

Chapter Eleven / Waiting

The eldest child's stories were simpler than the father's.

Growing up far from other children for most of the year, independence had been a strong learning experience.

So, the stories centered around the grazing of animals, the tending of gardens and the occasional long hunt with the father.

During one particularly long summer when the child had been maybe six or seven harvests old, the family had made a temporary camp in a side canyon where the berries were growing particularly well. They covered the bottom and the sides of the canyon, growing close to the edge of a still fast-flowing, cascading, crystalline waterfall. The stream that fed the waterfall came from the mountains in the far distance, skirting the lake and dancing among scattered boulders across the plain to reach the edge of the family's canyon.

Above the rim of the canyon, the stream played gaily in the bright sun, whispering as it flowed over smooth, flat rocks and chattering as it fell over logs and jagged boulders onto rocky shallows, then roaring when it accelerated around the inside of a tight channel dug out of the bedrock. At its edge, trees of all kinds held back the land and directed the waters toward the channel.

Willows dipped their roots into the deep, muddy soils on the bars in the middle of the stream and trailed long tendrils in the slow-moving water. Cedars stood vigilant over banks that were rapidly disappearing, their great fronds of branches drooping under their own weight and hiding the furrowed trunks. In places, cedars that had been undermined too deeply now formed bridges for the wildlife to cross well over the rushing, pushing flow.

In the shade of these bridges, silver fish and pink crawdads rested, safe from the eyes of overflying birds and watchful foxes. When the sun was highest in the sky, the water seemed to lie still for an instant, and in that instant, a fly would land on the seemingly still surface, only to be sucked down by a swift fish.

In the canyon, smaller relatives of the fish moved in the deeper pools, staying in the shade of a boulder or ledge, waiting for other flies to land.

The eldest child took great delight in spotting the fish for the father, who would herd the animals from early morning until later afternoon, when the mother or grandmother would take over. Then the father and child would go out to gather a few berries, some reeds for basket-making or branches for bedding, and to catch fish for a supper. There were not enough fish in the side canyon for more than that, but two or three fish a day were easy enough to find.

As the sun moved past the canyon and the purple and gray shadows darted across the packed sandstone floor, the child and the father would stand near the base of the waterfall and find their supper. There! A fish would flash its side in the waning light as it surfaced for an insect, and the father would dip his net in the water swiftly.

The fish, suddenly finding itself on a hot dryness would squirm, and the child would scoop it into a large basket in the shallower water.

One, two, three fish, and they were done.

The child liked looking at the fish as they swam slowly in bewildered circles, following the curve of the basket, looking for a way back to the safe, dark water of the pool.

The father would hand the net to the child and heft the basket, dripping and festooned with water grasses, onto his back. It was a short enough walk back to camp that they didn't bother to wrap the fish in weeds or leaves. By the time they reached camp the fish were past trying to breathe, and so were easy to scale and gut.

The child, at first disgusted by the process of cleaning the fish, eventually came to look forward to that part of the evening.

The grandmother would take over as soon as they set foot in camp, shooing the man off to make sure the animals were safely penned for the night. The child would scale each fish, using a sturdy flake of stone, dipping the fish in the water periodically and checking for missed scales. When the fish were all scrubbed, the child and the mother rubbed a board with sand and set it on top of a large boulder near the stream to make a cleaning table. Then the old woman set to work.

With the stump of her one hand, she held the fish down, and quickly sliced upward on the belly with her sharpest, thinnest blade. The silvery-white belly turned back on itself and revealed a bright pink flesh, the entrails sliding out onto the board. The grandmother would point to the innards and name the parts in a chant the child soon learned.

This is the stomach, where food is kept
This is the bowel, where food is let out
This is the heart, which beats like mine
These are the organs which are so fine

She would wait for the child to repeat the chant and point to each part. She motioned to the fish, and then toward the pen where the land animals spent the night. Though different on the outside, she would intone, they were much alike on the inside. Then she reminded the child that, whether the animal came from the

land, the air or the water, it had had its life taken in order for the family to live. It deserved honor and care, and should not be wasted.

The innards were carefully tied buried in a pit near the stream, and the bones, once the fish had been eaten, added in afterward. The fish, laced onto sticks, was propped over a fire. It was the mother's job to lace and tend the fish while it cooked, while the child took care to turn the roots that were roasting in the coals.

The grandmother watched, commented and made adjustments to the roots – and to the fish – while she tended the younger children.

The eldest child, the only one allowed to fish or to tend fires, felt very grown-up. During the meal, it was important to feed the youngest first, and then the grandmother, and finally the parents and eldest child ate. That way those who needed the most food were able to get it. It was the tradition of the people, and the parents were careful to explain to the eldest that traditions were not inconveniences to be avoided, but important measures of the family's ability to provide.

Nothing would go to waste - - Usually there so much food that some was left over. When that happened, the mother and grandmother would store it in a cool rock cache they had made, dug down near the stream where the water cooled the soils and kept food fresh. It was capped off with a thick rock, protecting it from animals overnight.

When the father left in the morning to herd the animals, he would take the bundle of food out of the cache and a small basket to pick berries on his way. Some days, he took the eldest with him. On those days, the child worked with the father and a dog they had trained to keep the herd moving in the right direction until they reached good grazing.

The best grazing was above the canyon rim, and the animals would be driven up single file along a narrow path, then out onto the plain until they were far from the canyon. Then they were allowed to graze, but only for a short time in any one place. The father watched the ground as the animals ate, deciding to move on when the footprints started to merge, or the stumps of the grasses and herbs were all that was left, or when the animals seemed restless. In this way, the land could recover in a few days, as the plants sent up new tops to replace the ones that had been eaten.

On most days, though, the child stayed with the mother and grandmother during the day. In the early morning, the small garden plot would be tended.

First, weeding out plants that seemed to grow up overnight, taking up too much space or creating too much shade for the protected plants to do well. Then the child would take a small amount of soil from the animal pen and add it to a basin of water at the edge of the garden. It was a fairly long walk from the stream to the garden, so

the mother and grandmother would take turns to carry buckets of water to the basin, filling it to overflowing, and mixing in the manure and soil until the water looked like a thin broth. Then it was the child's job to carry small ladles of water to each plant, gently watering it before the sun climbed too high in the sky. By the water basin there grew a host of plants that needed extra water and benefitted from the daily bath they received. Farther away, root vegetables, and climbing plants, and herbs.

The younger children would play alongside while the garden work was done, and the eldest took care to explain what each plant was, how it grew, what would happen next in the garden, and which plants to never, ever touch.

Then they would all go pick berries. Big baskets for the women, a medium basket for the eldest child, who was proud of its shape and design, and fist-sized baskets for the youngest children. It was a mark of honor when a child graduated from the smallest berry baskets, because it meant that they were able to fill the small basket with berries and give the berries to the older people to add to the family's store of berries.

Once the berries were collected for the day, a simple meal of fresh vegetables and berries was eaten and then the youngest children would take a nap while the mother and grandmother mashed berries and made them into little cakes and cooked them on stones by the still-smoldering fire. They would sometimes take the juiciest berries and mash them into a tightly woven basket to which they would add water and set inside a large crock. The juice would be refreshing late in the afternoon when it was hot.

As the afternoon grew warmer, the children would all find a sheltered spot and watch while the mother and grandmother cooked root vegetables and mashed them into a paste, then spread the paste out on the rocks to dry. They would sneak small bits of the paste while the women pretended not to notice. The children helped pry the dried paste off the rocks when it was dry, the soft flakes layering deeply, like the most ethereal snow. The dried paste would be stored for winter, as would the berry cakes, simple, nutritious reminders of the bounty of summer.

At night, after the younger children were asleep, the elder child would watch the stars streaming through the night, naming the brightest ones, and watching the changes from day to day. From the beginning of that summer to the end when the herd, fat from grazing on healthy grass and herbs, was brought back into the canyon for shelter in the winter, the child began to recognize star stories that accompanied the watching, to notice the differences between the different plants that were grown before they flowered or bore fruit, and to learn how to clean as well as cook.

This was the summer the child become aware of Self as distinct from, as independent from, Others. This was the summer the child understood that the animals who were killed for meat didn't come again.

And this was the summer the child understood that the family was as fragile as the delicate insects the fish enjoyed.

That summer, the not-baby got sick while the family was camping in the canyon.

The baby slept and nursed, cried and played, and the child who was older than the not-baby followed the eldest child back and forth for chores in the canyon.

But the not-baby was fretful, and refused to play.

And then the not-baby cried, and refused to eat.

The older children tried to hold it, it shrieked. The grandmother and father tried to hold it, it wailed. The mother held it, and it moaned fitfully. It was inconsolable.

From the morning when they woke, until the evening when the not-baby went to sleep and didn't wake up, the cries were quieter and quieter. The father let the animals out of the pen to get water at the stream, then penned them again and tossed in some dry fodder. He did the mother's chores, meekly taking direction from the grandmother, and then he went fishing, alone. The grandmother held the baby all day long, and went about the chores in silence.

The elder children helped as they could, but finally wandered off a short ways, watching the events unfold.

The mother held the not-baby all day long, except when the baby needed to eat, when she held both of them.

And in the evening, when the not-baby let out one last breath, she kept holding the not-baby until the father returned from fishing and gently took the small body up and out the canyon on the same trail the animals followed.

When he returned, empty-handed, he held the mother until her sobs stopped and she fell asleep. Then he sat by the banked fire holding the baby with the other children leaning up against him as they listened to a story from the grandmother.

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