

III

Tribe

In the dreamtime, she walked in the garden of creation and she believed in the breezes that rustled through the leaves she heard the voices of gods that sang to her. In places, she felt the presence of the ancestors that dwelt in the spirit world and she believed they whispered her name and touched her when she passed near. Every drop of rain, every cloud, the light of the sun and the moon she believed occurred in the presence of god, and she considered her world not a place in which she struggled for survival but a place of too great abundance to gather and carry or to hold in one concentration. In the end time of her tribe, a new age brought another kind of man in great number to her world and those men gathered the earth and disrupted patterns of nature while her tribe retreated to remote extremes of terrain and there dwindled in number. For purposes, designs or perhaps serendipity known only to the gods, the age of another kind of man commenced as the age of her kind concluded and she considered such events beyond her comprehension to question while she furthermore considered such her honor to witness so great an event and to count herself among the last men of her kind.

As her tribe wandered into the forests of the great cold places, the beautiful Antha befriended them and lived among them, and though Antha appeared as a man of the other kind, she believed Antha of a different origin. Why Antha befriended the tribe or how long Antha lived among them, she no longer recalled but she believed Antha saw the spirit world, knew the gods, and came to the tribe to ease their passage through the end time and on to the spirit world. In even the extremities of the cold places, the man of another kind in time appeared and as her tribe retreated, some of those men pursued with sharp stone instrument as if on the hunt, and some among the tribe even entertained belief that the men of the other kind intended to eat the tribe.

Seasons transpired as the migration continued and in the harshness of cold places, one after another succumbed to illness, exposure to element, hunger or natural age. When the last of the men died and the tribe committed his body to the earth, for the first time, she despaired and doubted the designs of the gods. Accounting as one of but two remaining women with two girl children, she appreciated no more children would ever the tribe bear and the end time at last approached near. Although she appealed to Antha to beseech the gods, turn back time and raise her men from the spirit world, intuitively she knew Antha could never alter nature or time and accompanied the tribe not as intervention but in fondness and sympathy. Nevertheless, Antha responded not to her pleas but asked she describe the spirit world then she told Antha of her name whispered on the breeze and the gentle caress of ancestor whenever she passed near. With eyes closed, Antha remained silent and still while the moon traversed the sky then advised the tribe prepare to travel.

In the isolated places of an obscure and forsaken wilderness, the tribe traveled and there observed from a distance contrary to all expectations, a remnant tribe as their own of their own kind. Perhaps weary from tribulation or wary of all strangers in the age of the new kind of man, the remnant tribe moved swiftly and accommodated no commiseration then Antha instructed the tribe remain behind while she might approach the counterpart remnant in darkness. Furthermore assured Antha if any man among the others yet lived then might she unite the two remnants and by intervention yet prevent the occurrence of the end time. With the sunrise, Antha returned and led the tribe across open field but discovered the campfire of the others abandoned then tracked the remnant tribe as the sun traversed the sky and as twilight approached, great clamor of voices raised in anguish and frenzy arose from a narrow valley.

With the last two women of the tribe, Antha crawled to a prominence then observed a great concentration of remnant tribes by hundreds in number together on the banks of a river while among them rushed masses of men of the new age with stone instrument in hand striking dead, man, woman and child with blunt force and piercing wound. As the two women howled in anguish, Antha clutched at them and the two girl children then rushed the four to low ground and toward the cover of brush. Under a thin veil of sparse vegetation, the tribe ran along a creek bed twisting through a low crevasse between two heights until the creek bed merged with the river. Antha bid the two women place the children upon their backs and cross the waters but examining their faces, immediately understood they could not tread water. A group of men suddenly emerged from the brush and with apparent jubilation, converged on Antha and the tribe of four. Antha then bid the women run upstream and never stop even unto the great endless mountains of ice then Antha stepped toward the men. Of the women, one clutched the two children and ran but the other stepped near Antha. Without a word, Antha grasped and propelled her with such force toward the others that she understood she exercised no further choice. With a last glance over her shoulder as she ran, she observed a dozen men maneuver to surround Antha with brandished stone pointed instrument but for two that carried reflective and shiny hideous objects. A titan of man with hair the color of the sun issued an instruction and his subordinate raised a shiny reflective object in a threatening gesture toward Antha while the others held their ground. Approaching Antha, the man coiled and sprang at her slashing the shiny object across her midsection. Antha cried out but clasped the man by his wrist and spun him twisting his arm then seized his shiny object, and swung it across his shoulders severing his head and sending it tumbling.

The last four survivors of the tribe fled along the riverbank and the children shrieked as two men approached gaining from behind then one of the women pushed the children toward the other and urged her on with one last glance at her own child then she lifted a rock from the bank and stood her place. Slowly and cautiously, the two men approached smiling gleefully with blood-spattered faces and as they prepared instruments to strike, she unexpectedly hurled her rock striking one man at the center of his forehead and he stumbled back then grunted as he fell. With an angry growl, the remaining man thrust his stone pointed instrument but she leapt to a side then sprang upon him and as they wrestled in the stones, he shrieked with fear and perhaps even surprise for the force of her strength. Claspng a hand to his throat, she squeezed with force that expelled hoarse gasps from his mouth as she gouged with fingers into his eyes then a sudden pain in her back caused her strength to fail and as the man slipped free of her grasp, she staggered to her feet while blood trickles ran down her leg. In the hand of the man, she observed a stone instrument with blood upon it even as the man stumbled back with apparent intent only on swift departure but she would not allow him to return to his hordes uncontested and report the escape of her tribe or the direction in which they traveled. Rushing the man, she sprang upon him and again wrapped her fingers around his throat while clamping her teeth onto his arm as he shrieked and thrust wildly. Even as piercing pains again occurred in her back, shoulder and arm, she yet desperately squeezed her fingers into the throat of the man and clamped her teeth only tighter in a grip of death on his flesh. And by such occurrence, her living world faded into darkness and her dreamtime reached a conclusion with a finality from which it would never revive.

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*in the spirit world, she walked with the ancestors
and they took her into their arms
she saw in them, continuation unbroken
and she saw origin and cause*

*she saw in nature, motion and consequence
and in her life, abundance and harmony
and with the ancestors, she lamented
the conclusion of the dreamtime*

*she saw in the end time
not nature, motion or consequence
not abundance, harmony or continuation
but disruption, disarrangement and disorder*

*she saw in the end time
-- anomaly --*

*in the dreamtime, she walked in the garden of creation
and in the spirit world, she dwelt with all the ages*

*her kind knew purpose and meaning
her kind saw destination
but in the man of the other kind
she saw anomalous origin*

and she saw no destination but bleak and dismal oblivion

and for the man of the other kind, the man of the new age
no dreamtime ever occurred
and no spirit world ever awaited
no breeze that rustled through the leaves
ever sang with the voices of gods
no ancestor ever whispered names
or touched any that might pass near
no drop of rain, no cloud, no light of the sun or the moon
ever suggested the presence of god

in a harsh and unforgiving world
the man of the other kind struggled bitterly for survival
and no matter what things he gathered and carried
no matter what things he held in concentration
he found no comfort or contentment
and in no place upon his earth did he ever see abundance

he saw no origin or destination
he saw no consequence or cause
he saw only a bleak and dismal material world
random chaos and the damnation of eternal oblivion

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Stars twinkled overhead around a dark shape and after adjusting her eyes, she recognized Antha leaning over her. Antha pulled her up and knelt close with arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders and closing her eyes, she leaned against Antha and rolled her face in thick curls of soft hair then Antha pulled her up to her feet, held her hand and led her along the bank of the river. At daybreak, the pair stopped and rested, and Antha stared at her some time then to her surprise, demanded she state her name. With even more surprise, she hesitated, unsure for a moment then nearly in the form of a guess, finally named herself Ornatenske and added that Antha named her only Orna then she named the last woman of her tribe Atanakeri, and last children, Olenka and Kavela. Jolting suddenly, she ran her hands across her back and shoulders and felt the crust of dried blood on her garments but identified no injuries upon her body and even more remarkable, felt neither pain nor even degree of debilitation, but with great apprehension, Orna cried out for her child Olenka. Antha assured Orna her child still lived along with the other child and last woman, and promised she would find them before the next sunrise then with that, the two continued on the trail for the duration of the day.

With approach of sunset, Antha followed fresh tracks and not long after dark, she spied the dim light of a campfire from a great distance. Orna rushed toward the light and as she neared the fire, Antha pulled her to a stop insisting she stay away and refrain from contact with the three survivors of her tribe. Although Orna objected, Antha advised that her approach might only frighten her child and the others. Orna did not understand but she complied and observed from a distance as both children slept near the wary and distraught last surviving woman of the tribe. Near sunrise, Orna insisted she wait no longer and moved in the direction of her child but Antha restrained her and with no other explanations remaining, Antha informed Orna the last three of her tribe might perhaps no longer recognize her. Orna stared in disbelief for a moment, intent on demanding to know why Antha might entertain so preposterous a notion but then for the first time, carefully inspected her own arms and legs, and Orna immediately realized her own body somehow became unfamiliar to her overnight. Stumbling away, Orna then ran to the river where she found a shady hollow and a pool of still water. Several steps behind, Antha approached as Orna knelt on the bank and leaned over a still pool then gasped at the sight on the surface, recognizing a vaguely familiar face in the reflection but in the form of the other kind of man. Turning to glare at Antha, angry and confused Orna then demanded, “What have you done to me?”

Orna clawed at her arms as if with the expectation that perhaps she might peel away the offending cloak of skin while Antha attempted to hold her in her arms but Orna resisted then reluctantly allowed it then pushed Antha away and ran back toward the camp while Antha followed at a distance. Creeping near, Orna observed the two children huddled together next to the fire then discovered Atanakeri nearby scavenging for roots and berries but upon approach, her appearance inspired only fear as Antha anticipated and Atanakeri dropped the roots she gathered and turned to flee even as Orna pleaded, “Do not fear me. I am your tribe. I am Ornatenske.”

Atanakeri hesitated then stared in disbelief and Orna stated, “I have passed through the spirit world and I have returned to protect you.”

Unable to move, Atanakeri resisted then exclaimed, “Abomination.” and fled to the fire then stood protective over the children.

Orna despaired and Antha held her then instructing her to maintain distance, gathered the discarded roots and approached the campfire even as Atanakeri pulled the children close and examined Antha suspiciously but at the least, she restrained from panic in the presence of a familiar face. Preparing the roots, Antha comforted Atanakeri while she ate then motioned to Orna and as she cautiously approached, Atanakeri breathed heavily and cringed but Orna knelt and leaned close to embrace her. Atanakeri reluctantly looked into her face and at last discovering some form of familiarity, she embraced Orna in return then tightly they held one another while they wept.

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When the first snows fell, the tribe settled deep in a dark forest and though the men of the other kind did not likely travel to such remote places in wintertime, scarce provisions presented conditions no less perilous. Antha and Orna dug shelter into a hillside and blanketed it with soft underbrush and grass then throughout the winter, kept the tribe barely alive foraging for nuts and roots, and netting fish from the rivers and lakes through holes in the ice. In the springtime, an abundance of fish swarmed the waters and with warm seasons, fruits and berries grew in many places. The last three of the tribe, and perhaps the last three of their kind, survived the winter but Orna asked Antha, “What is the meaning of this survival? They live another day but my tribe will not endure. Are their lives now some number of days lived for the next day until the last?”

Antha asked in return, “Would we then kill them tonight in their sleep if we fail to find any other reason today they might live until tomorrow?” Orna remained silent and Antha advised, “Tomorrow is reason for them to survive today and the day after, we will name reason to survive tomorrow, and in the passage of these days, we will hope.”

In the summer season, Antha and Orna explored the extents of the forest and discovered all its reserves of food sources. Twice in the season they spied from a distance, parties of men, one of which entered the forest and traveled through its fringes for a number of days but both parties went on their way and by all appearance, never detected the presence of Antha and Orna. The summer season passed and with approach of autumn, Antha instructed Orna to stay close to the tribe, keep them in the forest and with assurance she would return before spring she then departed. Orna felt great apprehension over the absence of Antha but with Atanakeri, she foraged for vegetation, made holes in the ice and pulled fish from the waters, and in the shelter on the hill, endured a winter less desperate than the winter previous.

As springtime approached, Orna wandered farther from the shelter in search of food supplies and under fading twilight, she stood still and felt the presence of Antha. From a distance, Orna observed a figure move through the trees and as she stepped near and the figure emerged from the shadows, Orna flinched in surprise to discover not Antha but a small girl wild in appearance as nearly a form of beast. The girl stared at Orna, examined her closely, touching her face and her hair then stated, “You are Orna. Antha sends me to you and asks you trust me as you trust her. I am Tara.”

Orna embraced Tara and as she felt in her the presence of Antha, so she trusted Tara as Antha. Although Atanakeri and the children appeared to fear Tara, they also found protective comfort in her presence as they felt in the presence of Antha and so Tara assumed a natural place among the tribe. With the commencement of springtime, Tara and Orna together roamed the forest collecting food supplies and watching warily for the presence of men and their parties that might wander near.

As men wandered near in the previous warm seasons, men again wandered near and among those a party wandered too deep into the forest and stayed too long. The party discovered trails used by Orna, Antha and Tara, and those trails led to the encampment of the last three survivors of the tribe. As the party moved across a narrow stone prominence near the banks of the river, Tara attacked them and with naught but bare hand, she thrashed, gouged and clawed at them, casting them all at last into the river where they submerged and vanished from the earth, and no tale of their fate ever returned to their home. Subsequent encounters occurred during the warm seasons and twice, the mere appearance of Tara frightened parties sufficiently to turn them away from the forest. Another winter passed by and in the spring, Antha returned. Orna embraced Antha but angrily admonished her for so prolonged an absence.

With the return of Antha and warm seasons, food provisions occurred again in abundance and soon, Antha, Tara and Orna wandered the edges of the forest, kept watch for parties of men and even traveled beyond the forest exploring territory occupied by men and there tracked a hunting party. The party made camp and under darkness of night, Antha and Tara crept in and killed all but two while they slept then bound the survivors and led them toward the forest. The two men grew terrified and shivered so with fear, they could not continue but Antha sat them and extended assurances she intended no harm and wished only to bring them into her tribe as no men yet survived within the forest. Upon arrival at the destination, Antha promised the men would rest in warm huts, suckle sweet fruit, drink wine and take shelter in the enchanted garden of the wood nymph then bath in the soothing waters of the pool of everlasting serenity. The words calmed the two captives and throughout the journey, with constant reassurance from Antha, the men gazed in wonder at the beautiful forest and even appeared to anticipate their arrival with newfound confidence as they neared the tribal encampment.

In the camp of the tribe, Antha separated the men into two huts where Orna and Atanakeri comforted them, and served them wine and fruit. Atanakeri selected one of the men and seduced him spending several weeks alone within a hut. The men rested content and barely set foot outside for more than a full cycle of the moon and when Antha felt assured Atanakeri bore a child, Orna and Tara slipped into the huts and struck both men in the head with stone hatchets, dragged them perhaps still breathing to a near bog and hurled them into dark shallow waters. There the two men rested in eternal tranquility just as Antha promised, upon the muddy bottom of the pool of everlasting serenity.

A winter passed by with far greater ease than previous winters and provisions only rarely ran low but with approach of springtime, Antha and Tara departed then Orna spent most of the warm seasons foraging food for the tribe and with great difficulty in solitary as Atanakeri bore a girl child Natea. With warm seasons, hunting parties of men once again occasionally wandered near the forest and Orna observed from a distance while most departed without incident but when on occasion, a party wandered too near, she entered their camps in the dark and killed all present. Several seasons passed as parties of men appeared greater in both frequency and magnitude but Tara at last returned nearly coinciding with the appearance of a hunting party great in number that entered the forest, discovered the trails and traveled in the direction of the tribal encampment. Orna and Tara killed all present but one then Orna instructed he return home with warning that no man should ever venture into the cursed realm of the wood nymph again and for several seasons thereafter, no man reappeared.

For a great many seasons, Antha and Tara only briefly visited on occasion, and in warm seasons, Tara and Orna ventured into the fringes of the territory of men, returned to the forest with captives and comforted them with fruit and wine. Atanakeri seduced one captive then Tara and Orna struck blows to the heads of the men and cast them into the pool of everlasting serenity. Atanakeri bore a third child Radeka and with the passage of many seasons, Olenka the daughter of Orna as well as Kavela the eldest daughter of Atanakeri grew to maturity within the isolation of the forest.

Antha and Orna again hunted the territory of men for captives with which the eldest children Olenka and Kavela might bear children and there in the wilderness, Antha and Orna tracked another hunting party. From a distance as she spied, among the party Orna observed a young man with a malformed foot hobbling about the camp and performing chores while the other men mocked and abused him. Orna pitied the man and when he wandered some distance from the camp to gather firewood, she approached him and upon the sight of her, he immediately fell under enchantment. Instructing the man to lie in the bush and stay still until she returned, Orna and Antha then entered the camp, killed all but four and bound them then collected the hobbled young man from the bush and returned to the forest. In the camp of the tribe, the hobbled young man Saben demonstrated such loyalty none among the tribe considered him hostage and Olenka soon developed great fondness for him. Olenka and Kavela soon carried child and the four captives rested in tranquility upon the mud bottoms of the pool of everlasting serenity but Saben thereafter shared a hut with Olenka as a permanent member of the tribe. When Olenka and Kavela bore children, with the inclusion of Saben, the last three survivors of the tribe counted among a tribe renewed numbering eight.

Many seasons passed and as children grew to maturity, at times when Antha or Tara visited, Orna ventured with each beyond the forest with greater frequency then returned with increasing numbers of captives of which, all eventually found their way to the mud bottoms of the pool of everlasting serenity while the number of the tribe increased. On a summer evening, Atanakeri died of natural age and though Orna continued to protect the tribe, she spoke no word to any for several seasons. Orna and Atanakeri came into the world in the same season, lived their childhood as well as the balance of their lives nearly inseparable and Orna grieved bitterly the loss of the closest companion of her lifetime. Orna finally spoke again and she appeared to recover to an extent but she sought solace in isolation on occasion, and it accounted as a departure from her established behavior.

The lifetime of the child of Orna occurred in an age of improbable tranquility and she bore three children but seasons passed and she too at last grew old. Orna held Olenka by her hand and observed with inconsolable anguish, her child more than twice her own apparent age, pass from the living world then Orna vanished into the forest and for many seasons, no living member of the tribe nor Antha or Tara knew of her whereabouts or actions. Antha allowed solitude but growing apprehensive with the passage of time, she searched for Orna and found her in the wilderness during the last moments of twilight as she leaned upon a stone and stared at her reflection in a pool of still water.

Antha knelt near, held Orna by her hand and as the last light faded, Orna asked, “Why did Atanakeri and my child age so much sooner than I?”

Antha replied, “They did not age sooner. You have not aged.”

Orna inquired with some alarm, “Why have I not aged?” and then with increasing apprehension, she asked, “Am I dead?”

Antha hesitated then finally reluctantly replied, “You are no longer of the living world. You died but you are not dead.”

“Where then is the spirit world?” Orna inquired then as if without expectation of a response, she stated, “In the dreamtime, death never separated me from the ancestors. I felt their presence and I knew as I observe my image in the water, only the reflection of light determined the boundary between the living world and the spirit world. Now, I no longer feel their presence. If I am no longer of the living world, why am I not of the spirit world? My dreamtime has ended and my spirit world no longer dwells upon this earth.”

Antha struggled for words of consolation but before she spoke, Orna stated, “I believed the end time the design of the gods. I never questioned their wisdom, and I accepted the end of my kind and the emergence of another as a part of a purpose greater than I, beyond my living comprehension but I know now, it is not so. You raised me unnaturally from dead and you have orchestrated the unnatural preservation of my tribe. These are not the actions of gods with a design and a purpose. The other kind of man is neither natural nor the design or purpose of the gods. You removed my spirit world from this earth and placed me upon it to counter what you now recognize as a mistake. The dreamtime is over and the spirit world is gone. This new age of man accommodates no dreamtime, no spirit world - This is a simple world now, of material men and immediate sensation in a single dimension without design or purpose, and your actions... they are a desperate attempt to recover something lost.”

Orna fell silent and Antha cautiously explained, “My number is seven where once I counted it eight. I have lost one of my number and coinciding with this loss, the world gains a kind of man unexpected and so I see this loss and gain as an action and a consequence. The loss of your kind might have ended in bitter disappointment, something of ages beyond the ages of the earth itself. Never did I tamper with the natural course of humankind through many end times and new ages of many kinds but if evidently, one among us has broken with that tradition, I will observe no convention or expectation to correct that error. You restore my number to eight, you restore the last natural tribe and you are the best hope for preservation of the last natural humankind upon the earth.”

Orna pondered the words then concluded, “You say then you are the gods, and you say you never tamper through ages greater than the earth. What entertainment is this that you casually observe and never intervene? Is the design and purpose of the gods no more than mere amusement?”

“No such thing I say.” Antha objected, “I am not god, and that accounts as more than sufficient explanation for my restraint from intervention.”

Orna argued, “If you intervene now to correct an error, you do so with a design and purpose you claim not the authority to exercise. Who intervenes on behalf of design and purpose not their own? If this is a world of design and purpose, where are the gods in all of this? Why would gods not intervene on behalf of their own design and purpose? If you are not god, who is god?”

Antha held Orna close, caressed her cheek and staring directly into her eyes, whispered, “You are god. It is I, not you, who accepts a purpose greater than my own and beyond my comprehension.”

Orna pushed Antha away and cried out, “No!” then ran into the forest.

Antha pursued but relented and again allowing for solitude and contemplation, returned to the tribe and remained there many seasons, yet occasionally sought Orna in the wild.

As seasons passed and Antha occasionally sought out Orna in wilderness regions, Orna detected her presence and avoided her then following the trail of Orna, Antha discovered villages and encampments of men destroyed and all present massacred. On a cold and windy autumn night, Antha approached Orna at her campfire and Orna finally consented to council. Antha embraced and kissed Orna then sat near her at the fire and they drank wine from a soft flask in silence for some time until finally Antha stated, "I am sorry I let this occur. I am sorry so many of your kind died before I understood the circumstances and I am sorry the survival of your tribe involves breeding with the very men that nearly extinguished your kind. I am sorry I failed you."

With eyes flushed in tears, Orna clutched at Antha insisting, "I am sorry I blame you and punish you. You have not failed me. In some measure even if diluted, the tribe endures only because of you. You have not failed - You have succeeded."

Antha held her eyes closed and remained silent for some time then composed, she stated, "I observe a trail of blood in your wake."

Orna immediately protested, "This I learned from you. Do you now disapprove?"

Antha argued, "What you learned from me always occurred in defense of the tribe. What I observe behind you now is spiteful, punitive and unconstructive." Leaning near, Antha advised, "You cannot kill them all. In the time necessary to kill them all, they will double in number behind you. Killing them is as if multiplying them."

Orna shook her head and with a nearly pleading tone, she confided, "I walk among them and I hear them speak, and though in time perhaps appearance may render us indistinguishable, this kind of man will always know my tribe as a different kind, just as I know these men as a different kind. I name you god and you name me god but this kind of man awaits no word of any other nor names any other god. This kind of man names itself god, recognizes no other order, and considers this earth and all of nature inferior and subordinate. This kind of man neither respects nor ever will understand or appreciate nature but expects only to subvert it and alter it. This kind will never share this world with any other kind nor will they ever concede any portion of it unaltered. This kind will subvert and subordinate my kind or they will subvert and subordinate our earth, and all contact between us will always occur under terms of bitter contest." Contemplative, Orna paused then anxiously inquired, "If I cannot kill them all and they will never yield, is my extermination not then inevitable?"

Antha responded in a soothing manner, "If extermination is inevitable, how does your tribe grow in number?" Orna nodded subtly in appreciation of the encouragement and Antha insisted, "You do not take a single step and arrive at a destination. To arrive at a destination, you take a step in that direction then you take all the steps in between and if you do not take any one of those steps, you never arrive at a destination. The only step in any process that ever matters is the next step. You have a destination and you will arrive there by taking all the steps that lead there. Tomorrow, we will defend and preserve the tribe, we will keep them isolated from the other kind and protect the expansion of their clans, and one day, their time will arrive." Antha stared with deliberation until Orna acknowledged her even if perhaps a bit reluctantly and then Antha concluded, "Very well, then the time comes for you to stop pouting, set aside your spiteful retribution and do something constructive for those that need you. A yet unborn multitude depends on you. You are god. Now come home and act like it."

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