

# TELLING STORIES

by

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'I hope someone's remembered the cakes', said Demi, hitching a sheepskin back over her shoulder, and keeping her feet to the mud of the steep track up to the cave.

'You said that before'.

'Bad enough when it was just us and the children. But now with a pack of fellows traipsing up here too every year . . .'

'They've brought the cakes and they've brought the meat and the firewood and something to drink and the bedding. All right?'

'I don't think a ritual should be tampered with. Do it or leave it alone. But letting the men in - that's tampering. And it makes the cave far too crowded for a good sleep'.

'Look, when the moon comes out of the clouds again. You'll see the entrance to the cave. Nearly there'.

'Well I hope the stories are a bit more inspired than last year, that's all'.

A woman was already showing a little group of men where to light the watchfires outside the cave. Children, solemn with their importance at being out at night with the grown-ups, spread their own bits of bedding and for once did not jostle and squawk over who was to lie near whom.

'Into the dark cave of what is there and not yet known', said Auli, as the last stragglers panted up through the spring night. Demi had to admit she said it very well, clear and quiet, and into a moment when the whole tribe was momentarily hushed.

The night was like other nights before May morning that Demi could remember. The stone of the cave floor seemed to grow ridges as she lay there, with first one hip, then the other, becoming sore from the hardness as she turned about. There were too many snorers, too many sudden elbows, too many babies mewling and suckling, too many sounds that suggested that the rule of purity was being disregarded as completely as every other year since the men had been given in to, pandered to, and let into the spring ritual. She went to sleep prophesying a rainy morning.

In the dead half-light before true dawn, the watchers roused everyone. 'Let us take out into the light what was in the darkness', said Auli's clear grave voice.

'And take your bedding to sit on', added Demi, too quickly and loudly. She was not pleased with herself for that.

The sky hovered minute by minute from a pale-gold eastern rim through turquoise to a bold summer blue above them. With the song sung and the children's dance done, they offered meat. Each person proffered two roast morsels to a neighbour, who took one and let the giver eat the other. Demi's spirits rose and warmed as the sun did, and she found the basket of cakes and carried it round the great circle of people sitting and kneeling round the hot ashes of the dying fire.

From the plateau the river and woods of home looked so small, so safe, down there in the valley. She looked out at them and at the blue sky beyond the polite hands taking ceremonial cake. Esther sniffed hers closely. Her eyebrows rose.

'They didn't forget the special flavouring, then? This smells like some cake. Quite some cake. Three-day cake I'd call that. Well, I'm looking forward to the stories'.

She bit carefully with her front teeth, and let the cake rest in her mouth as if sudden swallowing might destroy its inspiring qualities.

Demi gave out the last cake and discovered none left for her. Ten years on the council, three times assistant to the priestess, and she ended up with no magic cake at the spring story-telling. She sat down hard on her sheepskin, and observed that lumps of its wool were coming loose. Nothing was right any more. Nobody kept after the men to make them cure the skins properly. Nobody counted how many cakes were needed for today. The stories . . . Even in the privacy of thought she paused, taking courage to finish what she had begun to say. The stories were the same stories every year now. Since

they let the men in. The wild tales, dream tales, bad tales, mad tales, had toned down to repeated formulae on recent May mornings. Cakeless, Demi waited to see what this year would bring.

On the far side of the circle Bettinson laughed foolishly and then sang a piercing long note, a woman's note he had no business to be singing. Two other men joined in, and the pure sound echoed back from beyond the valley. They were taking over. Demi shifted, destroying more of her sheepskin, and glanced along the line to Auli.

Certainly the cakes were working. Most people's faces had turned pink, and the wise look was beginning. If only looks could be trusted, thought Demi sourly, frowning at Auli. Perhaps they were in for a morning of squeals and ululations, and no stories at all. Auli sat smiling a cake-smile. It was as if she had forgotten that she was to conduct the whole ritual. Her hands smoothed the grass in front of her and she gazed gently through whoever her eyes lit on.

The three-man note died. Bettinson stood up, knocking a child and treading on some cake.

'And now', he said, in a clear voice uneasily like Auli, 'and now',

He tossed his hair exactly as Auli might toss hers, and some children laughed,

'we have brought into the light what was in the darkness.'

'Get on with it', said another man, enjoying the parody. 'Gip it up a bit, Bett'.

'Let us see and let us hear', said Bettinson, in Auli's flute-clear voice, 'the story that lay in darkness last night and that will be made real now'. He held his hands wide as Auli might have.

'I could tell you a tale or two', said the other man.

'Now then Nobby! Keep it clean!'

Demi shut her eyes to keep herself from shouting in rage. Auli must act, must stop these men from violating a whole-tribe ritual, the holiest and most important day of the year. Still smiling and still seated, Auli raised her right arm and stretched it so that she pointed one by one at the people opposite her. The sniggering died and one or two youngsters were cuffed. The men gave up their shouts, and Bettinson sat down, looking guilty.

Auli's finger stayed pointing at Jem, a red-haired girl of seventeen.

'It is through you', said Auli, 'that the story will begin'.

Everyone waited. This was not the ritual. Never before had the priestess singled out a teller.

And what a teller! The girl who used to play in the clay pit and rub clay into her hair till she could make it stick out in points all over her head; the girl who at 15 had suddenly turned soft and been moonstruck over first one, then another boy, in a way foreign to the tribe. Being moonstruck was a soft, boyish trick, not one for a self-respecting girl to go in for. And yet Auli was pointing at her, and the girl was gazing back, half-smiling, confident, waiting for the story to come through.

Grudgingly, Demi recognised the right look, the story-maker's look, as she remembered it from the good days of childhood May Days. That had been the look on Nan's face when the story of the Spindle came through her. From that story had come the now-assimilated miracle of threads, leading on to netting and weaving and the tunics and sacks and mats that all these young people just took for granted.

Jem shook her hair back and stood in one easy movement.

'Once upon a time', she began, and there was a rustle into silence all round her. People recognised the enchanted voice, so different from the sprightly, the false voice tellers used to spark up repeated tales. She stood forward in the circle, her trance smile turning to a grin, the morning sun firing the east side of her red hair.

Once upon a time there was no thought and there were no words',  
She stretched her arms wide and spoke in a softer voice,  
'only a harmony'.

She drew her breath in, and all the tribe copied her, so that together they made a long chant of Om that sounded through the valley. It died away and she went on.

'Then there was dreadful noise and darkness and whirling'. The children led this part of the story-acting, hurling themselves into people or on to the ground.

'All was fragments, nothing was joined: hot, cold, light, dark, fear, pain, not knowing. Then slowly, slowly, the pieces made sense of

themselves, and became rain and sun and air', Other voices came in now, building the story with her, as all the tribe enacted the words.

'Fishes in the water',

'Birds in the air',

'Meat animals running on the land'.

Jem's voice came through again, as adults and children turned themselves rapidly from fishes to birds to four-legged beasts, giggling, excited.

'And there were people to know the world and love. But the harmony was broken. Some of the people were om-men, womb-men, who still could give life and make miracles'.

As she spoke, the women made a circle with the children inside it. Then an angry man's voice at the back anticipated Jem's words.

'And we got put on the outside for being nothing-men, with no breasts, not allowed to make children'.

'It ain't fair', said another man's voice, as Jem went on.

'And the muscle men, the nothing-men, were not content just to work in the fields, to carry wood and water for the womb-men. So, because the womb-men, having so much, could be generous, they summoned a nothing man from outside the circle, and gave him an orchis, and an old piece of pig-gut,'

Jem named the things she picked up from the ground, and a burly teen-age boy swaggered, grinning, into the circle to play this role.

" 'Here, man, take this orchis and tie it around you, so you too have a body ornament, as we have breasts'. But, being a man, he tied it on awkwardly, so the orchis dangled between his legs, with an end of gut flapping above it".

The women sniggered, but the men did not respond, as the boy in the middle acted tying on his orchis.

Jem scratched with her toe in the grass and picked up some seeds.

" 'Here, man, here is something to keep in your orchis-purse". And the man pushed them in and began to strut about. But then the gut came

loose and he had to tie the orchis back on. And so from that day men have worried lest their orchises drop off. And they have strutted and plotted, and thought of nothing else in their lives but how to coax a womb-man to receive their little seeds and make them grow".

With a laugh she skipped forward and kissed the boy in the middle of the circle, and announced,

'The tale is done'.

A little hastily, cutting into the jokes and half-embarrassed laughter that was beginning, Auli said in her priestess-voice,

"This story was never heard before. But it was in us, and part of our truth".

Then she slipped between the groups to where Demi was squatting, and knelt beside her and squeezed her hand.

'Amasing', she said, glowing. 'Now you can be pleased again. A new story, and one that will stay with us for a long time'.

'No, I'm not happy', said Demi, who seemed to take a delight in being gloomy. 'That is a story against. For the first time in tribe, we have made a story against. It is a woman's story against a man. And now that it is there, one day a man will come to the ceremony and he will make a revenge story, a story to make us womb-men into nothing men. And then we shall all be done for'.

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