of the dark rushing river.

Solomon has been lecturing Anansí about entropy, the theory that says that all energies eventually run down. He stretches out his hands to encompass the flow of the river and the silence of the dark jungle across it. All that is flowing down, don't you see. All that water, the soil, the trees, are washing down into the ocean. All energy in this universe is slowing down, emptying into a void of... Nothing?

Anansí too stretches out her arms over the water, looks at him with a radiant smile, And, dear friend, Life! All that is Life! You think of dying, all the things we did wrong. But the earth is still here. And a few of us...

Yes, Solomon says, hesitantly, we were too stupid to see what we were doing. We almost destroyed our earth. We can never be so stupid again. How can we warn the people who are left?

Anansi does not respond right away. What can she say? Then she speaks, first softly, quietly, slowly: Let me tell my thinking the only way I know how to say this, dear friend. A story. This one you know well enough,. This water—and she points at the water flowing fast down to the ocean—gets to the ocean, and then what, eh? Hey, a whole new life! Now there is salt in the water—more salt, a scientist would whisper—and lots of other minerals, and oxygen, and plants and mountains, and coral, and fish! Animals! They say the ocean covers two thirds of this planet. Now I am the water, there must be lots to see. I want to see it all. That is what the water that is flowing there is going to say when it reaches the ocean. It brings soil and trees and blends smoothly and perfectly with all the other waters. This water here is dark brown, as you see, and the water in the ocean is transparent on the top, but on the bottom of the ocean all waters are black, because in deep places there is no light to see by. So, that water from here, NOW — THAT ONE! — did you see the one I meant?—that little plug of water is going to get down to the ocean in a few days. Of course on the way it meets many strange waters from other streams, and perhaps even rain, so that by the time he (let's say that this water is a he) gets to the ocean he is already used to waters of all colors and shapes. The ocean, man, that is something to look forward to! He sets out and he is lucky, he gets into all the right currents at the right time, and gets all the way to a very deep bottom where, truly, there is no light to see. But, he can sense there are big animals, and he still has some oxygen in him that he can give out to that poor worm that lies there. And as he gives the gifts that he received himself, ultimately from Her Majesty, the Sun (in this story the sun is feminine)... as he gets lighter and lighter, he goes up, up, up. Now he enjoys the light and the colors and the gay play of small fishes. And air bubbles! Look at them. Our little plug of water romps around, and laughs and has a great time until he reaches the very surface of the ocean. You already know what is going to happen, of course. The sun laughs too, and sends a strong ray of heat. He evaporates! He leaves one body, but very quickly finds himself part of a thick white cloud: a different body, maybe even ice. I forgot about ice. And steam, or mist. We too are water, aren't we, Solomon? I've forgotten the statistics, but a lot of us is water, no?

Solomon nods. He is beginning to get into her playful mood. He looks lovingly at her animated, wrinkled orange-brown face. Impulsively, he reaches to touch her cheek, How old are you Anansi?

She laughs her deep belly laugh, I don't know, synho (that means mister in Brazilian) we don't 222 have calendars. We don't even celebrate birthdays. We celebrate when it is time to celebrate. When the first rains come. When they finally stop. When a child is born, or dies, or caught his first big snake, then we celebrate. Before it all ended I met a white man here. An American scientist of some kind, he figured out from some things I remember that I must be 51 years old. That was perhaps five of your years ago, or just as perhaps, ten years ago. And you, Solomon?

He, in turn, bursts out laughing, I don't know either! Isn't that funny? When I woke up as a person, I was a little boy, probably a few moments before I would have died from hunger. There is no way to tell whether I was three or six years old. Six year old starving boys look like very

small children. I count on calendars for 51 years. So, you see, We are the same age. But get back to your story. The “plug” of water as you called it, him, is now lost in a cloud. Lost whatever identity he may have had.

Anansí looks at him with a warm smile that gets broader, lightly tapping his knee with one finger, I don’t know about identity. He is water. And now he is in a cloud, a tiny part of a big cloud that travels from there back to our mountains, and one of these days, he — this same plug of water, subtracted from, added to, having had all those adventures — rains down in the mountains over there. And soon it will flow past this very spot of rushing brown water again. You see how it flows through all those changes, places and energies, different forms, always circling, recycling...

Solomon laughs, you are a dreamer, a beautiful dreamer! But remember a few years ago, when the oceans were filling up with water and fish were dying. Rivers dried up, and smoke filled the air. Because we, humans, interfered with the cycles and it all blew up in our face. Or probably we blew it up in the end. Nobody knows what happened. I want to tell the ones who survived, like your people, not ever to be so stupid again.

Anansí, tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. They’re not “my” people, of course; you know that. Now it is the time for us to let things flow the way they flow. We, humans, must sit back and enjoy the moment. Give the earth a chance to recover from a perhaps lethal sickness. There will be scars, but the earth can grow a new skin. And we, you and I are the elders of the few left around us. What we can give to the young, you and I, is love for a badly wounded earth, Come, let’s bathe, let’s swim. The many wonders of water.

Naked in the water Anansí says, You want to play sister and brother, or lovers, or what? I’m enthusiastic but not very good at loving, and sister brother, I don’t know at all, really.

You mean, Solomon said, you sleep with a man, many men?

Of course, what do you think. What’s wrong? You look shocked. You’ve sworn monogamy with Katherine?

No. No, we have not sworn anything.

Long silence as they get out of the water, shivering as a breeze dries them quickly.

Solomon, breaks the silence, Why don’t you finish your story, and tell me what happened to OUR water, that is now in a cloud, or perhaps ice.

Oh, Sol, my Solomon, you know what is happening. See, that cloud? It is getting dark on the underside, that means she is pregnant, ready to give up many waters. Wait until late this afternoon, and our water will come back, but way up the mountains where it comes down as snow, then packs to ice for a while, and then slowly it melts, drips down, in tiny grooves in the rock, and eventually, maybe in six or seven moons, it will rush by here again. So, tell me, when is your entropy?

Did you say “when?”

Yes, when is it all going to run down? When did it start, all that energy you talk about? When? We don’t know, we think billions of years ago, not sure how many.

A billion, what does it mean?

You think it all just recycles, do you, he grumbles?

Of course. Everything recycles, that is part of all there is, what you call “creation.” As if someone—like you—with a fancy computer, designs a universe just so, and then lets it flare up and die again? Playing games? No, we think that what there is, these rocks we sit on, the river, the trees on the other side, with all their millions of leaves, the fish in the river, people, all of that is a mixture, each one a miracle of complexity, of water and air and iron and who knows what other parts. And all of us, and the water and the trees, make part of another something that you call a planet. And the planet, with all its innumerable complexities is part of a larger, infinitely innumerable complexity that you call a solar system, and then a galaxy, and then whatever you call it. And it all recycles, changes color and scent and meaning all the time. Isn’t that enough of a marvel? We think of that as All That Is. Or, What Is, or perhaps you call it God, or even Science. Anyway, we feel real close to What Is, because it is in every tiniest part of us. We are part of it.

Solomon sighs, then whispers, I understand your story.

She does not say anything.

Yes, I really understand. That very last part is hard for me. I can see how I have been trained, conditioned, to think that the parts are more important than the whole. I learned to think in exceptions. You see, I can take a cup and scoop up water; put it in an airtight container, and save it from going down to the ocean. I can build a dam to prevent the water...

Anansi had to interrupt. That’s how your medicine men think when they talk about prolonging life. What are they prolonging? Sure, you take blood, and run it through endless tubes, until the tube breaks, or the blood clots eventually, perhaps even evaporates, and the patient still dies. What have you gained with your dams and canals and...

Solomon stands up. Maybe it is time we were lovers?

The first time was clumsy. He didn’t enough, she did too much, then he did, she did. Next time better, lover, Anansi said. We’ll both learn each other.

Then, as they were lying side by side in her little hut, on the furs that were her bed, he asked, Is that what you do? You teach these people?

She shot up, twisting to face him, NO! I am learning, don’t you understand. You cannot teach, she said, almost with disgust. We can only learn.

But in our world — yes, the old world — our whole society was organized around the idea that we must teach people. Teach them to be able to make a living. You have to teach a carpenter how to be a carpenter.

And he learns that from a book? From a teacher?

Yes, all the tools we had, all the machines — he has to be told how to operate and maintain and what the dials say and what the switches are for.

And then, what? All that is dead information. He has to sit in the seat and touch the pedals, and feel the machine. He is the one who is learning. For hundreds of years you people forgot learning!

But Solomon cannot give up, He keeps on talking about fathers teaching sons.

Suppose the father is out of town, or sick in bed, don't you think the boy can learn to hammer a nail by himself, using his father's hammer and a nail that he finds on the ground? Anansi whispers.

He might smash his thumb, Solomon guffawed.

Exactly! Then he learns. Think of us. For four, five hundred years—probably thousands of years!—your people have been trying to teach us how to be like them. Do things the way they do. Be like them. We didn't want to be slaves, we didn't want to live in your world based on exploiting the very earth who is our mother. Exploiting people! We've been waiting for this day, for the day when finally your world destroyed itself because you were too set in your ways to learn what we always knew. Now is the time for you, and everybody who survived, to learn again. Learn to live as part of this earth, man! You cannot teach that, because you didn't know before, and you don't know now. We, all of us, have to learn. We have to listen very carefully, deeply. You know what, lover, tell you a secret, I have long thought that all those expensive experts you had in your world shared what they had learned, not what had been taught them somewhere. I'm sure that humans learn on the job. You learn by doing. After six months doing, you know what you are doing. You wasted all that effort to make people do what you wanted them to do, the way you wanted them to do it. And now you are here, in one of the jungles around the equator—perhaps one of the few surviving jungles—wanting to teach the survivors of whatever happened, is happening, not to make your mistakes again? We did not make your mistakes! Still want to stop the water from flowing, Solly? Has anyone every called you that?

Yes, one of my mothers did. She was small like you, very beautiful, and she did not like my name. I never liked it either, Can you imagine! It always sounded “old,” even when I was a child.

Darling, you undoubtedly were old, even when you were child. You're a very ancient soul, as I am.

There you go again. That is new territory to me.

What? You mean “soul?”

Yeah, I don't know what you mean by that word.

Relax, I don't either. I just meant that both of us have always known things that we may have learned in previous times around the cycle. Somewhere in the depth of the ocean we learned about seeing without light. When we were ice we learned about being still. When we were free, roaming the ocean, we explored. We learned all that long ago. That is what you brought in when you wrote that book that they wanted to give you the Nobel for.

How do you know that?

You yourself told me. You said you felt that was not original research, others had done the research. Of course others did the research. You were the one who learned from it, remembering what you already knew. You put the pieces together. That's what a genius does. They don't do the details. They have minds big enough to put what is already known together in new constellations. Such words, I use! This is not the way I usually talk, hope you realize that.

Solomon was now sitting up also, admiring her breasts, small and still nicely plump. You're right, he says, as he slowly stretches out a hand to touch a spot between her breasts. I worried where my insights came from. I thought maybe I was an extra-terrestrial, from somewhere else, you know?

No, you remembered. Come, I'm hungry. Let's see whether anyone has any extra food to share.

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Sossy hammered on the door where Alive and Guinée were taking a late afternoon siesta, Your friends are here, she said through the door.

Alive opened, Guinée behind her, putting on his pants. Who?

Guinée whispered in her ear, Solomon and Katherine, of course. From up river.

As they stepped outside, Katherine came, on the arm of King Arthur, walking as if on egg shells, taking careful little steps.

Katherine, you're hurt?

No, dear. But I'm not wearing a bra any more, and I'm not used to feeling myself so loosely flopping. And this gentleman is King Arthur. He and Tillie and three other men brought us here. We're on our way somewhere. Tillie can tell you.

And Solomon, Guinée asked?

He stayed with Anansi. He told me that I needed an adventure. As if my life had not been enough of an adventure the last few years. I think he wanted to get to know Anansi. Those two are on a level... I don't know how else to say it. But, he was right, the last two days (two, only two?) have been an adventure in ways I never dreamed of. An eye opener. Alive, I think I am

finally learning to be a whole new person. I feel like a child, I have to learn so much! And unlearn even more, she added with a slight sigh.

And this is Sossy, Alive introduced her. What do we do? Shake hands?

No, Sossy said, we kiss and embrace. "Hug," I think you call that?

They did: all of them, everyone with everyone else. Tillie and the rest of the men had joined the group. Then some other people from the budding village joined them. They feasted till late night, with drums, singing and dance, outside, under a quickly put up thatch roof on poles, with torches fiercely flaming in the slight breeze. Hard work, everyone sweating profusely. That meant they needed fluids. Someone had home-brewed beer. It tasted like nothing the American women had tasted, but it was obviously lightly alcoholic, and it quenched thirst. When Katherine finally, with much coaching from King Arthur, let go enough to get into the swing of things, she also finally understood that tomorrow is not yet. Now is all there is.

In fact, tomorrow was not the next morning, but the morning after that when the boat party left on their quest, seen off by the entire village.

King Arthur spoke for the travelers, Until we meet again. By the way, what is the name of this place?

Sossy and Headman looked at each other, at the other people of the village. Then they burst out laughing. We have not thought of that yet! As the two canoes were silently slipping away, Headman yelled, We'll tell you on your way back!

The morning after that, one of the women in the settlement gave birth to what seemed a healthy girl. Not the first child born after the Change, as people referred to it here. But children born before had all been born severely misformed, or unformed. Or, had died within a few days. Now everyone hovered uncertainly around this beautiful little girl. The first child that was born with the help of Sossy, who also was qualified to know that the baby seemed, so far, completely normal and healthy.

Alive felt her baby moving around. It was not her time yet, but, she felt a strange sense of her baby sharing the good luck, and the good looks of the little girl just born.. Maybe her child was a boy and... Oh, come on, she scolded herself. Don't get carried away. My child— our child!— must grow to be the man he is born to be. We cannot interfere.

Guinée, sitting next to her, on a bench under a shade tree—and who could not possible have known what had flitted through her head—said, as if he summed up his own thoughts, And then, when the child is born, she has her own destiny. We can but watch, maybe catch them when they fall.

Alive leaned into him. You're thinking of our child?



Yes, and then I thought about myself as a little boy. The first memories I have, that don't seem to fit with later memories. Memories of a real mother, a birth mother, and after that another mother who pushed and slapped me.

And you went your own way, anyway, didn't you?

Yes! But maybe all that paddling made me tougher.

And tough is good?

Well, I'm still here. Doesn't that say something about tough?

Men have a different idea about tough, you know. You think muscles and will. Women think of tough as giving birth to a child, being torn apart inside, and not failing to do what must...

Guinée looked at her, with concern. You worry about the birth?

Of course, I worry. And worry about whether the child is, you know, "normal."

What is normal, today, Guinée said quietly? Maybe normal cannot survive in a world that has not stopped changing yet. That's what I was thinking of. Maybe babies born now are not as we were. Maybe they need new defenses, new talents, new insights to survive in this world.

Hard to think that way, isn't it?

Yes, but we'd better learn fast, Guinée said, looking deep in her eyes.

Sossy, who had approached, overheard that last exchange. Sat on the ground, by Alive's feet. Looking up, she looked at both of them, I know so little about either of you, and yet I feel so close. I've never been a worrying person. People said, Oh, Sossy, she no care. I do care, you know. But I did not think much. I was good in school. And nursing. Then the Changes happened. Now I feel as if I am someone else. I don't remember who I was before. Now I care only about people. I used to think about money, having to buy things. I worried about my boy friend, or other times not having a boy friend! Now is so different. Do you feel that?

Alive reached down, put her hands on Sossy's shoulder. You say it well. Yes, I too can barely remember who I was before. Now I feel like a child, learning too much all at once... and growing a child inside at the same time!

Agh, Sossy said, no worry about the child. You're a wonderfully healthy woman, and your man is an awful good-looking man! How can your baby be anything other than wonderful?

She stood up, I must get on, I see someone coming to the Clinic. She laughed: what I call "clinic!" But it works, no? And you, she turned to Guinée, if you get tired of this lady, I'm available.

Guinée gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, I'll remember — if she'll ever let me go!

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Katherine and the boat party leisurely traveled through a landscape that did not change much, even though now they were going east as well as north: sometimes the sun was in their eyes that morning. Katherine faced King Arthur; occasionally one of them would speak; even more occasionally they would talk.

Until Katherine, out of the blue, it seemed, remarked, You know, King Arthur, I cannot keep my eyes off you. You paddle this canoe with such strength and yet it is not forced. I cannot get enough of your skin, the dark, almost blue-black color and the texture: so smooth covering all that muscle.

King Arthur smiled a secret sort of smile, and I keep looking at your pink skin, and wonder how you are different. All men learn from childhood that white women are forbidden. Dangerous. Getting involved with a white woman gets you into trouble, jail, prison, or a lynching. But when we are sleeping and you are in my arms you do not feel different. I could almost forget that you are what we called “white.” Of course we always knew that white people are rarely white. But, that white has so many other meanings. It means that you always wear clothes, that you cover some parts of your body at all times. It means that you eat with tools, that your hair is always combed. You wear shoes. You think different than we do. White people have that “attitude,” I think you call it. You know that you are better than us. We don’t feel that we are less or more than you, and at times we argued with you, but we found that white people could not understand. So we, here, in these lush woods, learned hundreds of years ago, to stay away. We were not afraid, but it was too much trouble to do all the things you required from us. You were the ones always talking about freedom, but you had enslaved yourselves. We were the ones who were free, but we did not advertise that! And now, you are here. The first white woman I have ever known as well as I know you. I’m still curious about you, and also I am still afraid. I know, of course, that the world has changed. Your world has probably crashed; our world is not much affected. Not yet, at least. I don’t think I need to be afraid of you, but it is part of me. Can you understand?

After a long pause, Katherine said, Yes, I understand. I too am afraid of you. Even though, in a way, I now know you more intimately than I have ever known a man. We were raised with a fear of black men. Oh, for many reasons that were not reasons at all, probably. One reason was that black men are supposed to have monstrously big penises.

King Arthur started to smile, but suddenly changed his facial expression (without for a moment breaking the rhythm of his paddling), And why would you fear that? Afraid I would not fit in you? Obviously, vaginas are made to allow babies to be born through there. We help our boys understand early that what you call “making love” is with, not to. We learn early that it takes two to make love, both have to enjoy intercourse. Always pleasure, never pain. We, here in these woods learn from very early that force never works, we have to work with everything we do. This jungle does not accept force. Why would the size of a penis be a problem? And suddenly his voice changed, softer, gentler. And with a pregnant woman we make doubly certain that we make gentle love. Dear lady, I’m uncomfortable talking so much. Thinking so much. I learn better by doing, feeling, with my hands, with my cock, my mouth, my lips...

Katherine was quiet for a few minutes. Softly she asked, How do you know I am pregnant? King Arthur's paddling seemed to skip a little, Isn't it obvious? Your face, your whole body shows a glow. Surely, that is no secret? And, you know, we also tell out boys that giving a pregnant woman a bit of our seed feeds the baby when it is given with great love.

Katherine sighed, I was so ignorant — WE were so ignorant. We were afraid of anything and everything, you know. We hid behind our words, our complicated thoughts, our so-called morals. You are so right. We learn only by doing, feeling.

They said not another word until they stopped briefly for a quick lunch of roots they spotted on one of the shores of the now wide river, and more fresh coconuts. As they were about to get into the canoes again, Katherine said, almost casually, And Solomon has become lovers with Anansi.

King Arthur looked at her. Yes, I imagined they would. And?

Katherine hesitated. And...? I don't know. Nothing, probably. I went on the plane that brought us here because I thought I was in love with Solomon. When we were here I saw how he and Anansi were meant for each other. And, another "and," I am filled with a need for you, King Arthur! And then I think, I am a foolish old woman.

Old for what? Love? Have sex? Not too old to make a baby! Don't you people know that humans are never too old for love and sex? He turned to Tillie's canoe, raised his voice to reach across the water, Today, I want to find a cozy place early. I need some time with this woman in my boat! we need to do some serious learning.

They all laughed.

There were fewer trees here; the afternoon was hot. Katherine was aware of her sunburn. Before the day cooled, King Arthur (they were now in the lead) sharply turned his canoe into a creek that almost immediately led to a small lake. The lake—if that is what it was; it could be a swamp, perhaps—had several small islands, some with big trees to give some shade. They made fast on one of the smaller islands, but it was high and had one big shade tree. They stretched, wandered around, relieved themselves.

Tillie reached into her canoe to get a little package wrapped in a big leaf, tied with some grass, that she gave to Katherine, whispering in her ears, This is fat from the tapir we ate the first night. Remember? I often need some lubrication, this works fine. Here, take it.

Katherine blushed. She discovered that, indeed, it worked fine.

Tillie and the three men went to another island, bigger and it had a spring on it, one of the men remembered. It would not hurt to take baths! As they left, one of the men called back, We'll get dinner.

The love making was a slow and careful concern for both Katherine and King Arthur.

After: I cannot call you Katherine, for some reason; the name is too “white” in my mouth, said King Arthur. May I give you a name?

Yes, she said with enthusiasm. Even before I came here, I wanted a new name: they all had new names when I was still in the cold country. For a while I was called Visitor, but that made me feel so isolated, as if I did not belong to the group that we came to think of as the Family.

Katherine does not fit you now. I want to name you Mahoni. Our word for mahogany, the tree.  
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A rich red wood, not too different from the color of your skin. And you are like that tree, slow growing, looking almost soft with green, but inside hard as... , hard as that wood.

It sounds like “my Honey,” as if I belonged to you...

No... NO! Of course you do not belong to me. People cannot be owned. That is the deepest knowing we have. A few hundred years ago we ran away as soon as we were brought to this part of the world as slaves. Never again can we be owned. Nothing can be owned. Our children must be their true selves. It is sometimes difficult to find out who we are, but how can one be anyone else?

I love Mahoni. I love the name, I like the wood — it was highly prized in my old world. Most of all I love a name you’ve given me. Bestowed on me. I am trying hard not to talk so much, not to think so much. Please, be patient with me. Come, she reached to take one of his big hands.

Make love again, I hope you mean! All this talk...

They had an after-dark dinner with the others, Everyone accepted Mahoni as the right name for who had been Katherine. Later, when they got back to their little island, they found a huge anaconda rolled into the hollow depression they had made earlier: the hollow King Arthur had made, lined it with soft leaves.

Tonight we must join the others, King Arthur said quietly. We cannot disturb the queen. Mahoni looked up at him, questioning.

He gently tugged her away, turning her around to go back to the canoe. There was a moon, soft light.

Mahoni did not say what had been on the tip of her tongue; learning to not talk the first thing that came into her head. She reveled into a new glow of love given and received so entirely.

On the water, King Arthur said, We are honored indeed that the queen of these woods sleeps in the bed we made. Maybe it was still warm from our passion.

And perhaps she smelled us, Mahoni said. I could smell her!

They spent the night in a big huddle that night, the men taking turns being awake and aware. Mahoni slept like a child, safe in King Arthurs massive arms. There was hardly any wind and the night was strangely quiet where they slept, but the lake—or swamp?—came alive at night.

Splashing, slithering, walking, calling, screaming, yelling. The men did not sleep much, but they rested. Soft talk occasionally. Touching. Smiling. Young Prince giggled.

The next morning Mahoni asked, Do you know who all those animals are? Can you tell from the sounds they make?

Oh yes, they all nodded. All our lives we hear those people, we listen, we get to know them. Of course!

Mahoni announced, almost formally, I am a new person with a new name. I thank you for being with me. I feel... very close to all of you. And, she said softly, nobody says my name as if it were “my Honey!”

That is not what the word is. It is mah-hoh-nee.

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They traveled all day, leaving the swamp early in the morning. In the afternoon they approached what, from the sounds, could be a “city where no city had ever been.” King Arthur asked for a plan. Maybe they better send one person first, to see what is going on. Or, watch them from afar. The noise was not pleasant. As if people were fighting, things were falling. Perhaps gun shots. They found a sheltered place, away from the river. There was just enough water to take the two canoes and hide them under some trees. The men decided not to go hunting, they found roots and some leafy vegetables that they cooked over a small smokeless fire.

In the evening it became clear that this was no city. A few people can make a lot of noise, if they are arguing, fighting, not getting along in any case.

They moved further away from the group of arguing people, but the noise carried. Screams of pain, a gun shot, music perhaps, occasional drums, sticks beating rhythmically and then out of control.

The group sat around King Arthur. Maybe one of us should look. I’ll go, said Prince. One of the other men said, maybe we should approach from different sides, one a little behind the other. Nobody voted, but that was what the group decided.

Prince approached carefully, a step at a time. The other man, who Tillie called Sep, crept to the other side. Both disappeared from sight, behind bushes and trees. There was a stream running through the place that did not have much water.

The noise continued but now screams seemed louder. Or, there were more.

Sep came back first, visibly shaken; Prince a minute later. Both were almost too shocked to speak. They are crazy people They... cut each other. They eat each other Sep said with horror. They’re drugged, or something. They...

Mahoni's first impulse had been to rush in and 'help'. But when what the two boys said penetrated, she shivered and sought shelter in King Arthur's arms. He turned, walked toward the noise, sniffing the air. He stood for a long time, sniffing.

When he turned back, his face was closed, his eyes deep dark. We turn around and go back, he said.

He would not say another word all that day as they paddled back, up the river.

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A small child walked in, with an even smaller child on one hip. The child listened with a cocked head. Are you talking?

Anansí and Solomon stopped what they were doing, looked down at the little boy. Anansí answered gently, Yes, we were trying to find a way to talk, but we had some difficulties.

The little boy did not take his finger out of his mouth as he sat down in a cozy corner of Anansí's hut. He moved the baby to his lap in a dance of movements that showed he had done this before.

The adults continued trying to find a common language that would be more to her liking than English. Not French, not Brazilian, although that had possibilities, Solomon knew a few words of Portuguese, but no Brazilian.

This is nonsense, you know, he said. If there is a language that does not have such ugly associations with possessive pronouns, we would not argue about words.

Not words, Anansí said. And we're not arguing. We, I, am looking for a language that does not have a structure that I resist. It is the structure of a language that determines how we think. I don't like to be forced to think in terms of owning everything I talk about. That twists my thinking. I go crazy trying to imagine that I own something, or an infinity of somethings. I stumble over possessive pronouns, as you call those kinds of words. My this, your so and so. I don't own anything.

Except your body, Solomon said.

My, my, mine; I own this body? Don't you hear how silly that is? Meaningless. I am my body. You think you control your body—because that is what 'owning' means, no? Dear friend, if there is any owning, it's the other way around. My body owns me! The earth owns us. But that is equally as silly. And anyway, I thought of a name for you: Anansí.

But that is your...

Ha, see, I caught you! Do I own that name? Hah! If I own it, I can give it away. It's yours now. Solomon was quiet for a long time. Finally he spoke, hesitantly at first, Or... let's see... what if we agreed that possessive pronouns do not mean owning, but instead mean that two aspects go together. A square has corners. A square does not own those corners, they are part of what a

square is. And, similarly, your name does not mean that you own it, or control it, but that it is part of you. Like your face is part of you, your unique smell and feel is part of you.

Anansí (female) laying back luxuriously, reaching her arms over her head. Si Senhor lover, let's agree that. Come, be a part of me, Anansí (male).

The small boy with a smaller baby got up and left. The boy talked to the baby that was fast asleep.

Old people talk all the time...

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That evening the group sat close to a little fire. Mahoni felt Solomon calling. After a short hesitation, she opened her mind. She thought she would have to explain about King Arthur, how she felt, what had happened, the new name... but, of course, that was not necessary. Solomon kept saying he was now Anansi.

Mahoni asked, Is she dead?

No, no, we're both Anansí. You know it is me, don't you? Just as I know it is you, regardless of where you are, or what your name is. There was a good kind of love between them. No longer "being in love," but loving. Then her friend continued, She, the other Anansi, told me about the crazies you saw today.

Mahoni could not help interrupting, I did'nt, the boys did.

Yes, yes, your group of travelers saw. Anansí (female) says they used a vine from the woods, but they use it wrong. it is a terrible poison when you use it wrong. They're all going to die. She says King Arthur is very wise to not even come close. Dangerous that. When you come back, she, Anansí, will call a big meeting of all the people and she will talk. She thinks a moon from now. In the mountains. You meet us there.

As Mahoni turned to share with King Arthur, until she realized that he had just had the same message. Yes, he said, we meet in The Mountain. He said that as if it were a known place. Suddenly he sat up, That means, Mahoni, you go with me to my home first, and we spend some time there, and you meet my family, before we all go to The Mountain!

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For one thing, Alive said, with anxiety in her voice, Babies growing up in a world like this..., it's a pretty loose, lawless world!

Guinée giggled, Lawless! You want someone, or a group of people to tell you who you are, what you can do, what is forbidden? Hey, Alive. Look around you, we have... what? Maybe fifty people living here. We had a wonderful spontaneous party. We'll have other parties. And some of us will die. Babies will be born. But we work together pretty good, don't you think?

Yes, I feel that, too. Sossy has told me that this part of her country was a dangerous area; she talked about ‘bandits’. They would rob people who traveled through. They killed white people, or perhaps only those they did not like.

Because, Guinée said with emphasis, when you start having rich people, there are others, who are poor. The rich have to protect themselves. Private armies, then governments that make laws and more laws, then you must have police to enforce those laws, prisons to put unwanted people in, then you need an army, and in the end you blow the whole thing up.

Is it so simple, Alive asked innocently?

Maybe not; probably not. But power or wealth for just a few people makes others feel dissatisfied. If you can be rich, I want to be too. Better everyone poor. I’ve lived with my rich family, who were constantly afraid, and I’ve lived with the poorest of the poor. They laughed and sang, even when they were dirty and hungry. They did not envy the rich. Maybe it is envy, wanting, that brought us to whatever it was we suffered the last many years.

Alive, I don’t know any of that. I think I don’t want to know.

Guinée shrugged his shoulders. We can’t know. This is not over, of course. Who knows what new diseases will jump up. Or... I don’t know what could happen tomorrow. But we live, don’t we? We live and love; what else can I want?

After a short silence, Alive spoke softly, I seem to have forgotten all about the math constructions that filled my head before. Now I just feel in my body. I feel the growing inside, I seem to know what I need to eat to make me a better baby-growing woman.

Chérie, it becomes you! You’re glowing...

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Mahoni said to King Arthur, You know what I am learning from your people?

“My” people? I have no people who belong to me! He sounded put out, as if she had misunderstood, or not heard, the very basic value of this culture. I know, you mean the people here, in the forest. But nobody is “my” people, he said firmly.

Mahoni felt put in her place. Thoughtfully, she began, I know. I know that. What I wanted to say is that I greatly admire the pride, and the self-assured way of the men and women I have met here. In my work, ages ago, I knew black people. I knew them when they were sick, that was my job. They too had a pride that could not be shaken, but now I realized that we, the people in power, mostly white people, did not allow black people to feel that pride. So, it was always twisted.

King Arthur did not answer for quite a while, then he said, And we here always heard that America was a melting pot, all races were equal...

Yes, legally, but in truth people were not thought equal...



He interrupted, We knew, of course that was not true. We had enough tourists to get to know your people, he said, with emphasis.

Mahoni had nothing more to say, but she made a firm resolve that from now on she would have to be more careful saying what was in her mind. Or, at least, think first, censor what came out of her mouth. No, that was wrong. She must learn to change her thinking. From the bottom up!

But before that new command to herself could take effect, she couldn't help one more try, But you talk about "your" son!

Never! I may say, The boy I fathered, or I am the boy's father. But he is not mine. He belongs to himself.

King Arthur touched Mahoni lightly on the shoulder. She almost jumped up. She smiled a wan smile, I was dreaming of the other King Arthur.

There are many Kings Arthur, King Arthur said.

And they are all like you, the very essence of chivalry and all powerful. What a combination! We learned to think of kings as ancient myths, embodying some desirous quality...

King Arthur shook his head. Are you still in the dream with another King Arthur?

Mahoni looked at him for a long second, then burst out in tears.

Without thought or intent King Arthur reached out and held Mahoni, who now sobbed even more deeply. Sometimes she spoke; fragments. The essence of chivalry... seeing the noble savage... but it's true!... he is the essence of a word he cannot know... why do I see?... how can I...?

Reluctantly at first he softly brushed her hair; hair such as he had never touched before; feeling very different than "real" hair.

Mahonni cried for a long time. King Arthur had to move the leg that was under her several times. Then she sat up, turned a little to face King Arthur, and said, You know, I must have fallen asleep, had a sort of dream, but suddenly I saw differently. A very confusing experience, seeing something as if in color. No, not that exactly, but it has an extra dimension added to it. So that I saw myself, and you, the wonderful man whose name is King Arthur, and another King Arthur, who... is still remembered as what we now call a gentleman. A gentle man. And I saw you as that gentle man, and more, you are that gentle man, and... and, more. You who are black and in this deep forest are the gentleman that no longer existed in our... I mean the dead world.

King Arthur said, Is that why you were crying, because that world is dead?

Yes, maybe that was part of it. But, no, it is also something else. And I have to say this to get it out of my system. I have never been so close, intimate, with a man so black. No, with any

man! And all that that means. I never accepted it then, so why should it even come up now? I don't understand myself.

King Arthur said quietly, You, Mahoni — or perhaps for a little bit you were Katherine again? — are the first white woman I have been this close with. And I'm supposed to see you as stupid, cruel, dangerous, rich, and many more things. But I do not see those things in you. So, I think, perhaps this woman is not really white. But I know now how the skin feels, and your hair that almost does not feel like hair to me. And I cannot keep my eyes away from the smoothness of that mahoni-colored skin, and hard inside...

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Lover, I want to show you what this medicine is, Anansí whispered as they were lying on her furs. Do you mind if I enter your mind?

Anansí (male) sat up, Why so formal?

Because this is important.

Yes, you may show me.

Then relax, lie down beside me.

Anansí (female) began by showing what seemed like an imagine of the woods they were in, except at a higher altitude, he knew. A hand made a cut in one of the vines, and immediately put a gourd under the cut to catch the fluid. Looked like water, he thought.

No, the raw juice of that plant is a deadly poison; it is one of the things we dip arrows in. Deadly. Then she showed the fluid being cooked — not quite boiled: when it began to bubble, it was taken off the fire. A woman was cooking. When it had cooked enough (no explanation what “enough” might be) she covered it with leaves, then wrapped up the package, and carefully put it in the crock of a tree. And left.

Next—which he knew was some time later, not the same day, maybe several days later—a man came, opened the package, smelled it. There was a fuzz on the surface of the fluid in the gourd. With infinite patience the man skimmed off the fuzz, with the help of a small feather, and then with a blade of grass. Then wrapped it up again, and put it back where he had found it.

Anansí (female) said, out loud, And this is repeated, a woman, then a man, will skim off the surface. Maybe three times— the more often it is “cleaned” the stronger the medicine. The last man who finds it, inspects it, and perhaps skims one last time, is the shaman. He smells it deeply.

The imagines are vivid in Ananasí's mind. Solomon too took the deep breath he saw the shaman take. It was as if he smelled the complex musty scent of the fluid. The fluid had become thicker, it did not slush but lazily moved in waves as the shaman moved the gourd.

Anansí (female) spoke out loud again. That was the old man, there is a new shaman not far from here, who is less cautious with his preparations. And different shamans have different

rituals. A few drops are usually enough to send him in a trance. You must have guessed, that is what the fluid is. It affects people in many different ways. The shaman is trained to use the confusion to slip into a trance. Confusion is not quite the right word. It is as if all senses are cross-wired. I smell what I see, I hear what I feel.

He asked, And you? You have tried it?

Yes, she said. She showed him images.

Dangerous, he said quietly.

Yes, she repeated. Very dangerous if it is not prepared so carefully.

And this mountain? Is it so far from here that you asked them to come in one moon?

No... it is not far. There are mountains where Sranan and Brazil meet—nobody quite knows where the boundary is. But they know what I mean, it's a hill, you would call it probably. Bare, a strange place, an almost perfectly round clearing in thick forest. That hump makes a perfect meeting place, the woods offer protection and places to spend the night. Or, some people prefer to sleep away from the trees. When I first came here, that is where I would receive the oldest people, to learn from them. They know when I say meet at The Mountain, it is urgent, and important for all of the people. Not everyone will come, of course. Maybe not even half of the people. But the ones who come will spread the message.

And your message; what is that, he asked? You're going to tell them to stay away from the drug?

What would you tell them, she asked seriously?

Me? I have no experience with drugs, or shamans.

Didn't those Papua that you lived with for a year have a shaman, didn't they have alcohol, or drugs?

Yes, he answered, as he remembered nights and ceremonies in those other high mountains. Yes, they did. But everyone knew that only the shaman had been trained to use something dangerous, and how much to use, and how to prepare it.

The people here, she said, know the same taboo. This poison is for shamans only. But, the people that the travelers saw were not the forest people, they were town people, mostly Hindus (that is what we call people from India and South Asia) and halfbreed white, and maybe some other mixes. But town people. King Arthur told me that when he sniffed the smell of the vine from some distance, he could tell it was the raw juice. Not cooked, not skimmed. Apparently it acts something like rabies: uncontrollable thirst, and the need to bite. They were drinking the water of a filthy little stream and biting each other, and even themselves. That shocked the boys.

But, what are you going to say, Anansi (male) asked after a pause?

Lover, you did not answer my question. What would you say?

Anansi (male) was still thinking. After a few minutes he said, I would say something about this is a new world, don't fall back into the unhealthy practices of the old world, entertainment that becomes propaganda, so many voices, so many seductions, push and pull, but everything loose, not anchored.

Precisely, she said. And then with a wide smile, That is what you are going to tell them in English, I shall translate.

Me? I am going to talk?

Who else! We are together, you talk, I talk. But neither of us gives speeches. That too is old world. We talk with whoever is there. And even then, we don't talk much. We just are there, and they are there, we share life. You've met Yosef, and others. Yosef is a granman, he is supposed to be judge and jury. But he talks very little, and lets people solve disputes by themselves. He is an umpire! (she laughed) We don't need police and jails to enforce anything. What a strange word in English: en-force. Always force, power, violence. That is not our way, Our way is to sit around a fire in the night, talk softly, sit close together, looking at flames dancing.

Solomon asked softly, And what do you talk about, then?

Oh... our world. Our loved ones, or perhaps even our enemies. A rare bird I saw. Clouds. Sickness, death, births. And now we talk about you and who is now called Mahoni, and the woman Alive, and her mate Guinée.

What do they talk about me?

I don't hear much of that talk, Anansi (female) said. Probably about you and me. And whether you really are San. What a pity it is that we cannot understand when you talk, because they have heard you are very smart. Your orange skin and your height, the same as this Anansi.

Do they get confused by my new name that is also your name?

Yes, probably, and she laughed uproariously. We'll see how that works at the meeting on The Mountain.

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On their way back the two canoes separated at a small lake, Tillie and her men went one way, while King Arthur, Mahoni and Prince another, on their way to King Arthur's village. It took more time to go upriver, but after a few days they arrived at a bustling landing place, among a small flotilla of canoes, much laughter on the shore, people carrying things to and from the canoes. A fair-sized village. There was a large open space with ground that looked smooth as if paved. A few huts were around the central area, most of them disappearing into the woods. Mahoni felt very conspicuous, as they approached the landing. There was a crowd of people, obviously eagerly waiting for King Arthur and his new woman. As they stepped ashore, stretching after sitting for a few hours, a very tall man pushed his way through the crowd, and hollered some loud greeting. When the people heard the voice, they made way, so that the tall

man walked regally through a lane of people to greet them. King Arthur stepped up, laughed loudly and greeted the tall man with exclamations and hand clasps. He turned around, beckoned Mahoni to come closer and said, in English, this is the Granman Keess. He says he is honored to meet the new healer; I told him we are honored to be so loudly greeted by him! Mahoni did not say much, tried to smile. Soon a large, very round woman, took her by the hand and said something that Mahoni could not understand. The woman pointed to herself, and said in a low, but booming voice, Me King Arthur woman, come we scrub water! They went to one of the huts, where there was a western style bath tub, filled with greenish water, but warm. Mahoni stepped out of her panties (the only clothes she wore) and stepped in the bath. The woman, whose name was Kai, she said, scrubbed her with some roots that made the water foam a little. Another woman came to wash her hair, and while it was still wet combed harshly with a wooden comb, beautifully carved. After the bath Mahoni was given a piece of cloth, bright orange with dark patterns that looked like jungle vines, and taught how to wrap around and tuck it in, so that it stayed up. The two women looked approvingly,

Now you good, Kai said, ver' good!

King Arthur had disappeared with the granman, but now came to admire the new looks of his new woman. Yes, good, very good, he smiled.

The village did not quiet down until late afternoon. Apparently many of the people had been visiting from nearby villages; groups went home, one after another. When dark had dropped like a curtain a large meal was served to whoever showed up. Mahoni had not eaten since morning; King Arthur had eaten with the visiting granman and others.

Finally, after an abundant meal, much laughter, Mahoni and a few others sat around a small fire. King Arthur asked Mahoni whether she was happy?

Happy? Yes, probably. That word has gone from my vocabulary, but yes, now that you mention it... The only thing that bothers me is that I am not sure how to relate to your wife.

King Arthur roared! You mean, you think she is jealous? We don't know those emotions. She is glad, probably, that I will leave her alone for a while. Those other women who helped you, those are also my wives. But Kai is my first wife, she is the one my parents chose, when I was fourteen, or fifteen perhaps. We've been together for a long time. We know each other.

And she, has she had lovers, Mahoni asked?

Oh, of course. That tall granman you met today, he is one of them. You too have had other lovers, and will have more, he added.

Mahoni looked pensive, A very different world indeed.

King Arthur looked at her troubled expression and asked kindly, Are you scared?

No, not really, but for an old woman like me it is quite a change. I was a spinster for so long, and now... Tell me, King Arthur, other than Prince, do you have many more children with all your wives?

Yes, undoubtedly. But here we say that a woman never can be sure who the father is. Sometimes there is a likeness, like Prince, he looks like me. And sometimes it is obvious that there is no likeness. Numbers are not important.

But..., Mahoni thought out loud, who would inherit. do your sons carry your name, grandchildren... Family? Who do you consider your family?

You, my dear. And Kai, and everyone you saw today, and many people who are not here. Yes, everyone probably is family. Aren't we all related somehow?

Well, for instance, your house. You own it, don't you?

We don't own, King Arthur said with a stern emphasis. The house does not belong to anyone, it is just a place where someone can live.

Anyone, Mahoni said with almost a challenge.

King Arthur looked at her, What are we talking? A house? Yes, I live here, come let's go to sleep. It is late.

Mahoni followed, dragging her feet. Do I live here too, she asked?

If you want. Yes, of course. You can sleep where you want.

And with who I want?

Of course. This is a strange way to talk, King Arthur said, shaking his head.

Inside the house it was dark; the embers of the little fire outside threw just enough light inside to see that there was nothing in it, except some pots on the far wall, and a raised platform on the left, hooks in the wall for what probably were hammocks hanging straight down. King Arthur lay down on the raised platform. Mahoni did not quite know what she would do, what she wanted to do, what options she had.

You can take a hammock, if you prefer, King Arthur mumbled, almost asleep.

A few minutes later Mahoni lay down next to him. But it was quite a while before she could relax enough to fall asleep.

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Preparations were made for the meeting on The Mountain. Not everyone in the village would go, Mahoni learned, only a few people from here. But there would be a few people from other villages, as well. How many villages were there, she wondered. How many would be at The Mountain. And what was this mysterious "The Mountain?" Nobody had known how to answer such a simple question. A place, where the tribe, or several tribes, sometimes meet to discuss

things. What kind of things? Whatever needs to be talked about. It was several days before Mahoni understood that it was unimportant to have expectations, foreknowledge of the place, or what was going to happen. Anansí had announced that she would be there, she had invited others to come, and so, some would go to hear Anansí. Wasn't that enough to know?

That night Mahoni called Solomon, but did not reach anyone. She tried it again later; again nothing. Early in the morning, before daybreak, Solomon answered.

Dear Katherine! What a surprise, we have not talked like this, or seen each other, for a long time.

My name now is Mahoni.

Yes, yes. I remember. I know. I haven't seen you since you became Mahoni, so in my memory you are still... But I shall remember. And...

But before he could think another thought, Mahoni interrupted, Would it be possible for us to meet? I'm not sure where I am in relation to your village, and I don't know whether I can just ask someone to take me to your village. I know so very little of this world, but... I would like to see you; I need to see you.

Do you want me to come there?

No, I would prefer to see you somewhere other than here.

As she had hoped, King Arthur immediately arranged for someone to take her to Anansí's village, to see her old friend.

One of his many sons, Mahoni thought, a very young man came to escort her to a canoe. When she asked how long it would take to get there, the young man, 'Annes, looked surprised. Then, very casually: an hour.

Mahoni burst out laughing, That was a foolish question. I guess I wanted to know whether we would get there before night. It is already late morning...

'Annes smiled, a bit nervous now, Oh yes, probably. Perhaps.

Without any further preparation they took off, 'Annes paddling upstream. She noticed that he carefully steered around obstacles, avoiding as much as possible any strong current.. Neither of them said much. The slow rhythm lulled Mahoni to sleep.

They got to the village just at sunset. Solomon waited, helped her out of the canoe. 'Annes hauled the canoe out of the water, and disappeared in the almost dark.

Did you eat, Solomon asked?

No, not since this morning, but I did not do anything, am not very hungry, but thirsty! Where is Anansí? Is she here?

No, she had to go to a neighboring village where a woman is having a difficult birth. The 244 midwife came to get her. She said, she might be away a few days. When we shared thoughts — this morning; not all that long ago—it seemed you were anxious, or emotional about something. Do you want to talk?

In voice, out loud, you mean? Yes, I want to talk with my voice, not in my head. I have spent so much time with King Arthur that I thought I was getting to understand him, but then, the other day—no, it was yesterday—when we came back, and I met his wife. His first wife. And, quite casually, he told me there are other wives. And he does not know how many children he has. I feel very alien in this jungle.

She felt tears running down her face as she talked. Solomon reached over and touched her face, but did not say anything.

I felt that I wanted to be with someone from my old world, and... She continued after a little pause, Actually, I was thinking I wish I could talk to another white person and of course you're not white either. I guess I am the only white person in this world. That terrifies me!

Solomon still did not say anything, but he moved closer. They were sitting around a tiny fire one of the women had made for them. There were no other people visible, although the soft murmuring of voices sounded through the night noises of the forest. They each had a bowl of fragrant soup but neither of them ate.

When he did not say anything, Mahoni went on, No clothes. These people wear no clothes. None at all sometimes. At least when we were in the canoe, when I was with King Arthur and some other people. Tillie was with us, too. And some other men. One was King Arthur's son, Prince. King Arthur is an amazing man. He is powerful, big, muscled I mean. And yet he is the essence of gentleness. I don't feel any stress, tension, certainly no violence in these people, although they hunt, and kill animals. They don't seem to "think," worry I mean. King Arthur is a real gentleman. That was an expression we used for a man who respected women, was kind and attentive. Had manners. Not our kind of manners perhaps. He helped me, took care of me, accepted me as I am. I'm not sure any man has ever done that before.

Solomon interrupted, quietly, But I did!

Yes. Yes, you did. But somehow I feel you as someone from my old world, and maybe that is presumptuous. You're not even American.

Mahoni, Katherine, I know what you are saying, and yet I am surprised. I too have felt very alien in this society, although I have experienced nothing but acceptance and kindness from these people. Perhaps Anansi helped me be in this world. At first I made a great effort to adapt, to let go the many deep-seated ideas, prejudices, I had. That did not work. Anansi helped me be in the present. This is the way it is. For now at least. And living now, moment by moment, in this world, is very good. I am really happy here. The only thing I miss is a bath. These people are clean, but I miss a warm bath.



Mahoni laughed, Then you must come to King Arthur's village! They have a bathtub, and they make hot water. The water is kind of brownish, and it smells like the river, but it is warm and makes you feel wonderful.

They were quiet for a long time. Solomon put another stick of wood on the little fire, and talked, hesitatingly at first, You remember when I visited you in the woods? How surprised I was that you wanted to come with us, leave those people. And then, we had a good time on Saba, didn't we? He turned to look at Mahoni, but it was too dark to see much. He went on, And then you went with King Arthur, and I stayed with Anansi, and she and I discovered we have much in common.

Mahoni interrupted, Everybody knew that Anansi and you were lovers. As King Arthur and I were—are—lovers. Every now and then I think about the last few years. How many years is it, do you know? Three, four, five? It seems ages, lifetimes. The changes are more than I can deal with. Now, here in this land of only black people with peculiar customs, I feel lost. I am lost. I don't know what to do. How can I adjust?

One day at a time. One moment at a time. Anansi told me that King Arthur thinks very highly of you.

How does she know? Well, of course she knows. She seems to know everything that goes on. Then she added, almost bitterly, I barely met her. She talks with people, often.

It was the dreamy flickers of the fire that made each of them follow their own path of thinking, and yet feel close.

Solomon, again starting slowly, You know that talking inside never seemed "real" to me, although it was real enough to fly all the way from Africa to see your group! Of course I know it is real, but... I think I needed time alone, so I shut myself off. And when I was half asleep, you called me. I don't know what to tell you, other than just let go, live each moment as it comes.

Mahoni felt tears again, but ignored them. With a choking voice she said, Now you and I could sleep together, tonight. And nobody would think anything of it. Probably they would think it strange if we didn't. But I cannot handle that.

You don't have to handle anything. When you are ready to sleep, we'll go inside. There is a large sleeping platform, big enough for two without touching each other. Or, if you prefer, I could sleep in a hammock. My dearest friend, it is not important!

But you don't know what it is to be the only white woman in an all black world!

I certainly do know what it is to be the only black man in an all white world! And a strange, short, small black man at that. I invented that story about being San as an excuse. Anansi thinks that I may really have some San in me. But, in any case, I do know what it is to be different. But, believe me, in this new world, IT IS NOT IMPORTANT! And you have a beautiful tan, you really look the color of mahogany. And you look healthy. You've gained some weight, but firmed

up your flesh. In fact, you are quite beautiful! And, as an almost unconscious afterthought, And radiantly pregnant!

For a moment Mahoni, Katherine, was shocked into speechlessness. Everyone seems to know that, except me. But no, of course I know that. Have known for a long time. From Saba...

That was a good time there, wasn't it?

Solomon, you may be a father. Did Anansi tell you?

Yes, it is so obvious. Of course it occurred to me also that I may be a father, a father-to-be.

Now I want to go to sleep, but I want to sleep alone, by myself. If that platform is big enough we can make some kind of barrier between us. If that is needed, she asked quietly?

Dear Mahoni, Katherine, when have I ever forced myself on you?

Many times —no, you did not force me, I forced myself on you, Solly!

Solomon winced. I don't like—as you know!—that name. Anansi now calls me Anansi! Why, because you are so close?

Something like that, it is sort of a title, I think. Do you know what the word means?

Yes, Tillie explained to me. A spider?

Yes, the small animal that is smart, like the fox in Europe, like coyote in America. Now, let's sleep. It must be late, I do not hear any more voices.

With almost a sob that ended in a laugh, And I am tired from... And then, only yesterday, again, I decided not to worry so much, not to think the old way... King Arthur seems to know it is a girl. I did not even know I could have children at my age, whatever that is. Mahoni took him by the hand. I really am tired, even though my body feels great. All that sun, and sitting in canoes... We'll talk again tomorrow.

They did not notice that a woman had come to douse the fire with ashes.

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The next morning, before Mahoni and Solomon were fully awake Anansi came back. Her first words were, Mahoni, I need sleep! She put her hand on Mahoni's stomach, Oh, this is a very special child! I am happy for all of us. Only then did she embrace and elaborately kiss Mahoni, who was not totally awake yet, and did not quite know how to take this greeting. Anansi occasionally turned her head to look at Solomon, Wake up, dear, the Healer Woman obviously knew to heal herself. That is unusual, you know!

Solomon interrupted what he knew could become an animated, but long rambling talk. Hey, your first words were that you were so tired, you want to sleep?

Anansi stood back, holding Mahoni's hand, as if she were reading it, but looking to Solomon, You are right, lover, but first I need something to eat, I think. Have you two eaten?

Later, the three of them, soon joined by others, sat around a new little fire, eating a kind of cakes baked on the edge of the fire, in the ashes. With fresh coconut water.

When Anansi had gone inside her hut to sleep, Mahoni and Solomon washed as best they could, with some lukewarm water someone had brought in a container made of bamboo, or some other root or stem. Mahoni remembered Solomon's remark, and said softly, Come back with me to King Arthur's village and you can have a real bath! And immediately she added, I know he would say it is not his village.

Yes, you're right. That is an obsession with these people.

Anansi thinks it is the "structure" of English and perhaps other languages, to have so many possessive words. English is also the only language that capitalizes I. By talking with her I understand that these people remember three hundred years ago they were brought here as slaves. As property. They keep that memory alive. That is ingrained in their being. Owning anything is bad, amoral. Against all that the earth is. Humans cannot own things, and certainly not other people.

Mahoni did not answer but tears ran down her cheeks again. Finally she mumbled, A sure sign of pregnancy, emotions all over the place and uncontrolled.

Solomon, slyly, "control" is another one of those words. As if we must control even our emotions...

Mahoni changed the subject, Remember that first evening on Saba? The showers?

Solomon laughed exuberantly, Yes, we knew when we first reached the camp in the woods, or whatever you called that place. I remember Max said something like, "Is that what white people smell like? I don't like it!" And then he — Max— laughed and added, "Or, what a mixture of black and white smells. I still don't like it!"

Mahoni smiled. Yes, we were a strange mixture. A few white, and more of us various mixtures.

Suddenly Solomon had a thought, You know what we smelled was people who eat a lot of meat! We had not eaten very well in Africa. A lot of starches, roots, whatever we could find. We had not found many animals to hunt.

And you, Mahoni said, You all looked pale in your dark skins! Flying an airplane, all the way from "somewhere in Africa" of all things! Heavens, that is long ago, isn't it? I have fortunately forgotten much of those years... She burst out in tears again.

Solomon, solicitously, put his arm around her shoulder. You really are pregnant. I have never seen you in tears before! You were always so strong!

Still sniffing, Mahoni said with a wet smile, and now I am no longer strong? I assure you, growing a baby takes a lot out of me. I have to be strong.

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Anansi slept the whole day, woke up briefly to eat something in the evening, then went back to sleep. Solomon looked in to see that she was all right. He and Mahoni had been given places to sleep in neighboring huts. They could have stayed in Anansi's, of course, but they felt that their inevitable in and out would have disturbed her.

Until the next morning when they were all awake, sitting around a mid-morning brunch. Anansi was strangely quiet. Her bubbly nature, this morning, seemed to be somewhere else. Finally Solomon, turned to her, and said softly, Anything wrong?

Anansi shook her head, as if brushing aside spider webs, No, my friend, it is just... She sat up straighter, looked at Mahoni and Solomon, Now, I am here. She smiled her usual warm all-embracing smile.

Mahoni asked about The Mountain, When is this to happen? Is it far from here? How do we get there? Questions — I'm sorry, I should ask one at a time.

No dear, you are right. I should say something. I thought we would have gone now, but somehow it is not right yet. But to answer your other questions. It is not very far, a few days travel. From here we go by canoe to the edge of the forest, then we walk through the savannah to the mountain. It's not really a mountain, you know. It is a gathering place, for our tribe, and some other tribes too. And perhaps other people, Indians, also use it for gathering. It has a feeling about it that is special, I can't really be very specific about that. People feel those things very individually. It is a strange formation, a cup on the side of a hill, an outcropping in that rolling but also flat land. And our voices are loud and clear inside the bowl, but somehow cannot be heard outside. It feels safe. But there are times of the year, or weather conditions—I don't really know what it is—but there are times when... it is just not right. Not "available" perhaps. I know that it depends on the sun, we always have our gathering in the early morning, often beginning at night, when there is a big moon. When the sun gets high enough to shine inside the bowl. Now it does not feel right any more.

How often do you have these gatherings, Solomon asked.

Not very often. Only when there is need. I felt there was need, but perhaps that was premature? I just don't know. I still want to have a gathering. I feel great need. But it is not right yet. Not the right time. Then she turned to Mahoni, Have you heard from Alive? She thinks it is another moon, or more, before her baby is born. Do you talk to her?

No, Mahoni whispered. I've not talked inside with anybody for a long time. I have been much occupied. She giggled a little about the use of that word. Then she looked down at her stomach, and asked Anansi, When do you think?

Not yet, not yet, my dear, looking preoccupied. Then she went on, Some time ago, maybe two moons, I asked two different men to find others, to the east and to the west. I've heard only from

one. She turned half away, He found some friends, they want to come, but first they have something to do, further east. I don't like it.

She stood up, restless. Now, something else is in my head and we three should talk perhaps. The birth I attended was difficult, but that is not unusual, of course. We haven't had many births. Very few. After the storms—the craziness, as some people call it—we had births of strange babies. I remember a boy born without hands: he had good arms, but his fingers came out of what looked like a stump of his arms. And another baby—ooh, that was awful—with a face on the side of the head. We always think, when there is a very bad birth, “who is more important, the mother of the baby?” We don't often think of that consciously, but somehow we have made that choice. This last birth! Bad. The mother has three other good children, the youngest maybe ten of your years; quite grown up already. Then she had miscarriages, during the bad times. Now... At first I thought she must have twins, but could only feel and hear one person in there. Everything seemed good, the head in the right place, but somehow the woman could not push. I knew she was afraid it would be deformed. The second day, she was exhausted, not doing well. Almost automatically I had thoughts like, this woman has already had three nice children, and, she is a smart woman, we need her. My hands went inside her: a big head. But what shocked me was that the baby fought me with his hands. Pushed me away. He did not want to be born. Or she, it later turned out. Yes, she was born, but the mother tore too badly and lost too much blood. I think she will not live. The baby... poor baby. If she had been born in one of your hospitals she would have survived. She had a vagina but no anus. Probably a simple surgical procedure?

Mahoni, who had blanched during the story, immediately said, Oh no, not simple at all. It is not just the opening, but the nerves and particularly the muscles around there. If they are not there, surgery would be too... difficult?

Silence. Long silence.

It was Solomon who asked the question, But have there been normal babies born?

It took Anansí a while to answer. No, perhaps not, at least not that I know of, but I have talked with women further inland, in the mountains and beyond, who have had good babies. But they did not have any for what must have been some years. The good babies began to be born just before you came. Too soon to tell, probably.

Mahoni said thoughtfully, This baby is good, I think. I talk with her, or, at least we communicate. She shrugged one shoulder. She is content, most of the time. I cannot see her as a person yet, quite, but almost. Mahoni smiled secretively, she has funny hair, little islands.

Anansí laughed, That is San hair!

Solomon said shyly, Mahoni says I am the father.

Of course darling, hadn't you figured that out yet?

But King Arthur wants to raise her, Mahoni said. I like that idea. I can visit, can't I, asked Solomon?

After another, long, pause, Anansí asked, Seriously, what do you think, is it more important to save the mother?

Mahoni, speaking with authority, We had “policies” about that, rules. Of course we were supposed to save both, but when we had really critical situations it was always very difficult to decide: mother or child. I know, the doctors sometimes had a hard time, but they always made decisive decisions. Sometimes even with all the machinery and skills we had it was difficult to save a baby that was not formed yet, or had a trauma during hours of trouble. With surprise in her voice Mahoni continued, Forgive me for sounding like a nurse. Had not thought about that part of my life for a long time. But now, this moment, I know that, to me certainly, it is more important to save this baby. I think it is healthy and good. A beautiful girl... Oh yes, this baby needs to be born. And...

Anansí interrupted, almost rudely, No, don’t think of names. Someone else must name her, you cannot own ... it is bad luck to name a baby before it is born (and without a pause) come on, let’s go to the river, maybe we can bathe! I need a bath with lots of water...

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King Arthur came with two of his sons to meet Solomon. You are San, he said while embracing Solomon who almost disappeared in the large arms of a much larger man.

Solomon sputtered, protested, No, or rather, I don’t know that I am San, I don’t know who my mother is. Or my father.

But of course you are, King Arthur said, surprised. I know it.

Only then did he turn to greet Mahoni with the same bear hug.

Anansí had left, for “another place,” she said without looking at anyone.

That night, in King Arthur’s village (no, the village where King Arthur lives) neighbors invited neighbors, the drums began early in the afternoon, and by nightfall there were eight or nine large canoes tied up and a few dozen people sat around a big fire. First they ate and drank some home made beer that was not very alcoholic (yet, the maker explained). Solomon, Mahoni, King Arthur and his sons, were the guests of honor to a banquet and a dance.

Too bad Anansí is not here, one woman said. But he is, another laughed. The San Anansí. And Mahoni is here and because she so ripe she must start the dance!

Everybody roared. Yes, she is ripe!

Mahoni first tried to hide, but suddenly she felt herself strong, a new person, and she strode to what became the center of a large circle. An old woman stood a little behind her and loudly proclaimed that the child-within would go far away, far, far ... and she is almost ready to begin? The old woman ended surprised at what she had said. Then, in Mahoni’s ear she whispered, she is small like her father, but well formed.

The old woman stepped back and disappeared in the dark.

Mahoni was the star, but one of King Arthur's sons was the first to show her what "dancing" could be. What must have been the population of two or three settlements followed in the dance. Partying lasted till daylight, although the fire died down much earlier.

Days later — without a calendar there were only the moon to be aware of time -- Anansi called that she would be at "The Mountain" the first night after the next dark moon.

When the message was shared people congregated in small clumps to wonder about a meeting on The Mountain at night, and after the Dark Moon? Very dark omens. Mahoni and Solomon were the only ones who had to have explained to them what was "dark" about the time when they were supposed to meet. A meeting at night, it was explained would be in whispers because at night that remarkable resonance would be absent. It hinted at danger. And on the first night after the dark moon there would not be much more than a sliver of moon, not much light.

And there was more to the message, all the people should meet first at the edge of the forest. Oh, so that people from far away — it was whispered that people from the french side might come — and the edge of the wood would be a good place to meet, because they all would have to be there before going to The Mountain. It was the place just after where they would have to leave the canoes where all the paths came together.

Solomon asked how far the place on The Mountain was from here. Nobody knew how to 253 answer that. He said, How long does it take to walk from there to The Mountain. Still nobody answered. Then the son of King Arthur said, Small children who walk holding onto the hand of their fathers leave when the sun first comes up and get there before nightfall.

And, a young woman added, the dark of the moon is half a moon away. Perhaps. Yes, a few others nodded. That was right.

Mahoni, asked the women what she would need on the way. Food? Something warm? Something on her feet; were there rocky places, sharp rocks? Nobody seemed able to answer. The feeling among the people was tense. They were beginning to know that there were dangerous times ahead, but not what kind of danger, where it came from.

Not exactly fear of something tangible, but the fear of fear, and that is worse.

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Anansi and Solomon were at the designated place when the day came that people began to come from everywhere. Anansi greeted many as friends, Solomon was enveloped in a cloud of those who had not met him before. They nodded their heads, yes, he was another Anansi; he and the first Anansi looked and felt the same, certainly similar. They waited another day because a small group was coming from the East, "the french" as they were called. Anansi quietly spread word that the get-together was not to be at the open area they all knew as "The Mountain," but nearer to here, in that direction. She and the other Anansi (she smiled at Solomon, who stood beside and a little behind her) had found an open area in the woods, just over there. What they all

knew as “The Mountain” was not a good place. Not now, anyway. She really could not explain why not, but it felt very wrong. Nobody said anything, and as one they started walking.

Mahoni, with King Arthur, three of his sons, and other family and friends, had come the second day in the morning. Later that day Yoseph had come with the largest group. Mahony and the two Anansís, newcomers, outsiders, were the heart of the group.

The group camped, talked, listened, talked some more, for four days. That night they decided to stay awake and just listen.

What they “heard” was all too clear for most of the people there. From every direction humans in various degrees of anger, confusion, hatred, but mostly overwhelming confusion. It was also abundantly clear that there were only small bunches of people. Dangerous confusion.

Two more days were spent strengthening the cohesion of this group of small groups of the people of the woods, and a few others.

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The meeting on “The Mountain” that was not really on the mountain lasted another few days. There was talk, small groups that merged into larger groups. Back and forth. The stories from the East were the worst; nobody really knew what to think any more. There was a group from close to the city who reported that there were probably no people left in the city, or near the ocean. The ocean had had strange surges and rotten fish heaped up on beaches. One of the big rivers was blocked by something near the ocean and had first overflowed its banks and then merged with a small stream that was now the mouth of that river. A woman had come from far across the mountains perhaps who did not say much, except to whisper “they all died.” It was not clear who these “all” were.

There was not really an end to this meeting on The Mountain. The tentative cohesion of the large group seemed to melt. One by one smaller groups left, sometimes without saying words, sometimes saying soft goodbyes.

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On the way back Mahoni and King Arthur and some of his sons, and others, walked slowly through that strange terrain between the frightening openness and the thick forest where they lived. Here there were trees, but widely spaced. There were bushes here and there, some with berries that were poisonous, King Arthur had warned. This is a sort of no-man’s land he explained to Mahoni. On that side is Indian territory. We haven’t had much contact with them for a while. Before... well, before the last few years of horror and illness, we used to meet now and then.

Prince and one of his new friends were walking behind them, talking and laughing. The friend was Haai (shark), a strange name for a Saramaccan, but he had told them it was because of his big mouth. He did indeed have a wide mouth that was never still, either talking, laughing, or eating!



Mahoni and King Arthur did not say much, each of them was thinking of what they had heard and felt during the days at the meeting of the large clan.

Mahoni spoke up, Perhaps it was the openness of that landscape that made us huddle so close together.

Hmm, hadn't thought about it that way, but perhaps you're right. The landscape has an influence on us.

That's what Yosef said, when I asked him.

Yosef... , King Arthur smiled. You know how old he is? No, more surprising, do you know how many children he has fathered?

Mahoni looked at him, No, tell me.

Nobody knows probably, but I can count at least a dozen. More.

Mahoni mumbled to herself, good genes. Then, leaned over, and asked, And you, King Arthur, how many of yours can you count?

Prince cried, Look out!

Mahoni turned her face. A small arrow hit her in the neck, biting deep into the flesh and tendon. King Arthur and both boys rushed to her side as she fell sideways, drawing her knees up, moving into a fetal position even before she hit the ground. Her face was drawn, drained of blood, leaving her proud tan a pale brown.

Prince and Haai turned around to locate the hunter. He stood in full view, not hiding, wearing nothing but a string around his middle, and a basket on his back with more arrows, holding up a small bow.

Haai ran toward the man—a boy really—, taking his knife in both hands, as if to spear him.

The boy held up his hand, Stop! Then he reached for another arrow, turned it with the point to his jaw, pushing it deep in his own neck. It took no time at all for the wound to spout blood, but the poison was faster and found its way to where, in seconds, it would reach the nerve center that made his heart pump, and made him breathe. The boy collapsed.

King Arthur had kneeled down by Mahoni, checking her pulse, seeing the effects of what he knew must at least be strong cobra poison. Then he noticed that her stomach was making ripples, as if something inside was fighting to get out. He did not think she was ready to give birth yet. Her legs still tight against her heaving belly. King Arthur looked at her face again, now empty. He could barely feel a pulse, her breathing uneven, shallow, almost invisible. Without a conscious thought, he took his knife, moved her knees down, and carefully slit Mahoni's belly, low, where he imagined it would not hurt the baby that struggled so hard to get born prematurely. He reached, lifted out a small bundle of spasming arms and legs, dark of skin, with hard round circles of hair, a flat nose. Tiny, but obviously full of life. He carefully lifted the tiny baby higher,

until it gave a gasp, a gurgle, a small noise, and then it began to breathe. Anansí had rushed to their side; King Arthur handed the baby to her, then pinched the cord, cut it.

Anansí slowly stood up, holding the tiny, but evidently whole child.

Mahoni had made no sound, no movement. They looked at her face, thinking she must have died, but King Arthur saw one eye looking at him. A hint of a smile seemed to be on her lips when the light went out in the open eye.

Yosef was the first of the people walking behind King Arthur's party, to come upon the scene. He looked at the stunned men, a dead woman, a very small baby, and not far away a dead Indian, blood. No words were spoken. Haai and Prince stood silently, in shock. Slowly Anansí took a corner of her shirt to wrap around the baby and put it to her breast. King Arthur whispered something of a baby suckling a dry breast.

Anansí said softly, Even the suckling is comforting; that is the first instinct.

Then her face clouded over, Why? Why did the Indian boy shoot an arrow at Mahoni and then kill himself? What does it mean?

Yosef answered, Who knows. But, perhaps... Our tribes used to do something like this in the past: if we killed an Indian—even by mistake—they would kill one of ours. Perhaps the Indian boy was saying, he made a mistake, and by killing himself he made peace between our tribes again.

King Arthur could not help looking at Anansí with the baby. You look so experienced, he mumbled softly, but loud enough that both Yosef and Solomon heard him. Yosef began to say something, but Anansí put her hand on his arm, No, Yosef, it is all right. Yes, King Arthur, I had a child born when I was probably thirteen or fourteen. I don't know what happened to that girl. And Yosef was the first man I saw when I came here, so many years ago. I had two children from him. After that, I could not have more.

Those two...? King Arthur's eyes questioned.

We don't know, Yosef whispered. They were both traveling in the old world, Of course now... Anansí added, Of course we have tried to reach them. Perhaps it is too far from here? But we do not know where they were. We just don't know. Perhaps we will never know what happened to them. They were fairly well-known scientists, in different fields.

Oh, King Arthur said, then I know who they are!

Before he could go further, Yosef said, We prefer not to talk about them.

Anansí had moved apart from the men, gently rocking the fragile life in her arms. This girl, she whispered, is very special. Seven months only, but strong. A gift to all of us. Sma, she whispered. That is your name, Sma, Libisma, human...

Suddenly she turned to the boys, Prince and Haai, One of you run to the nearest village. Bring back a young nursing mother, explain to her. But don't be slow, this baby needs a breast that has milk in it. The other escort Solomon here, he walks slower. We shall meet in the forest. Quick, go, both of you! And, King Arthur, you and Yosef, must carry Mahoni so that we can give her a proper burial. I and this child, shall walk as fast as is possible. Soon we will be in the dark forest again, walking will be easier, perhaps faster; we might even find a canoe.

Soon, others caught up with Yosef and King Arthur, carrying a dead Mahoni, escorting Anansi who was carefully holding tight to her chest a tiny baby. A silent group walking slowly, too shocked to say much. Many of them wiping tears from their eyes; they had gotten to know and love Mahoni, and to see her dead so suddenly was more than many could accept.

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When they reached the forest the party had grown. A silent group. Occasionally a whisper to a friend, reminiscing the strange events of the last few days. And now a poison arrow that killed their healer, but her child miraculously survived! They carried a burden, the burden of survivors in a new world still too uncertain. Dangerous in old ways, and perhaps new ways they did not know about yet.

A very fragile child to carry a fragile future.

## Epilogue

Flashes from a book that will never be

She vaguely knew her name, Sma, a word, a sound, that somehow stood for who she was, but beyond that she remembered no language. It was so long since she had met any being like her. Birds had told her to walk away from the mid-day sun because it was not safe. An animal without a name who accompanied her for a time had spoken other sounds and she had answered. There was a lazy tapir who had tried to convince her to stay, but birds had urged her on. Snakes avoided her, although she tried to think to them also. Her knowledge of where she came from was confused and confusing. One story was that she was born from foam, water splashing down a high water fall making white foam. And part of a story that almost evaded her was that a spider had placed an egg in a tall tree that had fallen, the egg rolled away, the many mothers she almost remembered had nursed who came out of the egg.

All Sma knew was that she was alive.

The baby who was snatched out of her mother's womb just before poison killed the mother, Sma, was suckled by two, then a third woman. Perhaps more; there is no history of those times. The other children of these wet nurses did not survive early childhood afflictions. At first Anansi was around to step in when there were disasters; she saw to it that another caring mother was found for this child that grew, but slowly. The child learned little, for even then, at age three (nobody kept track of years, however) she was the only child among a dwindling number of adults. She knew many mothers, several fathers, no play mates. She spoke hardly at all; what was there to say? She always knew what the adults wanted of her, which was little enough. Anansi was in and out of her awareness, although Sma knew that Anansi was the one to be relied on.

Anansi, at first, had tried to imprint on her as yet unformed mind the wonder of a father and a mother, other people, a group. But there seemed to be a veil between Sma and others.

Her father, Solomon, never showed signs of wanting to deal with this child. He died when Sma was four. His death seemed an accident, but Anansi knew it was a willed ending; Solomon could not deal with living in this strange new world that was all the world there was.

Anansi died the next year, in the "great epidemic" which affected every one of the people. The great epidemic killed swiftly and mercifully, death followed symptoms in days. Now there were few of the people left to take care of a precocious child. Human life became ever more precarious because finding and preparing food, maintaining shelter, and just the normal activities of living, seemed to become more and more burdensome. King Arthur and his entire family were dead, as were the people of settlements further down the rivers. Only far upstream there were a few survivors. Sma, and a few others, eked out an existence until the "ghost epidemic," the

Purple Epidemic because it left purple bruises all over the bodies of those infected. Who but ghosts could pinch and not wake people deep in slumber? Sma was ten, maybe eleven, a small,

tough girl, when this epidemic struck. All elders died, leaving her alone in the world, she assumed. It did not take long for her to know how to survive on her own. Her will to live was formidable. She knew what roots, fruit and leaves were edible, she had learned some of the healing qualities of what grew. But more, she learned to listen to animals, who showed her new ways of living another day.

She could not know her age, but she knew when her body was changing. Small breasts, hair here and then there, and a different feeling about herself. Perhaps it was then, she started on what she thought of as her Search. A search for other humans? She did not think “people,” just a search...

In the mountain ranges, where she now found herself, wildlife was sufficient but different than in the world she had known. Sma learned to avoid dangerous plants and animals, and befriend others. Her search took her over the mountains and in an endless forest cut through by rivers and streams, bursting with life forms she was not familiar with. With the help of a jaguar she survived more years. Animals showed her edible roots and what plants to avoid. She discovered she could eat of dead animals after other animals had removed the skin.

Eventually — time had long since lost its meaning, and there were no seasons to make a rhythm — she met another human. They did not recognize each other as human at first. It had been so long since she had seen another of her species, and he had forgotten what he looked like. But both of them felt an affinity that went deeper than recognition. The man was tall, almost twice her height; she had remained compact and spare. He was dark, skeletally thin, with an impenetrable mat of hair. His eyes always almost shut, so that it was a long time before she could be sure he even had eyes. He did not speak; Sma had not spoken words for so long, that she did not even try to remember. Communicating with the jaguar and other animals had not been in words, each understood the other. Sma and Man communicated silently. They discovered early that they perceived — heard — each other's intentions, needs, moods and questions, and could respond adequately.

As humans will, Sma and Man, coupled. Clumsy, tentative at first, always meaningful. Sma conceived a few times, aborted spontaneously. They both knew — animals taught them— that one day she would bear a child, another being like them.

Together they continued Sma's search. Man had seen beings perhaps like them "there," pointing with his chin, as he had seen others doing a long time ago. They went there. Found a few dwellings, almost reabsorbed in the wilderness. They went to other Theres; found nothing but signs that humans might have been there at some time in the past. A large bird accompanied them for a while; other animals joined now and then. The humans were never lonely. The woods were teeming with life not human. The two humans perhaps forgot the search, now they wandered for food and wandering became their given.

Perhaps one day she, they, would have a child.

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*back cover*

## EARTH RENEWS

“A new Eve and Adam for a new humanity of a planet renewed?”

“Yes! No speech because words can lie. Mind-to-mind can not lie.”

“This book has power; not entertaining, but... ”

“Oh but it is; could not stop, seems so real.”

“Yah, that is the power.”