

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

John M. Groves for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 18, 2011.

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In Night Dreamer Walks, the first eight chapters of a novel of the same name, John M. Groves imagines the predicament of a young Native American man living 8,000 years ago in Oregon's Klamath Basin. Beginning as a story to avenge his father's death during an unusual outbreak of tribal violence, the novel explores the protagonist's growing involvement in healing and witchcraft practices. The author crafts a prehistoric world by drawing on ethnographic accounts, indigenous mythology, archaeology, and contemporary Native American life. The journey of the protagonist, Night, to the ocean and back becomes a movement across the topography of greed, tradition, transformation, and morality.

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Night Dreamer Walks

by
John M. Groves

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

John M. Groves, Author

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Night Dreamer Walks

Prologue

Night sat at the marsh's edge, watching the sun drop over the mountains toward the Dancing Place of the Dead. When the last red band had disappeared behind the volcano, he walked into the growing darkness to see his father, Morning Crow. Lately, Morning Crow had looked as sad as Night had ever seen, his jowls wrinkled like an old dog's. This had never happened before. His father was a medicine maker, and his medicine had always kept him strong. Whenever Night visited him at his tiny earth lodge—he lived apart from the rest of the family—Night left happier than before. But not the last time, and the time before that.

The wind picked up. It carried him upslope to where he could no longer smell marsh water and dead tule reeds and woodsmoke. At the top of the rise, he saw his father crouched on his heels inside a rabbitskin blanket. He looked like a fur-covered earth lodge. He wore his basket hat like he always did, pulled down above his eyes, almost touching the bumpy tattooed lines running across his cheeks. Morning Crow stared at the fire, ignoring Night until he sat beside him on a tule mat. They touched palms and Morning Crow patted Night's shoulder and they just sat there.

Night thought his mother had acted horribly when she called Morning Crow a "cursed fishless bastard" and made him leave a year-and-a-half ago. With Night's help, his father had built the earth lodge which stood behind where they sat. It was a small, round house, not much bigger than a wikiup, made of pine timbers and posts over a

shallow pit. It was covered with branches and grass and earth and had a smoke hole at the top.

“What’s wrong?” Night finally asked.

His father didn’t say. Night stood and looked east, as he had seen grown men do to show one another they were upset. Where he looked, the moon was rising like a big goose egg over Basket Mountain. The sky behind was the darkest blue he had ever seen.

“I’m leaving the marsh, Night,” Morning Crow said. “I’ll be gone a year. I’m going to the ocean.”

He said it plainly, like, “I’m gathering obsidian, Night. I’ll be gone three days.”

Simple, like that.

A thin cloud drifted across the moon’s bottom, turning white at the edges.

His father had been keeping things to himself.

“Are you leaving to find another wife?” Night asked.

“Maybe.”

Night could see the sense in his father looking. His mother had said foul things to Morning Crow for as long as Night could remember.

“You’ll be gone when I become a man,” Night said. He was thirteen, and when his voice changed—surely it would soon—he would go to the mountains to claim power.

Morning Crow stared at the fire. It seemed to be all he did now. “Crow Clan wants me gone. Stone Knife came and threatened to kill me.”

“Are you leaving because of Stone Knife or for a woman?”

“Both.”

Night knew that his father and Stone Knife—Crow Clan elder and headman of their tribe, the Fish People—hated each other. But he thought his father was running from a fight.

“Use witchcraft,” he said. Morning Crow could do it. He was a medicine maker—all medicine makers knew witchcraft.

Night looked back. His father kept staring at the fire.

“Teach me to be a medicine maker,” Night said. “I’ll do it.”

His father laughed for a long time, each wave louder than the one before, like thunder getting closer.

Night sat by him. “Teach me,” Night whispered. “I’ll do it.”

Morning Crow’s eyebrows rose like caterpillars bending their backs. He looked at Night, looked away, then looked at him again. “All healers are witches, Night. It’s true. But a medicine maker does a lot more healing than witchcraft unless he wants to be called a witch.”

He put his hand on Night’s knee. “Things will be all right,” he said.

Night didn’t believe it.

He thought.

He knew his father had been to the ocean when he was young, but he didn’t know why he wanted to go again. It had taken him months to get there and back, walking across the Big Peaks and into valleys and mountains full of rain.

“Why the ocean?” Night asked.

“You’ll know why I’m going after I tell you.”

Night listened.

“Did you know you can hear the water in the ocean before you can see it? It’s the sound of rocks and mud sliding down a mountain, but it doesn’t stop. When you look at it, you know it’s the most powerful thing you’ve seen.” He looked at Night with humble eyes, and Night knew what he had said was true. “You swim when you go there,” Morning Crow said. “You dive under the waves. One comes, you go under, through it, until you’re out past where they break, and then you keep swimming, because it’s cold, Night. It’s cold and the water tastes like your arm when you lick it on a hot day. You look at the horizon and the water keeps going—it’s all water that way, straight to the Dancing Place of the Dead. But the Dancing Place is so far away you can’t see it. I never knew that, never knew you had to walk across water to get to the Dancing Place.”

Morning Crow looked down, eyes closed.

“I floated high on my back and swam,” he said, coming alive. “I could see the sand.” He moved his hand slowly through the air, as if the sand never ended. “There are dunes like the ones east of here, and trees past the dunes, fat, old ones with broken tops. As I floated, I started to feel warm. That’s when she took hold of my leg and pulled me down.” He looked at Night as if to make sure he was listening. “I had a lungful of air when she pulled me under. It’s a good thing. It’s dark down there when you get below the surface, darker the further you go. I could see her swimming in front of me, pulling, long skinny arms gripping tight while she went deeper. We went so deep that everything was black.”

He nodded slowly. “All she wanted to do was play. The water spirit. The big one. She’s not in Fish People stories,” Morning Crow said. “The water spirits that live around here are tiny compared to her. They think they’re big, but they’re not.” He chuckled

softly. “She let go of me when I was about to die. I kicked hard, almost lost my air. When I finally came above, I knew I wasn’t close to getting out of it because I was cold and tired and the swells were bigger. And it’s harder to swim back because the waves catch you and turn you upside down and all you can see is bubbles. But I ended up on shore. Somehow I got up and walked.”

They sat for a while, and Night tried to imagine everything his father had told him.

“That’s the ocean, Night. In the mud along the tidal flats there are littleneck clams and bent-nose clams and knife clams, mussels, oysters. You see their breathing holes and you put your digging stick in and find one every time.” He made a motion with his hands like digging clams and looked at Night, eyebrows raised. “Deer and bear and elk come down from the hills to drink water and eat skunk cabbage in pools of water between trees as wide as I am tall. You float your balsa boat into the estuary and put a net down and it fills up with tomcod, sculpin and flatfish.” He raised his hands as if pulling a net from the water. “You wait until the sun sets and net yourself cormorants, grebes, gulls, ducks, loons. If you get tired of shellfish and fish, you find a seal on the beach. You put seaweed in boiling baskets to give salt flavor to your food. You drink water from little springs that flow under fern leaves.” He wiggled his fingers, little springs under leaves.

“That’s the ocean, Night,” he said.

Night thought it sounded too good to be true.

Beside Morning Crow sat a boiling basket filled with white and yellow innards.

“Skunk fat,” Morning Crow said. “I’m making oil to keep my hair black. But I forgot my cooking stones and my cedar spoon.”

His father looked too warm and comfortable to move, wrapped in his blanket.

“I’ll get the stones and spoon,” Night said. He walked up the roof of the lodge and stepped through the smoke hole onto the blackened ladder.

Inside it was small and dark and silent, barely lit by the slumbering coals in the hearth. It didn’t look like a medicine maker’s house, full of stuffed effigies and painted posts. All Night saw were a couple of sacks of seed meal bulging between the rafters of the ceiling. A simple tule mat on top of bundles of grass by the smoldering hearth. A few baskets, charmstones, dart shafts, a fire drill. Up and down the walls and the sloping roof—which made Night smile—his father had woven laurel cuttings into the shape of a giant green basket. “To keep the fleas away,” Morning Crow always said, and Night knew it was true. “You think I have time to tear my lodge down and rebuild it every year like everyone does?” He did have time, living alone. But he always said, and it was true—everything he said was true, so far as Night could tell—that the day’s trek into the forest on the other side of the marsh to get laurel was a small part of the time it would take to tear down his lodge and rebuild it.

Cooking stones. Cedar spoon. Night found them inside a basket and brought them out.

The sky darkened. In the north, just above the horizon, Night saw black clouds wrapped in pink light that seemed to fade as he looked. He put more wood on the fire. Night would put a log on, then his father would, then Night would place another where it

fit. They did this without talking until the fire climbed into the air, higher than their heads. It was bigger than it needed to be to melt skunk fat.

“Everyone on the marsh is tearing down their lodge and building a new one just to get rid of fleas and mice,” Morning Crow said. “You know what’s wrong?” he said. “No one has time for the old stories. They’re too busy fishing and getting deer and gathering seeds.”

“Not everyone,” Night said. “I lined our lodge with laurel.”

“Your mother must have said nice things about me when you did that.” Morning Crow pulled the blanket tight and reached into the fire with a forked stick. He rolled a cobble out and dropped it into the basket of skunk fat. “One’s probably enough,” he said. “Don’t want to burn it.” Night watched it disappear. He picked up his old blackened spoon made from red cedar, the handle carved in the shape of an outstretched frog. He dipped it into the oil forming atop the grease and set the spoon on the rocks to cool.

“I’d like some,” Night said.

When it was ready, his father held the spoon over Night’s cupped hands and poured a tiny amount onto his palm, poured some into his own hand, rubbed them together, took off his hat, and rubbed it into his hair. Night did the same.

Morning Crow got up and put his hand on Night’s head. “Stay here,” he said, and disappeared into the earth lodge. He came out quickly, putting his sandals into the old worn places in the sod as he walked down the roof. The wind blew more strongly. It blew the smoke toward his father as he stood, but he didn’t move. He squinted at Night and held out his right hand. In it was a squirrel tail with a buckskin cord bound to the end, a loon feather hanging from it.

“Take it with you when you go to the mountains,” his father said. “For good luck.”

Night wanted his father, not a squirrel tail. But he took it.

“Do you think I’m old enough to be a medicine maker?” Night asked.

Thirteen years was too young—he knew it. But he wanted his father to tell him it wasn’t. He wanted Morning Crow to give him a medicine cane and a medicine hat, saying, “You’re ready, son. Sure as can be, you’re ready.”

But all Morning Crow said was, “You promise you’ll keep the squirrel tail?”

Night nodded.

“I’ll follow you to the ocean,” he said.

His father laughed. “The marsh needs good storytellers, Night. You stay and tell the old stories. Don’t try to be a medicine maker. Hear me? I’ll come back.”

At home, Night snuck down the ladder into his mother’s earth lodge. Asleep around the hearth on mats and bundles of grass were his mother, his sister, his grandfather’s brother on his father’s side, his uncle, his aunt, and their baby. Night lay on his matting next to his oldest sister, looking through the smoke and haze of the fire at the Path of the Dead across the top of the sky. When Curly Snake Skin and Night and his uncle rose early and went outside to swim where the river flowed into the marsh, Night didn’t tell them his father was leaving.

After they walked home, Night ate his seed mush and washed his mouth with water and walked up the rise to where he saw smoke rising in the cold, clear air. Morning Crow had burned his house in the darkness and left.

Interlude

Night's voice changed in the deep of that winter, in the month of the frozen marsh when he would sometimes drop a line with a bone hook through a hole in the ice to try to catch chub and trout. His voice sounded much like his father's, but higher. His sister, Goose, half-joking, said it sounded like a loon crying and a man talking at the same time. Night told her she was wrong, but he secretly liked what she said. Loon had witchcraft power.

When the days warmed during the months of late winter dancing and the medicine maker Long Smiling Woman called for snow to leave and sun to come, Night went on snowshoes to the top of Basket Mountain to become a man. He piled rocks for five days, hardly sleeping, shaking half-asleep in a rabbitskin blanket, always calling to the sky and mountain and waters for any spirit who would listen. Finally Heron came to him in a dreamsong. *I am Heron*, he said to Night. *I fly slowly, but try to catch me, and your hand will slip.* That became Night's spirit song.

Morning Crow came back from the ocean during the month of the feast, when frost covered the bunchgrass in the mornings but melted quickly in the sun. Night could hardly believe it. His father walked up the path along the marsh shore and found Night and his cousin Curly Snake Skin peeling the skin from three wood rats they had roasted. He looked five years older—he was old to begin with, having married late—but now he looked ancient to Night.

Morning Crow told Night he had swum again with the ocean spirit. He had wintered on a bluff above the ocean, eating plentifully of the fish and birds and shellfish of which he had told Night.

He came back without a wife. Night asked him if he had met a woman, and he said he had, but didn't say much about it. Whoever she was, he hadn't brought her back.

Things began to change. Morning Crow seemed at peace with Stone Knife and the Crow Clan. Stone Knife and his sons never came to taunt Night's father. Oddly, Morning Crow told Night one day that he was going upriver to heal Stone Knife's youngest daughter of fever.

Night could hardly believe it.

Crow Clan had their own medicine makers who could have done it. Night couldn't understand why his father would help the man who had threatened to kill him. He thought his mother had something to do with it—always she had pushed Morning Crow to be close to the Crow Clan, the clan she had been born into. But Morning Crow had never listened to her before.

Morning Crow spent three days upriver trying to heal Stone Knife's daughter, Willow. On the fourth day, Willow died. Morning Crow came back, and Night could tell he was afraid.

The family of one who had died in a medicine maker's care had right to kill that medicine maker. When a medicine maker failed, it meant his spirits hadn't listened or he had lied and practiced witchcraft instead of healing. Such a medicine maker could do great harm. The family had right to kill him.

“Stone Knife can’t claim tradition,” Night told his father. “He took the fish runs. The past has never seen that.”

But Morning Crow was still afraid.

Stone Knife came downriver with his sons dressed to fight, with thick leggings and darts and clubs. They made a circle around Morning Crow in the clearing outside the earth lodge—Night saw it happen from the marsh, where he was fishing with a net from a dugout canoe with his cousin Curly Snake Skin.

He saw Stone Knife raise the club high in the air and thunder it against Morning Crow’s head. Night couldn’t see his father where he lay. He pushed the punt pole hard into the mud, but the dugout seemed barely to move. He screamed and Curly screamed too, paddling with his hands, Night pushing, but the canoe seemed barely to move.

When Night made it to the clearing, they were gone. Morning Crow lay on his face, his head turned, his face staring west at the Dancing Place, all blood and flesh and tooth.

After this, Night set out to become a medicine maker. To become a witch. To set things right.

He spent a year getting ready.

Up the River

Night climbed the ladder to the top of earth lodge, poked his head out the smoke hole, and looked upriver through the sun. Today he planned to walk upriver to put a witchcraft spell on Stone Knife, the Crow Clan headman: a spell so crazy that Stone Knife would not sleep or eat until he had won the love of his son's wife. The spell would make Stone Knife chase her like a coyote after a mouse, until it made his son so mad that he might want to kill him. Stone Knife wouldn't know anything. He would only know he needed Tiny Finger's wife. Nothing else. Then Night would walk home grinning and wait for word to come down the river that Stone Knife—his great uncle—had gone crazy with love.

Night thought it bad luck to see, below, his sister, Goose, kneeling by a roasting pit. He had told her he would sleep all day because he was sick, which was a lie—he had never felt quicker and lighter and more full of power. Goose should already have been gone gathering lily seeds with his mother and aunt. But there she was, not far from where cousin Curly Snake Skin sat on a stump sharpening the edge of a dart point.

“What are you doing, Night?” Goose asked. She didn't look up from the pit where she layered fresh grass over hot rocks.

Night stepped slowly down the roof onto the ground. He and Curly tapped palms as Night passed. They had been friends for a long time, and cousins forever.

“I'm walking up the river,” Night said. “To get sagebrush. For my stomach.”

Goose dumped pond lily seeds out of a basket tray onto the smoking grass, spread them, and threw more grass on top. She sat up, wiped her hands on her tule apron, and

looked at Night for a long time. Goose wore a snake rattle in her hair. Only men did that. Though she wasn't yet a woman—she was thirteen, two years younger than Night—she didn't care what people thought.

She looked at him calmly as a gambler. "What's that?" she asked, pointing. "Tucked inside your belt."

He looked at the left side, where the squirrel tail Morning Crow had given him hung. He knew she meant the other. "It's a squirrel tail."

"No," she said. "The other side. Inside your belt."

It was a loon feather. For magic. For witchcraft. "What do you mean?" he asked.

She stood and walked to him. Curly Snake Skin was sitting between them, next to the earth lodge, staring at the dart point held in the buckskin on his palm, pushing an antler tine into the edge.

"What is it, Night?" she asked.

"A feather," he said.

"In your belt?"

"It'll be safe there."

She looked at Curly. "You shouldn't work on tools so close to the lodge," she said.

Curly knew better, but he was lazy.

She looked at Night. "What are you doing?" she asked again.

"I'm going to set things right."

Night watched Goose's big, round eyes. They were browner than anything he'd seen. He had been fasting for six days in order to get ready for his witchcraft, and had never felt quicker and lighter. Colors looked bright as a rainbow.

He looked south down the marsh, east up the river, and north up the marsh to see if anyone was around. "I'm going to put a love spell on Stone Knife," he whispered. "Witchcraft. Make him fall in love with Tiny Finger's wife."

Curly smiled, and his eyes opened wide. He looked like a buzzard: his big, skinny nose had a lump at the top where his brother had cracked him once, and his hair was thin, hardly growing below his basket cap. "Wonderful," he said.

Goose held the rattle, twisted it, stared at Night. "Does Long Smiling Woman think you have power?" she asked.

Night didn't know. He had never asked the old medicine maker if she thought he was ready.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Night's ready," Curly said.

She looked at Night for a long time. She looked at Curly. "What do you know about medicine?"

He tapped his fingers on his palm. "I trust Night," he said.

"You don't know medicine, Curly," she said.

It was true.

She twisted the rattle until Night thought the cording that held it might break. "If it works, they'll know it was witchcraft," she said. "One of the Crow Clan medicine

makers will cure Stone Knife and his spirits will tell him who did it. They'll say, 'It was Night Dreamer.'"

Night had thought of all Goose said. Hadn't he?

"If it doesn't work," she said, "they'll know that you tried. You haven't walked up the river in a year. What are you going to tell him? That you came to say hello?"

She was right.

"But Tiny Finger will kill Stone Knife before they find out who did it," Night said. "Before they know it was witchcraft."

"Yes," Curly said, looking at Night, looking at Goose. "He'll be dead." He sliced his bony hand through the air.

There was no wind. The air grew hotter as they stood. The hollers of children running somewhere near the river sounded like memories, and Goose took a step toward Night.

"If you want to kill Stone Knife," she said, just above a whisper, "why are you using a love spell?"

The truth was, he thought he didn't have enough power to kill him. A love spell was easier. "More fun," he said.

Curly peered at him and blinked.

Night pointed at the roasting pit. "The grass is burning up."

Goose went and kicked dirt over it.

Curly held up the black obsidian point, turning it in the sunlight so he could see the edge. "I broke it," he said softly.

Night held out his palm and Curly tapped it. "I'm going,"

“I’ll pray to Heron for your luck,” Curly said.

Night laughed.

Curly never prayed.

The light from the chattering aspen leaves made Night dreamy as he went, made him think of the crazy magic he had for Stone Knife. He walked past earth lodges that looked like giant brown mushrooms, the river to his left. He squinted—the sun was hot and bright for the month of the chokecherries, the month between Summer and Fall.

He could see the whole valley when he looked. The willows and aspens and cottonwoods on the bank were the tallest trees in the marsh basin, alive with wind. Sagebrush and juniper covered the rest of the valley, the juniper smaller and darker green than the river trees, with little, blue berries and dry, twisted trunks. The basin ran north-south with blue mountains on the east and west. To the west, the mountains were giants; to the east, they stood smaller and rounder. The river he followed came from the dry eastern hills like sunshine out of a black sky.

Mink Clan people—his clan—were everywhere now, greeting him with smiles. Ever since his father had been killed, people treated him as if they thought he needed encouragement for whatever he was doing—of which they had no idea. They were gentle and kind, but far away. He knew that many people called him Night Dreamer when they talked of him. They said he spent too much time playing near the medicine rocks on the other side of the marsh when he was a boy, and that the rocks made him think and dream too much.

Further along, three women came toward him on the path, burden baskets on their backs full of huckleberries, their hands purple, heads bowed forward against the weight of the basket straps across their foreheads. It was Root Sparrow—his age, unmarried—with her mother and aunt. Distant cousins. They went silent as he stepped aside, and Root Sparrow didn't look at him. He thought she liked him, as he did her, but he didn't know.

Her mother slowed. "Are you hunting?" she asked. She must have known he wasn't. He had no darts, no club, no rabbit stick.

He shook his head. "The deer and elk have run because of the ash. There are hardly any left," he said. It wasn't really true.

She squinted at him. "Are you fishing?"

He had no net, no harpoon.

"Not today. There are no bugs. No fish."

She glanced doubtfully at her sister. "Helping build a lodge?" she asked.

He carried no timbers, no bone wedge for splitting.

"No. I weave laurel inside ours."

"What are you doing, Night?"

"Walking to Stone Knife's," he said.

She glanced at her daughter. They started walking.

"That's not going to get you a wife," she said without looking back.

He thought that when he was a respected medicine maker, Root Sparrow's mother might beg him to marry her daughter, and he would.

When he made it to the Crow Clan part of the river—Stone Knife's part—people watched, not friendly, knowing him but turning away. They were fat, healthy Crow Clan

folk. Salmon halves lay everywhere on willow lathe curing over alder smoke. The fish smelled like memories of Night's father, his jokes and smiles and stories bound up in the wood and fish flesh, now let go by red coals and ash, blackened wood and thick, gray smoke. Night could already see Stone Knife's earth lodge far ahead, the largest of any Fish person's, its rafters heavy with dried fish, he thought. The lodges of his sons surrounded his, smaller mountains around a giant one.

Stone Knife had no right to claim tradition.

Night could see just ahead a tule canopy, the top of it, and he wondered if Stone Knife sat under it. He touched the loon feather, tucked tightly in his waist cord, looked at the river through the willows, looked at the blue mountains beyond Stone Knife's lodge. He turned and looked down the river toward the marsh, where he lived. He looked at the Fire Mountain, the tallest mountain rising beyond the marsh. Far west was the ocean, and beyond that the Dancing Place of the Dead. You had to walk across water to get there.

He walked quickly through the big sagebrush. Stone Knife—if he sat under that canopy—wouldn't be able to see Night until he came close. There were tracks in the sand, Crow Clan steps. Night tried to put his sandals where no one else had gone. He put two fingers on the feather and whispered the song Loon had given him.

I am old Loon. Rainmaker, trouble maker. Rainmaker, troublemaker, love maker.

He walked to the last big sagebrush before the clearing. Stone Knife was there. Night could see him. He was sitting under the canopy with his youngest wife, Falling Moon. Night sang again, softly.

I am old Loon. Rainmaker, trouble maker. Rainmaker, troublemaker, love maker.

Now Night stood in the clearing, having walked into it without thinking, still singing.

From under the canopy made of tule matting lashed to bent willow branches, sitting on a pine stump, Stone Knife grinned and said, “Sing more loudly, Night! So we can hear.” His voice was happy and proud. Falling Moon sat on matting beside him. No other woman sat all day with her husband. Women sat with women, men with men.

She smiled and urged Night with hands held out. He didn’t think they would be so kind, so welcoming.

The sun beat Night’s head. It tried to steal his thoughts.

“I was singing a love song,” he said, happy to hear words from his mouth.

“Sing it for us,” Falling Moon said.

“It’s for Root Sparrow,” Night said. “Only for her.”

“She just walked past,” Stone Knife said. “Why didn’t you chase her?”

The sun—so hot. “She was with her mother and aunt.”

“Still, you could have chased her,” Stone Knife said.

Stone Knife wore no basket hat. He told people that hats were for people outside the Crow Clan—poor, simple Mink Clan folk who lived south along the marsh. His cape and breechcloth were finely grained buckskin. His sandals looked barely walked upon. Someone—likely Falling Moon—had pulled his hair back and tied it at the top with hemp cording. Three crow feathers hung from the knot like slabs of dried meat. It almost made Night laugh. Next, Stone Knife would tell people he was a medicine maker and could see the future.

Falling Moon worked, or pretended to. A duck decoy with a body but no head sat in her lap. Wet tule reeds lay close to her buckskin apron, which was embroidered with tiny, round shells from the south. She came from another tribe, from the Desert People. For a Desert Person to be among the Fish People was like a rare bird to fly into the marsh valley and be trapped. Desert People lived on the other side of the eastern mountains. In the desert. They moved always from one place to the other, and Fish People hardly saw them. Night had been told they slept during the day and hunted at night. Like cougars. He had been told they could go for weeks without drinking or eating, that they slept on piles of rocks, and they could look at the sun without going blind—but he didn't believe these things. Stone Knife had traded a Desert headman five burden baskets of fish as bride payment for Falling Moon. No Fish headman had ever done this. The truth was that no Fish headman before Stone Knife had not been a medicine maker. This was Stone Knife's way—to do new things, things that served him, and call them tradition.

“You look dry. Come out of the sun,” he said to Night, motioning.

Night walked and stood in the shade of the canopy. Falling Moon smiled. She was beautiful, and not much older than Night, but much younger than Stone Knife—forty years.

“Night,” Stone Knife stood. When he stepped forward and hugged Night, Night half imagined one of Stone Knife's hands pushing a blade into his back. But Stone Knife patted him in a fatherly way. He put his hand on Night's shoulder. “Are you hungry? Would you like tea?”

It had been a long walk.

The sun burned hot.

Night could put witchcraft on him later. They would think he came for a friendly visit. Beloved grandnephew.

“Yes,” Night said. “Tea, please.”

“No food?”

“Yes. Some.” A little, to break his fast slowly.

Falling Moon smiled at Night like a grandmother. She turned and walked to the cooking lodge, her sandals raising clouds of yellow dust.

“Sit with us,” Stone Knife said, drawing his hand toward a stump next to his.

“Please.”

Night sat, feet in the sun, face in the shade. He stared at the earth lodges down the river, hoping Falling Moon would come back quickly.

“How is your mother?” Stone Knife asked. He sat staring at Night with his elbows on his thighs.

“Weaving,” Night said. “All the time.” As if trying to make baskets to hold everything in the world.

“Healthy?”

“Yes,” Night said. “Healthy.”

Falling Moon came back with a basket of water on her head and a tray of roasted intestine in the crook of her arm. “From our last meal.”

She held the tray for Night. He thanked her and took a small length of innards. Stone Knife watched him. After Stone Knife ate of his, Night tasted some. It was rich, heavy on his stomach, and he only ate a little.

“Not hungry?” Stone Knife asked, chewing.

“Not very,” Night said.

The three ate silently, looking down the river. When they were nearly done, Falling Moon went again to the cooking lodge, a small house of tule reeds, open on one side, and came back with a stone bowl of soap root paste and a water basket for washing their hands. She set it politely in front of Night, and he washed.

The loon feather, the song, the magic—everything was ready, and Night’s stomach was full. The sun was beginning to sink—the shadow of the canopy moved slowly up Night’s legs. They were foolish not to suspect him of anything. He smiled to himself. It was perfect.

The three looked downriver, like a dream.

“Hot for the month of the thumb,” Falling Moon said, rinsing her fingers.

“Hotter each year,” Night said.

“Very hot,” she said.

“Like the marsh is water at the bottom of a boiling basket,” Night said. He cupped his hands in front of him. His father would have done that.

She laughed. Night saw Stone Knife smile. “Yes, yes,” she said.

“Coyote is trying to cook the fish in the marsh so he can eat them,” Night said.

“What a funny idea,” she said, smiling politely.

Stone Knife smiled.

Night hated them both.

“The desert crawls west every year like an ant,” Night said. He ran his fingers through the air one after the other. “We’ll have to chase water to the ocean, stay just in front of the desert.”

“Goodness,” she laughed. “I hope not.”

The leaves in the trees didn't move. The wind had stopped again. Night couldn't think of more jokes.

Stone Knife pushed his heel into the sand. He rubbed his chin. Falling Moon wove a tule reed into the decoy. Stone Knife looked at her, and Falling Moon, as if she had been waiting for Stone Knife's glance, rose, nested the tray, the baskets, and the bowl, and went quickly away.

Stone Knife stared at Night. “You walked a long way for a drink of tea,” he said, standing.

“I enjoyed the walk.”

Stone Knife snorted. He went to the edge of the clearing, kneeled beside a rock in the bunch grass, and stared at it.

Night whispered Loon's song again. The third time. The last time.

Stone Knife poked his finger into a hole in the rock. “Look, Night,” he said, “look what I found.” It had never been simple with Stone Knife. “I'll show you, grandnephew,” he said. Night walked to him. Stone Knife rubbed between his thumb and forefinger what he had dabbed from the rock. “You know what this is?” he said. His voice sounded friendly still, as if he were about to show Night a charmstone or a precious bead. “Yes, Night, you know.” It was ash from Fire Mountain. It had blown high and fallen like snow three days before. Stone Knife stepped closer. He held his thumb and finger between them. “Do you know *who* this is, Night?” he said, looking at his fingers, and then at Night. He looked as if he were about to smile. “This is your father getting shat from the Dancing Place of the Dead.”

Stone Knife rubbed the ash between his thumb and finger. “We called my daughter Willow,” he said, “because she was like a willow by the water. The tree with branches that hang like they’re remembering something. So much grace. You might think, Night, that an infant couldn’t be like that. How could a tiny thing strapped tight to a cradleboard, how could she be like a willow? She used to watch me with a smile, eyes following slowly, always catching up, never rushing, but always catching me—the way the end of a willow branch waves in the air when the wind strikes it. It’s a little behind everything, but that’s where the beauty is. That’s where her grace was, Night.”

The feather, the spell. Everything ready.

Night touched the loon feather.

“The fever took her grace away, Night,” he said. “It took her grace. All I asked of your father when he came home was that he bring her grace back. That’s all. A fever, Night, nothing more. You’d think that a year of walking would have made his power stronger. But what did he do?” He paused. “What did he do, Night?” he said.

“He called his medicine spirits,” Night said. He felt so quick, so light. “He called his medicine skoks.”

Stone Knife held out his finger, as if getting ready to streak his face. “Did your father hold sway with his medicine spirits, with his skoks?” he asked. “Did they listen?”

Night touched Stone Knife’s shoulder. He looked in his eyes. They were dark brown like buckskin. Like agate. He wondered what he looked like to Stone Knife, if his eyes gleamed like the moon, if his palm felt crazy, his fingers full of magic.

Night waited for word to come down the river. He made dart points and sharpened them, spent two days with Curly in the hills looking for elk and deer, saw many but failed to kill one. The two of them fished on the marsh from a dugout canoe, where Curly whispered as if to himself, but really to Night, that the world was against him—which was not far from the truth. Night went alone for laurel cuttings to the western hills and brought them home in the dugout loaded so heavily that water nearly came over the gunwales. When he wove them inside the lodge, his mother, Sunken Lily, cursed him, saying he was like his father: that he didn't work hard enough, thought too much, and would never bring wealth to his family.

Night made up stories. He imagined Stone Knife following Tiny Finger's wife into the hills when she went with other women to gather huckleberries, trying, like Coyote, to seduce her with stories and lies and wit.

He waited for word to come down the river. It came. Stone Knife was fine. He had never been healthier. He sat all day with Falling Moon like he had before, and had not fallen in love with Tiny Finger's wife. He told people that his nephew Night Dreamer had come to visit, and that he thought it odd. Night Dreamer had not been there for a year. He had hardly eaten anything when he came and talked quickly of the weather. Stone Knife had heard him whispering a song before he got there and was certain that Night had tried to kill him with witchcraft.

Not long after, a fat cousin Night liked named Seven Tooth came running and found Night near the marsh. He told him that Stone Knife was coming down the river, alone.

Pemmican

Searching the gray light inside the lodge for her seed winnowing basket, Sunken Lily watched Night scamper down the ladder. It made her angry to see him. She hadn't talked to him since he tried to kill Stone Knife, which made her feel like Fire Mountain: full of hot rage leaking everywhere.

He looked as afraid as she had ever seen him. Like a boy, shaky and strange.

"Stone Knife's coming," he whispered.

She went to him—it happened quickly. She grabbed his arms where he stood by the hearth with smoke in his eyes, squinting. "What are you doing?" she yelled.

"Looking for my blanket," he said.

It was right where it always was. He was so scared he hadn't even seen it.

"What are you doing?" she yelled. He ought to have known she wasn't talking about the blanket.

"I'm going to hide," he said. "Up the slope."

"Near where your father used to live?"

He nodded.

"He'll find you there!" she screamed.

"I'm going to leave the marsh," he said.

She had figured as much.

"Do you know what you did when you tried to kill my uncle?" she cried. He looked at his blanket, looked at her eyes, looked at the smoke hole as if he wanted to

leave. “You made me think you’re more a fool than your father,” she yelled. “You think you can go against tradition like that?”

She knew he would say it was the fish.

“No one took the fish before,” Night said. He took her arms and pushed them away—he had never done that.

“You can’t live in this house again,” she said. She meant it as a curse, but when she said it, she heard what it meant. Her son was gone. He would never sleep there again. Stone Knife, her uncle—her father’s brother—would find him if he did.

It made her even madder.

She said, “What kind of crazy medicine has Long Smiling Woman been teaching you?”

And, “Is my boy a witch? Is he a witch? Does he know what other medicine makers do to a witch?”

He did.

And, “Where in the world are you going to go, Night?”

Now Night yelled, and his voice cracked. It almost made her laugh.

He yelled things like, “Long Smiling Woman has been like a grandmother to me!”

And, “My father would be proud of me! He would have taught me witchcraft himself if he had known I’d need it to kill Stone Knife.” And then he screamed, “He wouldn’t be dead if you hadn’t made him try to heal Willow!”

“I didn’t ask him!” she yelled. But she knew Night wouldn’t believe her.

Finally, Night said, “I’m going to the ocean.”

He went and grabbed his blanket. He shook it out and sent dust and ashes from the fire flying. She couldn't believe it. It was horrible luck—little trickster spirits everywhere in the dust.

He climb the ladder, and she sat on the bottom rung, her back to the fire. Pieces of dust floated in the gray light, but she didn't even care.

Night needed to leave. He did. He might learn while he was gone to take the world as it was.

She set about making pemmican for him to take on his journey. She fetched a pitch-lined basket of deer tallow from the rafters, filling also two baskets, one with seed meal from a sack and the other with chokecherry mash. She dropped hot cooking stones from the fire in the tallow basket, nested it between the others—not caring if it burned her—and brought them outside with a basket tray for the cakes. It would be fake pemmican. No meat—she hardly had any.

Outside, the wind had gotten the best of the clouds, stretching them like white paint across someone's cheek. She wondered if Night saw them from where he hid. She sat half-in, half-out of the cooking wikiup on the east side of the lodge, mixing the meal with the berry mash in a fourth basket slowly, pouring hot tallow from the other basket onto it, and then mixing it all with a willow spoon. When it cooled—it didn't take long—she scooped a small amount and rolled it in her hand, pressing it flat on the basket tray to set in the sun.

She felt better with the making of each cake, glad to be alone, everyone from the lodge gathering pine nuts and choke cherries or hunting in the western hills. When she

had almost filled the tray, she saw someone coming from the north through the sagebrush along the marsh shore. Stone Knife. For a moment she thought him a skoks, a person who had come back from the Dancing Place of the Dead. But that made no sense. A skoks would never come during the day, and Stone Knife looked nothing like one. He wore more feathers and beads than she remembered: crow feathers flying from the top of his staff, white and red beads, the bones of birds, along the cord that held his cape together and along the seam of his leggings.

He came and brushed his hand against hers, hugged her tight—his favorite niece, he always said, even if she married outside Crow Clan—and walked to the old round lodge pit beside her lodge, where another lodge had once been. He found a rock there and heaved it backward like pushing an oar through water.

“How is your son?” he asked in his earnest voice, the one he used with her, but few others. He leaned forward, rested his arms on his thighs, and looked closely at her. “I’m worried about him.” He looked sad, his eyes dark and shiny. “He came up the river and tried to kill me.”

She thought Stone Knife had a right to kill her husband.

But she always had to tell herself, as she did now, that it didn’t make her angry.

She brushed her palms together and watched seed meal fall to the ground.

“Night’s got no power. He can’t kill you.”

“I don’t remember a grandnephew ever trying to kill me,” he said.

“Night’s troubled,” she said. “He needs time.”

He crossed his arms.

“Lily.”

“He’s only a boy,” she said.

“He’s a man.”

“I’ll talk to him if I see him,” she said.

She scooped from the basket. He watched.

“Where is he?” he asked.

She rolled it in her hand. “I don’t know.”

Stone Knife rested his chin in his hand. “He tried to kill me.”

She put the pemmican cake on the tray and began to make another.

“Lily.”

She rolled and rolled.

In the water, she saw a mother duck, four ducklings.

Down the marsh basin, blackbirds darkened the sky.

Stone Knife sat and watched. “If we have to find him,” he said. “We’ll send him to the Dancing Place. But if he comes to us, he can live.” He smiled. “He can stay among Crow Clan. He can gather firewood. Rebuild my house. Tan hides. Fetch water. So many things, Lily,” he said.

She stood, taunting him.

“Leave him alone,” she said. She felt like a boiling basket, clunking rocks and spitting steam. Violent ideas came to her sometimes. They did.

“Where’s your son?”

He looked to be wearing a Beaver mask—red eyes, black cheeks, white teeth. As if someone held it in front of his face.

“Lily,” he said, the Beaver said.

Stone Knife jutted his chin, the crazy white Beaver teeth, at the pemmican. The Beaver mask was never real—she had seen it many times, a memory held up for her.

“You made pemmican for him,” he said.

“I don’t know where he is.”

Night was gone.

She didn’t know if Night would come get his pemmican. She didn’t know if she would see him before he left.

“Where is he? Tell me, Lily.”

Down the marsh, blackbirds darkened the sky.

Drifting on the Marsh

Night set the punt pole against the shore and pushed, drifting through the black water, hoping to disappear into the dusk before anyone saw him: Stone Knife, Crow Clan. Even Mink Clan. He'd snuck from his wikiup to fish—hardly a wikiup, not much more than a windbreak of sagebrush and juniper branches in a hollow not far from where his father's lodge had been. Here in his dugout, without Curly in the stern muttering to himself that the whole world was against him, without quick words from Goose that stung like nettles, Night would know what he needed to do. On the marsh, alone. He pushed slowly into the mud at the bottom, passing the silent waterways between the tules where he had had dived so many times and begged Loon for power. He didn't know why his magic hadn't been strong enough. Didn't know if he had done something wrong, or if Loon wasn't strong enough. He thought that maybe another of his spirits—Frog, Fish Hawk, Rattlesnake—had been jealous that he swam for Loon each night. But he didn't know.

He pushed and drifted. He could see the black dome of Long Smiling Woman's lodge on the southern shore, smoke from the top drifting across the water. There was no other medicine maker in the Mink Clan, no one to teach him witchcraft but her. Each time he went to her, always at dusk—like this—they would sit on rocks by the water where no one from her lodge could hear. First, he would ask about what he already knew: healing, pretending to be eager, nodding and smiling as she told him what his father had told him. Everyone knew that Frog and Fish hawk and Rattlesnake came to every medicine maker, but that the rest of his spirits had to be found. Thank you, he would say.

Yes, thank you. She was old, hardly did medicine any more. She smiled when he thanked her.

He pushed the punt pole, drifted.

When Long Smiling Woman finished saying the same things she would always say, he would give her dried fish. Not much. A small basketful. She would take it, dump the fish into a tule sack, give him back the basket. A secret gift.

Then he would whisper: “Witchcraft. Tell me.”

She would lean back and grin and look at the sky—he never knew why—and always say the same: “Like healing. But you ask a spirit to hurt, not heal. Just ask.”

It had to be different. More than that. A medicine bag and death songs and prayer. “Tell me,” he would say. A spirit doing mischief would ask for more than a song.

When it was nearly dark one night and midges cried on the water, she told him. She made him follow her down the shore to a rocky spit far from any lodge. She showed him a bundle. Valerian. Taught him how to burn it, not all of it. Taught him how to pray, and sing. Different songs, but ones his spirits would know. Same songs, changed. So they would know.

He wished she had taught him more.

He pushed the punt pole. He came to the marsh to think, to fish. Crow Clan folk fishing just north where the river came into the marsh wouldn't see him now, wouldn't send word up the river to Stone Knife, or come for him themselves—Night had lit no torch in his boat, no flame to tell the world where he fished. He laughed, alone. Putting his hands on the gunwales and standing, rocking the canoe and not caring, he put his

hands around his mouth and yelled, “Heeeeyyyyyyaaaa!” No echo came back, and he wondered if anyone had heard.

At dusk like this, when fish broke the water to snatch bugs, jumping in quick flashes against the gray light, he could catch more than a few. Sucker, chub, salmon. Small ones too weak to make it up the river over the falls. If he could catch enough to fill three baskets, dried, he would be happy. Two for his lodge and one for him when he walked west, alone.

To the ocean. Like his father had done. It would make him a medicine maker. A witch.

He dropped the net poles, watching them disappear and carry the net down. He watched the shore for huge Crow Clan canoes splitting the water in the darkness. But everything was quiet. Far to the south, someone fished by torch in another dugout. He pushed the canoe forward so the net would trap fish. Everything was dark. On shore, the earth lodges, the junipers, sagebrush looked like fur on the skin of the earth. He pulled the net up, hoping it would be heavy but knowing it was light. Five fish thrashed in it—three sucker, two chub. No salmon. He shook them to the bottom of the net and clubbed and threw them in the burden basket tied to the gunwale, like his father always did.

He imagined that when he came back to the marsh from the ocean he would have children, lots of them, and none would die as his brother and sister had. He would heal them if they were sick. He pictured them in his mind, in his canoe and in canoes beside his, pictured the marsh like the floor of an earth lodge, the sky its roof. He remembered the voice his father used when he told the future, when he told everyone gathered during the coldest month when the fish would run, the snow melt, and the wild onions send up

shoots. Night talked aloud, pretending all his children were there. His voice kept him warm. “See, the Crow Clan always had more,” he said to his children and to the bugs and fish and ducks. “They live along the river, where the fish run. We used to go there to fish, before Stone Knife claimed the runs. A fight happened: Stone Knife asked for fish and meal to pay for a daughter who had married into Mink Clan. Mink Clan didn’t have more fish or meal. Crow Clan came with hide leggings and armor and spruce clubs.”

He stood in the boat. Somewhere behind, a fish jumped. He felt quick and light and strong. Loon’s power came and went—and maybe it went more than it came now—but he felt strong in the canoe. Each time it dipped to one side he’d catch it with the other foot, steadying it, until it was flat with the water. “Crow Clan would come down the river like that,” he said. “Mink Clan had fewer people. Quicker, smarter, fewer. Smaller houses and people always scattered—none ever knew where others were. When Crow Clan came, shouts echoed, and the Mink Clan would come running, but Crow Clan had already started the fight. That’s how it went. Hear me? They were ready. They took baskets of fish—maybe a woman, too—and went up the river. Then one year when the snow melted, Stone Knife claimed the fish runs. The past had never seen it.”

Night stopped and listened to water slap against the boat. The boat to the south was gone now.

“He killed my father.”

The net fell with a soft splash when he dropped it again. He waited until fish shook the net poles. He stood and pushed the boat forward in the water and something caught him—sharp, in his stomach; heavy ripples up his back, down his legs. He almost lost his balance, pulled up the net, shook fish to the bottom. It hurt when he raised the

club. Each fish was heavy as a rock when he put it in the basket. He sat and felt his gut to see if something had broken the skin. He hoped it was a dart point. If it wasn't a point, then some sharp thing had been put there by a spirit called by a witch. Only a medicine maker could heal witch magic.

He rested his hands on the gunwales, leaned forward, pushed the boat slowly back to shore. Twelve half-dead fish lay in his basket. He thought if he went to Long Smiling Woman and she tried to heal him, everyone would hear and know where he was, and Long Smiling Woman wouldn't be safe. He didn't want to do that, to ask her to bring her dry old hands into something like this. He could heal himself.

The hills east of the marsh were black, the sky behind was thin clouds and stars. Night pushed and drifted, holding the gunwales. He'd made the canoe with his father. Dry, burnt cedar, he held it. When he came near the shore, a short, wide woman walked to meet him. He knew it was his mother. She watched him turn into the reeds where he hid the canoe and the net. With his burden basket, he waded to the shore and stomped the muck off his sandals. It hurt to do it.

He knew if they talked long enough she would see that he was sick. The pain made him stand stiff as a tree. He hoped she wouldn't see that he was sick.

"I was fishing," he said.

She watched him. He wished he could see her face more clearly in the darkness. He figured she was still mad at him for having tried to put witchcraft on Stone Knife, but he didn't know.

He set down the burden basket. A fish flipped.

"I didn't try to kill him," he said. "I only tried to put love magic on him."

She laughed softly, as if she already knew. “You’re fishing late,” she said.

He could almost see her eyes. “I’m going to dry them.”

“For who?”

“For you.”

She walked to him. He lowered the basket. She put her hands on her knees and looked inside. She peered up at him. “A fire for these?” She straightened. “Are you sick?”

“No.”

She pressed her palm gently to his gut.

“You won’t get far sick,” she said, looking up at him.

“I’m all right.”

“See Long Smiling Woman,” she said. “She ought to cure you to make up for all she’s done. If she can remember how.”

Night told her his idea. About not wanting to get her into trouble. “I can cure myself,” he said. “With the power I’ve got. The power I’ll get.”

His mother put her hands on the fish basket—he still had it. She pulled and he held, and she pulled again. When she opened her mouth to curse him, he let go.

She set the basket behind her in the sand. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“You know,” he said. He smiled. He was proud.

With her thumb and finger she pinched his stomach. She grabbed some fat and held it. Not enough to hurt him. Just to show him she was his mother.

“Don’t go to the ocean,” she said. She pinched harder and started walking, holding him, and it hurt as he trailed along. “I’m taking you to that crazy old medicine maker.”

He stopped, and her finger and thumb slipped.

Now she yelled. “Spirits aren’t listening to you, Night!”

He told her to be quiet so no one would know he was there.

“You don’t have any spirit power!”

It was true.

“I’ll find other spirits,” he said.

Midges cried, louder and louder.

“I’m going to send him to the Dancing Place when I get back,” he said. “I’m going to kill him.”

She stepped away, her mouth tight, her fist held to the sky.

“Don’t,” she said. She shouted at the stars—as if every spirit in the sky had wronged her. She moved backward, almost like she was dancing, and nearly fell over.

He wished he didn’t have to leave like this, with her angry at everything he did.

He took his basket of fish and walked up the hill.

“You come back here,” she hissed.

A Burden Basket Filled

It was clear and cold as he circled the north end of the marsh. His shadow was a short, black one cast by the half moon. He felt it pull him forward like the magic that lay ahead in every deep pool and high peak. He tried to ignore his gut, but couldn't. Sharp tiny objects. This sickness called for medicine power, not teas and pastes and powders. Loon's medicine—he thought she would answer his call this time. For three days he'd forced down seed mush, thrown it up, and crapped brown water, all the time in a fever dream. He tried to live close to the fever dreams, but to pretend his gut was someone else's. He walked leaning forward, taking small, quick steps—fever dreams could bring dreamsongs and dreamsongs bring power, yes—not rising or falling much, trying to avoid the bitterbrush so it wouldn't tear his leggings. His feet when they hit the ground—covered with webs of frost—told him how heavy his burden basket was. When he looked up and saw the western edge of the marsh, though, he felt surprised to see it so soon. It was almost like a line on the ground where the flats of bunch grass and sagebrush gave way to a rise of juniper.

He thought if people could see him, they would make fun of him for wearing his winter clothes—a deerskin blanket, a tule apron (with a belt to which he had attached the squirrel tail), sagebrush bark leggings and hide boots stuffed with grass out of which he had shaken mouse droppings when he pulled them from under his bedding. Across his thick basket hat hung the cord of his burden basket. Inside, so far as he could remember, he had put a small sack of seed meal, a fire drill, a quiver of darts (poking out of the

basket), a dart thrower, a core of black obsidian wrapped in deer hide, a brown agate knife lashed to an elk bone handle, a water basket, a boiling basket, and buck brush root and sagebrush for cuts and bad stomach—people said these plants didn't grow on the other side of the mountain. He also had a length of mountain hemp cording; dried grass for fire; a bone needle and fishhook; his father's stone pipe; tobacco wrapped in hide; the pemmican his mother had made; a deer bladder canteen, full; a small tule sack of dried huckleberries; sagebrush bark sandals, and hot coals kept alive in old, dry wood. If he could keep a fire alive with him to the ocean and back he thought it would be the greatest luck. Morning Crow had told him it was wet in the mountains and wetter at the coast.

In the quiver with the darts he had put his father's medicine cane—a red and white striped willow branch with the feather of a red-shafted flicker lashed to the top. To the outside of his basket—an old, but sturdy one made of willow—he had tied serviceberry snow shoes that he hoped never to use.

He stopped on the flats and untied the squirrel tail from his belt and held it in his palm. He should have been carrying it from the start. When he set off, holding the tail against his stomach, the pain felt far away, like someone else's. He wiped sweat on his forehead away. Gusts of wind from the north blew onto his fever dream. He was ready to hear a song from the sky, to feel a spirit in the mountains.

At the beginning of the rise, he heard Curly's voice: "Rude. Leaving sooner than you said."

Curly sat at the bottom of a juniper, chewing something. Next to him was his burden basket. Curly knew nothing of medicine. He would, if he came, make it hard for Night to think and to get close to spirits. But Night was sick. If he fell down, Curly could

carry him, drag him to the ocean. Help him. And maybe he could help Night with medicine. Every medicine maker needed a caller and singers. People to help in the ritual.

“I’m coming with you,” Curly said. He bit the end off a piece of dried meat. “I’ll find a woman on the way. Marry her. Bring her back to the marsh.” He cleaned his hands in the sand. He stood and pulled his burden basket over his head. “Ready?”

Curly never was ready for anything. If they went hunting, he would forget his dart thrower. If they fished, he would forget a basket to put fish in.

“You forgot your cape blanket,” Night said. “You’ll freeze in the mountains.”

“I have one in my burden basket.”

There must have been little else in it; a blanket would fill half the basket.

Night thought. Maybe he could teach Curly. “I’m a medicine maker. I’ll need a caller,” he said. “A caller and a singer.”

Curly scratched his neck, looked at Night, didn’t seem to know what Night was asking.

“I’ve got to heal myself of this sickness,” Night said. “I’ll need a caller. A singer.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

They walked toward Rattle Mountain until the slope steepened at the mountain’s foot, where they stopped and Night drank from the deer bladder canteen, Night’s hand shaking like an old man’s. He poured water in his palm and splashed it against his

forehead, but his skin quickly became dry and hot again. His feet were cold, his intestines crawling. He could heal himself on the cold sand, he thought. Things for a healing lay packed in his basket—medicine cane, pipe, tobacco. Curly could be the singer, the helper, the caller to the four winds and to Coyote above and Little Coyote below.

They sat under a juniper, where Night lit his soapstone pipe with a coal from the dry wood. He felt the ground where he sat, blew smoke out his nose, made his fever clear with smoke, like round stones seen through running water.

Curly, standing, turning in each direction, shouted: “Spirits in the north, hear me! You in the east, come here! Southern spirits, come to us! You in the west, every one of you, come and help my cousin!” He stopped and looked at Night.

Curly must have slept through the healings he had been to.

“More,” Night said.

Curly looked up, hands at his sides as if he were getting ready to jump in water. “Stars and Sun and Moon, every one of you, and Earth below,” he shouted, looking up, looking down, looking at Night.

Night covered his face with his hands, waiting for Loon to come like wind through the trees, her power, her song, her voice in him. The smoke had made his head light and he forgot about his pain. The blanket wrapped around him kept him warm. Loon when she came would ask the other spirits to answer and tell if it they made Night sick. “Was it you, Eagle?” Night would ask, Loon would ask, her voice in his, his song and hers the same. She would throw questions in the air as each spirit tried to sneak past, not wanting to be caught. She would stop them, Night would stop them, and Night would know which one had made him sick.

Cold air in his nose—the smell of juniper and pine—he waited.

Loon didn't come.

Night was shaking from cold. He heard Curly shifting.

“What happened?” Curly asked.

Night took his hands from his face. Curly was looking east into the marsh valley, turning south then west, as if he would be able to see spirits coming one after the other.

“What does a spirit look like?” Curly asked.

“I've never seen one,” Night said.

Curly looked back.

“Even Long Smiling Woman doesn't see them,” Night said. “She hears their songs. She feels them nearby, like an animal you can't see.”

“You've heard Loon's song?”

There was doubt in Curly's words. Night lay back. He looked at the white and black sky through thick juniper needles and branches. “I've heard it,” he said. “I have.”

Curly saw Night shaking. He made a fire and they warmed by it, Night sitting with his back to the wind, his back cold, front hot.

Curly pulled dried venison from a tule sack, tore tiny pieces from the end and scattered them to the four winds, offered the meat to Night.

“Are you cured?” Curly asked, chewing.

“Not yet.”

Night felt sicker. He leaned on his basket and stood, bent at the waist, touching his gut. The shit water in his intestines was running downstream. He walked into the

piners and crouched over a hole in the sand and let go, cleaning himself after with sagebrush leaves.

When he came back he saw Curly looking through his own burden basket.

“What did you bring?” Night asked.

“A blanket. Food.”

“How much?”

“I’ve eaten most already.”

Night looked in Curly’s basket: a tule sack of dried berries, almost empty; a few strips of venison.

“Go back for more,” Night said.

Curly stared into his burden basket, as if food would grow like magic.

They tapped palms. Curly’s fingers felt cold. They agreed that Curly would find Night near the top of Rattle Mountain when he came back.

Heron had come to Night when he became a man—she had. He was sure of it. Heron gave him his power song, the first one. Not his healing song or witchcraft song—his power song, like the songs everyone had, the ones they heard when they went to mountains or pools to become a man or woman, or when close kin died, or when thoughts gathered like a thicket in their mind and they needed to know what to do.

I am Heron. I fly slowly, but try to catch me, and your hand will slip.

That was the song Heron had given him. A good song for one who walked lonely ridges, dreaming, while people—his mother—tried to call him home and make him stop dreaming. That song was his and he had it still. But it wasn’t for medicine, for witchcraft

or for healing. It was a power song, from when he became a man, and it wouldn't make him a medicine maker.

The fire grew cold and died.

Goose was right. He had no medicine power.

Up a gentle slope of pine and juniper the rocky summit of Rattle Mountain jutted into the darkness like an old man's chin. At the top lived Weasel, Morning Crow's strongest medicine spirit. More than once Night had heard of the son or daughter of a medicine maker who had claimed the spirits of one who had gone to the Dancing Place. He thought of what Long Smiling Woman had told him—something his father had never told him: a medicine maker could bend Weasel's power more easily toward witchcraft than healing.

Night threw dried huckleberries to the four winds, ate half a handful, drank water, tucked the bladder canteen away, and pulled the pack strap over his forehead. He began walking up the mountain slowly, bent at the waist. At a gnarled finger of rock he stopped and saw rain clouds covering the stars. As he stood the rain came, sooner than he thought it would. It ran off the front of his basket hat and across his cheeks. It would keep him cool as he went.

He walked quickly for one who hadn't eaten much, who shat brown water and carried a heavy burden basket. The path up the ridge steepened as he went, sometimes through pine meadows, sometimes over rock. He made tiny old-man-steps in the trickle of water that ran down the trail. He came to a meadow, where junipers grew in all shapes and forms, some rising only to his knees, others as tall in him and bent in all directions,

and pines taller than all of them, with fatter trunks and brown needles fallen to the ground like brushes. He tried to walk quickly to stay warm. The rain was very cold now, nearly snow. His hat was heavy with water. He stopped and took off his deerskin cape, stuffed it in the burden basket to keep it dry, and lashed hide over the top.

The meadow ended at a thicket of trees. To the sides, the ridge dropped off in small cliffs. For a long time he had heard nothing but water pounding the ground. Far back there had been the cackle of a crow, out of sight, in a tree. It was nearly pitch black now in the meadow, no moon or stars, not even a dying glimmer from the sun gone over the mountains. Night and Morning Crow had once built a fire not far from where he stood. Whether they were going up or coming down, or had just crossed the ridge in search of deer and elk, Night couldn't remember. But he remembered that it was close, at the center of the clearing.

A scream came through the rain. It came from far away, but he could hear it clearly, as if aimed at him from cupped hands. It echoed twice further up the ridge—the second time after a long silence. An angry scream. Night began to walk again when he heard it. It didn't sound like a cougar's scream or the sound of an animal being caught and killed by another. The scream was louder.

It came again. From behind. Closer. Down the ridge. Roughly, he guessed, while he picked up speed—halfway between a walk and run—from where he had just been. Where his father had once cut the bark from a pine sapling and the two of them had shared the inner layer, scraping it with their front teeth.

When Night heard the second scream, he knew it was a skoks.

He began to run up the path. A skoks was a person returned from the Dancing Place of the Dead. You don't forget the scream if you have heard one, as Night first did when was six when that happened, when the air in the lodge had grown cold in the snap of a finger. His father's medicine skoks had come to the marsh, angry that Morning Crow had broken some longstanding agreement. After Morning Crow came back from meeting it, there had been blood in the corners of his eyes and at the edges of his mouth.

The scream now made Night's feet fly across the earth. He tried to think what to do when it got to him. Let it pass on the left, not the right. To the right, it steals your life, eats it or takes it and throws it away. He tried to think as he ran, drops of rain splattering against his skin, feet splashing in cold pools of water, if he had done anything that would make a skoks angry and want to kill him—if he had uttered the name or touched the remains of the dead.

It felt foolish to run. It made no sense. You can't outrun a skoks.

The scream made the rain sound like nothing at all. It was so loud and strong it made Night never forget what he already knew: a skoks was not a person without a body, not a wispy spirit swirling and fading like a dust circle. A skoks was a creature returned from the Dancing Place of the Dead. It had the power of that land in it. The once-living person was turned into a new thing. A thing that screamed, and was closer now, maybe even visible if Night were to turn around and look, because skoks had red eyes and Night would be able to see them through the dark and rain if he looked.

There was a memory inside the scream of someone Night knew.

The rain turned to hail.

Water under forest duff was ice. When Night's feet slipped, his legs splayed out in the sad way of a deer losing footing on a frozen pond. He jumped off the path and ran through the sagebrush and juniper. Ice crunched and snapped under his feet. Hail stung his face and arms.

At a large rounded rock, a strange solitary boulder near the base of a giant pine, he stopped. He looked into the thicket of trees, waiting. The gray-black trees narrowed to a circle until he could only see the path down the center of the ridge. Slowly it disappeared. He was blind. He blinked, making sure, and only saw black.

He stepped away from the rock toward what he thought was the center of the ridge, choking on the cold air. Air the skoks had brought from the Dancing Place, air that the dead danced in and walked through while they were flesh when it was night on the marsh, upside down and different.

The skoks' stone cold hands took hold of Night under each armpit and lifted him into the air. The wind was like a storm as they flew. It stung Night's cheeks and hands and feet and blew his basket from his head, taking his hat and burden basket with it. The skoks held him close. Night could smell its breath, like a dead animal beginning to thaw, an animal that had been frozen all winter under ice and snow. Night's head slumped to the side. The ice on his hair snapped gently, like frozen blades of grass. What direction they flew, he didn't know, but the wind didn't stop.

The skoks seemed to enjoy flying.

Night tried to speak, but no words came. He tried again. "I can't see," he said. Wind blew over him, numbed him, made him want to sleep. "Where are we going?" he asked. His voice came back quietly. "What do you want?"

The hands squeezed tighter.

“We just passed the moon,” the skoks said.

Night wanted it to be true, true and not true, he wanted the deep sing-song voice of his father, but not like this, mixed with a rasp. He wanted the voice Sunken Lily always made fun of—“Going to the *hills*, now, I am,” she used to sing when Morning Crow left to gather medicine herbs, mocking him. “Going to find dogwood roots, *I am, I am.*”

“Father?” he asked, so quietly he didn’t know if Morning Crow had heard. “Do you hear me?”

They flew sideways. Night’s legs hung in the air like dead fish, air stinging them like sand.

“If you could see, you’d see the white of the moon,” the skoks said.

Night imagined it. “Father,” he said. “I’m sick. Do you see?”

“Why are you sick?”

“I’m cold,” Night said. He thought it might upset his father to know it was witchcraft.

“Why are you cold?” the skoks asked.

“I’m sick.”

“Is it witchcraft?”

Like a drifting cottonwood seed, they slowed, and Night thought they might fall to the ground. They were close to it—he could smell wet sagebrush and pine and juniper, gray lichen and old bark.

His father set him on wet sand, gently, like an infant. Night turned on his side, tried to sit up, fell back, heard his father clear the ground and sit beside him, felt the deerskin blanket—dry—cover him, waited for an answer. He put his hand on his own gut and thought he'd have to get up and find a hole, but it passed. Underneath the blanket he shook and remembered what his father had always told him: don't let a skoks know you're afraid.

Night thought his father had been mad at him for a long time and had hid it before today.

He began to see colors, gray shapes out of blackness. He could see his father like a person in the dark: sitting, elbows on his knees, forehead on his palms. Morning Crow needed new clothes. His deerskin cape hung in pieces across his shoulders. His breechcloth and leggings and sandals were frayed and dirty. His thin hair hung like witch's beard lichen, all white and messy, like it had been burned off at the ends by someone who didn't know how to.

His skin was pale, sunken toward the bone.

"Your hair needs skunk oil," Night said.

He waited for his father to laugh.

Morning Crow's eyes were closed as if praying. Night could see them now, eyelids flat. He listened for the sound of his father breathing but couldn't hear it. Upslope, a sage grouse beat its wings and took flight. The wind was picking up, as slow as someone walking—warm compared to flying.

He didn't think his father wasn't going to laugh.

Night put his hand on his chin—he thought he felt liquid. His fingers were bloody. He was bleeding from the mouth.

“Why are you here?” he asked. A skoks didn’t come back from the Dancing Place of the Dead unless something was wrong, unless someone had broken taboo—kept, instead of burning, a fingernail, a strand of hair, a tooth.

Morning Crow turned his head, opened his eyes. They were red. With thumb and finger he pinched a few hairs from their roots, held them in the air. The wind pushed them toward Night.

“Have you seen hair like this?” he asked.

“Someone kept your hair?”

His father nodded.

“Stone Knife?” Night whispered.

His father laughed longer and louder than Night had ever heard, a screaming laugh.

“No, not him,” Morning Crow said, chuckling.

Night knew. It was his mother, Sunken Lily. Her feet—Night could see them, short and wide, walking across the sand, up the hill to the cremation mound the night before they burned his father. Juniper and pine, sagebrush and dried grass stacked under Morning Crow’s body, a tule shroud wrapped around him.

She would have had to pull back the tule shroud to get to his hair.

“Why?” Night asked.

He already knew.

“She’s not done fighting me.”

Morning Crow wandered into the juniper. He told Night he had to be alone to pray—Night couldn't imagine what spirit a skoks prayed to—and said he would come back before long.

Under his blanket he was as cold as he had been the night his father's medicine skoks came to the marsh—the one that made his father's mouth bleed. Morning Crow called her Gam Yey, her name among the Mountain People where she had spent her life. Why she wandered the marsh after coming back from the Dancing Place, Night never knew. Before she came, Night had not known to fear skoks. He had thought if he were ever to meet one, the skoks would scare him like an old man telling a skoks story in a whisper, no more. That a skoks might even be funny, like an old woman who closed her eyes and smiled when she danced, shuffling in a circle.

After Gam Yey came to the marsh, he thought differently.

Her scream had awakened him in the dark. It woke everyone in the lodge. The air inside was smoky. Morning Crow was walking slowly up the ladder, his sandals curling on each step. He looked at Night through the smoke before he disappeared and Night knew his father was afraid.

Night wondered then if the skoks could see him through the wall, under his blanket. He pulled the blanket over his nose and listened to his father talking to Gam Yey, their voices coming through the smoke hole.

“No boots,” Morning Crow said, his voice shaky, like a boy whose voice had just changed.

“My feet need boots,” the skoks said. “Rabbit boots.”

Simple words. They clapped Night's ears.

“Soon, yes. Boots,” Morning Crow said.

Night couldn't stop listening. It was like when his parents argued, when he snuck close, crouched, and listened for foul secrets that hurt him, but which he loved to hear.

Gam Yey said: “Catch rabbits. Skin them. Tan them. Have your wife make boots.” Each word a deerfly stinging Night's ear.

“She will. If she doesn't, I will make a pair.”

Night's father, he imagined, was on his knees. Praying to Gam Yey.

The skoks laughed, like stones breaking icicles. “She doesn't like to make boots?”

“She will.”

“Boots.”

“She will. She'll teach me. I'll learn and do it.”

“There's blood on you,” the skoks said, laughed softly. Night imagined the laugh staying steady, never fading, a heron flying over the water. “Blood from your mouth and ears, I see it running.”

The skoks had left then. Night could feel it, like cold wind blowing away.

No sound, nothing.

Father didn't come in for a long time.

Now, Night lay shaking under the deerskin blanket, waiting for Morning Crow. Like the blanket from long ago, cold air laughing at it as if it were only a tule mat. He heard his father coming back through the sagebrush and juniper, breaking sticks, snapping branches, not caring if he could be heard. Morning Crow when he appeared

from behind a juniper with a forked trunk was laughing softly. He sat beside Night as he had before, not looking at him.

“Talk to your mother,” Morning Crow said. “Tell her to burn what she didn’t burn.”

Night hadn’t thought Morning Crow would ask this. He hadn’t thought anything, really.

“Your mother was crazy to keep it,” Morning Crow said. Laughing again. Always now. Night thought laughs meant something different to his father, that laughing was how he cried now. “Oh, she doesn’t know what she’s done,” Morning Crow said. “Oh, no.”

Night was sure she knew. He looked at the sky, swallowed. “See, I need to keep going west,” he said. “I’m going to the ocean. Like you.”

“Why?” Morning Crow pulled his head from his hands.

There were marks on his cheeks where his hands had been.

Not red.

Dents.

Night hadn’t thought Morning Crow would ask why.

“I’m going the ocean,” he said.

“To the ocean?”

“Like you.”

“What for?”

“I can’t stay at the marsh.”

“You can’t?”

Morning Crow never did this alive, saying your words back to you.

“Stone Knife would kill me.”

“Kill you?”

“Yes. Like he did you.”

Again a laugh-scream. Maybe everyone in the Dancing Place laughed like that.

“I tried to put witchcraft on him,” Night said. “But it didn’t work. See?”

“I see. I do. I see good, Night.”

His father batted at the air. But there were no bugs.

“What are you doing, Night?”

“I’m walking for medicine power.”

“Power?”

“So I can kill him.”

“Kill him?”

“Don’t you understand?” Night said.

Morning Crow looked downslope toward the marsh. He cupped his hands and screamed into the marsh valley. It froze Night where he lay.

“The world’s running through my fingers,” Morning Crow said. He stood and raised his hands in the air. It made no sense. “I know there’s witchcraft in you.” He spun around slowly, looked at Night—looked just over Night’s head, as if Night were standing. “Look and see that you’re sick already. I told you to stay at the marsh and tell stories. I told you, I did. Now I look and see you’re trying to be a medicine maker.”

“For what he did to you,” Night said. “I’m going to kill him.”

Above his head, Morning Crow’s hands rubbed each other, gray skin.

“Did to me. Did to me,” Morning Crow said.

Night closed his eyes and prayed for his father.

“Will you heal me?” Night whispered.

All skoks could heal. Every medicine maker had a medicine skoks.

Everything was silent.

Water dripping.

He opened his eyes. “Father!” he yelled.

Morning Crow was gone.

When daytime snuck over the eastern hills and woke him, he saw the hills past the marsh: Basket Mountain and Split Hoof and the smaller ones, tiny and blue compared to Rattle Mountain. He ached as if he’d spent the day before crawling through a lava cave to draw pictures. “Father?” he said softly, then louder, then not at all.

His father didn’t think about much now, as far as Night could see. He thought about hair.

Night told himself to remember who his father had been. Morning Crow was the one who healed. Anyone. Sick, even dying. Some medicine makers wouldn’t heal the dying. They would go to visit first and see how close to death a person was, and if the person was nearly gone, they would say no, nothing can be done, I’m sorry. But Morning Crow would take the person, sing spirit songs, lay his hands on the dying. He didn’t care if the family of the dying one blamed him when he failed.

Night would tell his children: Morning Crow was the greatest of all healers.

He looked at the sky. Tried to get up, fell down, pulled the blanket over himself, felt the sun, so close to the horizon, light but not warm, his bones still wet, water in his gut. He lay resting until the sun climbed higher, pulled himself onto his feet and stood, shaky, hefting his basket strap over his forehead and walking up the mountain. Dew at the tips of juniper needles looked like silver moons. Ice slid and fell off the branches of dark, wet pines. Night could have followed that path up the mountain blind, he knew it so well. He set out slowly, like an old man, burden basket like a fat person clinging to his forehead, soft, tiny steps across wet pine needles through sagebrush that didn't know what had happened to him. Up the mountain toward Weasel.

It was clear and cold all day, sun scampering across dark blue behind giant white clouds. One foot after the other up the green, gray mountain, his fever cool in the morning like a fire burned to coals.

Weasel lived at the top, old crazy Weasel, jealous witch-strong Weasel. Death magic and witch spells, herb bundles and soul thievery. Up the mountain Night went.

At the top he set down his basket, turned every direction and watched the world asleep. Fire Mountain pretending to sleep: no rumble, spit or fire. Quiet after rain. The old, bald rock where he stood was wind-swept and lichen-covered. Night's sandals turned on it. He wrapped himself in his blanket and sat on his heels like his father used to do, took sips of water and tiny handfuls of berries, offering them to the mountain, taking some, chewing slowly, like his father used to do; looking east, his back to the Dancing Place, waiting for a half moon and a black sky. Sparrows came, and a hawk, a raven, three buzzards; chipmunks running close, running back, squirrels eyeing him like a rock.

Wind blew cold all day, slowing when darkness came from east to west over his head like a basket hat. The stars were little holes in the hat; at the half moon, where his hair had knotted, he'd hung a tiny loon feather.

Clouds floated in wind's water, stretched like hides, jagged uncut edges lit white by the moon. The wind blew up the mountain. It lit the coals of his fever and whispered over his hat. Bats chased things he couldn't see, caught in gusts, flipping and diving. A cougar screamed in the valley. Night watched the moon walk from east to west, chasing the sun, now halfway there. He stood and pulled the blanket tight, turned west where he thought Weasel would come from, and listened, waiting for a dream song to come. Wind rustled trees below the ridge, then left, everything silent.

He saw a pond, black and silver in the trees below. Not far. He walked toward it, across rocks, until he stood at the water, waiting for a song. He put his blanket cape down and let the air shake him into chills, walked out on an old, fat tree that had fallen in the water, moss and tiny pines along its top, soft, green, wet and cold. He took off his breech cloth, boots and leggings and jumped, disappeared in warm, black water, holding his breath, sinking, knees to chest, finally kicking, opening his eyes, seeing nothing. Above the water, cold air on his head, he swam back to the log and hugged the moss. He walked hunched and naked down the log, holding tiny branches to steady himself, and lay down on the blanket, shivering for a dream song. Closing his eyes, he smelled a coyote den, sour and sweet, old farts and dried grass. He felt the sky falling toward him. Stars and clouds and black, tree branches and bat flutters and damp wind over the pond. Shaking on the blanket, waiting, ears ready for a song, he waited, teeth clenched.

A deer snorted somewhere in the trees.

He never heard a song.

Little Coyote

No Weasel song came—only sour water from Night’s mouth as he threw up on the cold sand. He fell asleep again until someone woke him, a voice somewhere.

It was Curly kneeling over him. He had found Night’s blanket and put it on him. “I heard a skoks,” Curly said. He stared, twitched, his fingers playing the air like a flute. “After the screams were gone, I ran here to find you. Everyone heard them at the marsh. They think you’re dead. Snatched.”

Night smiled at the thought that no one would follow him. “All but my mother,” he said.

Curly didn’t seem to know what Night meant.

“See, she knows the skoks,” Night said. “She knows he wouldn’t hurt me.” But Night did hurt, more than his stomach. His back, his neck, his skin. “Hurt me, yes, but not kill me.”

Night told Curly everything, how that Sunken Lily had kept hair in order to torture Morning Crow, how he and his father had flown through air colder than deep winter, how Morning Crow wasn’t in the least proud of Night for trying to kill Stone Knife, that he seemed to be crazy, and that he wished Night would return to the marsh and be a storyteller instead of a medicine maker.

Night didn’t tell Curly he had no power to heal himself or that he hadn’t heard a dreamsong from Weasel.

“Did you heal yourself?” Curly asked.

“Yes,” Night said. “Still weak, but cured.”

“And power? Did Weasel come? Did you hear his song?”

“I did,” Night said. “My father’s spirit. Yes. Mine now.”

Curly danced a strange dance on the sand, one halfway between a warrior dance and a midwinter dance for warm weather. He shouted. His voice echoed across the pond, and Night felt quick and light for a moment as if it were really true.

Night lay watching, the damp morning air waking him. He wanted Curly to ask about his father: What is a skoks like? What was your father like? Is he mad at your mother? Can you believe she did that? Why wasn’t he proud of you? Questions like these. The questions Night asked himself.

And most of all: You must hate Stone Knife more than ever—don’t you? He took your father twice, didn’t he? I mean, once he killed him alive, and now death has made him different, taken away who he was. Or was it your mother, Night, who killed him the second time, tortured him, made him come back to the land of the living?

But Night wouldn’t have liked Curly so much if he thought these questions.

Curly finished dancing, smiled, rubbed his hands together. “Ready, Night?” he said.

It was Curly’s power that Night liked—that any ill thing could happen, and Curly would keep living. After Curly’s brother broke his nose, Curly still played the stick and ball game, running faster than anybody and always rising quickly when others pushed him—which they often did. Curly didn’t need spirit power—he had his own.

Night went to the pond, rinsed, crawled to a rock, pulled the blanket tight, sat in the cold sun. He looked at the blanket. It stopped shaking, his knees. The sun—another day had begun—was climbing. Shuffling quickly like an old man trying to build a fire in

the morning—Curly watching—Night found his sandals—on the log—tied his breechcloth to his waist, hung the blanket across his shoulders, pulled his hat on, basket strap across his forehead, and squinted, shaking.

He could pretend he shook from flying with his father, which was half true.

He sat up, felt his gut, wondered if his intestines bled like they'd been cut by tiny things— sharp, white magic. He pushed his sandal and watched it sink below the muck, pulled it up when water ran onto his toes.

Curly stood across a stretch of bear grass and mud.

“I need to think,” Night said.

Curly walked away, around the pond, so Night could think.

Night watched him. There was mist on the pond. Curly walked through dead mountain flowers and tiny twisted fir trees. Up the slope behind him grew bigger trees, evergreens skinny and tall, apart from one another, with vine maples and mountain flowers and bear grass between them.

Night pulled the medicine cane from where it was cached beside his darts. He ran his hand down the feather to straighten the barbs. Curly watched from across the pond— Night had never taken it out. Night leaned with his left hand on the branch of a small hemlock, holding the cane in his other hand. He felt like he was pretending to be his father leading the midwinter ceremony. Curly looked at Night as if he were a real medicine maker. It made Night happy.

“See, Curly, as my medicine power gets stronger I'll be able to see the future.”

Night stopped. Curly waited for more words.

“I'll pray to Weasel or Heron. To Little Coyote, lord of the Dancing Place.”

Night pointed. Curly looked. They were in a hollow, a bog, a bowl between Rattle Mountain and Fire Mountain. Vine maple with cold weather leaves red as blood climbed up the valley's west side. The air had the cold smell of things rotting and dying. Night pointed at the top of Fire Mountain, over a ridge, north and a little west, like someone's head appearing at the edge of a smoke hole. "I'll pray to Little Coyote under the mountain," he shouted. His voice echoed. Once. Twice. "We'll walk there when we leave here, and he'll be my medicine spirit too, Curly."

Curly across the pond held a shoot of grass in his hand. He pointed it in the air and nodded.

"Yes!" Night shouted. "I'll say, 'Tell me of the journey ahead, Little Coyote. Who are the people there? Which are my friends? Which should I walk past, high on a ridge?' Then he'd tell me, him and Heron and Weasel. All three. 'There's a medicine maker among the Mountain People you should walk past, but others who are good to meet. And Curly, your friend, there's a woman for him there. Tell him to talk to her and tell her big stories. Tell her of how at the marsh no one runs quicker after the stick and ball than Curly. No one can guess at the gambling bones and always be right like Curly. Tell Curly to see her, Night. Yes, do.'"

"Find out, yes," Curly shouted. "Her name."

"Then," Night said, pointing at Fire Mountain with his medicine cane, "I'll thank Little Coyote and ask him to make the weather for me. I'll say, 'Little Coyote, the marsh sky, marsh sun, deepest blue, brightest yellow, bring that with me, keep it over my head as I walk. See, it rains all winter west of the mountains. So bring that sun and sky.'"

It echoed. Once, twice.

It made him feel strong, like he had power he didn't have.

Night stood straighter. "The more I walk, the more spirits I get, my eyes will grow dark and shiny and strong," he said. "When people look at me they'll see the power. They'll look away, and I'll say, 'Don't. I won't hurt you. Unless you hurt me, see?' And when we come to the ocean—the ocean, Curly, where it sounds like rocks always falling down a mountain—we'll swim. I'll dive for that water spirit, and she'll come. By then I'll have so much power. I'll say to her, 'Thank you for these clams, these mussels, these fish, this seaweed. Thank you for the salt in your water. Thank you for your power.' She'll be glad for me. I'll tell her about Stone Knife and what he did to my father and how he took the fish and how I'm going to kill him, and she'll smile."

The grass fell sideways in Curly's hand, as if he'd forgotten it was there. "And then we'll come back?" he asked.

"We'll come back. After the snow in the mountains has come and gone, maybe sooner. Then I'll get the last thing I need, see?"

Across the water, Curly squinted.

"A medicine skoks," Night said.

Curly dropped the grass. "Your father?"

The mist on the pond was gone, burned away by the sun. Night looked around the valley for his father. He didn't see him.

"He'll teach me witchcraft," Night said, just softly enough to carry over the pond. "See, Curly? He's going to find me again—I can see it. I'll talk to him when he does. I'll figure out why he doesn't want me to be a medicine maker. Then I'll make him change his mind."

“Yes? How?”

“You’ll see. Watch.”

Night didn’t know.

He almost believed what he was saying. He nearly forgot how sick he was.

“This is the end of our journey,” he said. “Weasel told me. You and I come back. Maybe there’s snowpack in the mountains, maybe we wait through the spring eating clams and mussels at the ocean. We come back, and I walk up Rattle Mountain and call witchcraft on Stone Knife.”

It would take great power to call witchcraft on Stone Knife from so far away.

“Yes, Night. Kill him.”

Night nodded. “I cook songs and call my spirits from the mountaintop. They all come. Together. They kill him. No love spell. He dies that night, blood from mouth and ears that doesn’t stop. Dead. Then you and I walk down to the marsh. Everyone knows it was me. They’ll say, ‘Night Dreamer is a medicine maker for sure. All that dreaming made him one. That journey he took made him stronger.’ See, Curly? And you’ll have a wife with you. They’ll say, ‘Curly’s wife is the most beautiful.’ She’ll be pregnant already. She’ll get pregnant at the ocean. That child will be the first. And Root Sparrow’s mother will come to me and lie, saying, ‘Night, I knew you’d have great power.’ It will make me smile. ‘Root Sparrow waited for you,’ she’ll say. ‘She waited so she could marry you.’ And that won’t be a lie.

“Curly, you and I will have races to see who has more children, and none of them will die. I’ll heal the sick. I’ll walk up the marsh valley, up the river, heal anyone who needs it. Even Crow Clan. See, when Stone Knife dies, Crow Clan will die—it was all his

doing, and when he's gone, they'll be like they used to. No better, no worse, than anyone."

The sun had climbed higher. Everything was bright and warming, red maple leaves rustling on the slope.

Curly nodded, happy, and came back around the pond.

They took slow, tiny steps toward Fire Mountain, climbing the ridge through the vine maples. At the top they came to a saddle and the world opened. Below lay another bowl with another pond. Dark reflections of trees stretched into the shining gray water at the bottom of a steep slope of rock. The path to Fire Mountain lay to the left, along a ridge which snaked toward the base of the mountain. Night took off his burden basket and leaned against it, sipping water, chewing pemmican to see if he could keep it down. The air stopped, as if for him, and he felt warm, watching the snowball clouds behind the mountain, sun on his back, sky as far as he could see toward the desert to the east. Smoke muddied the air near the mountain, behind it, to the north. Trees burning, lit by cinders from the mountain.

Under him the rock moved, nudged him, like someone tugging on a mat. Curly looked ready to run. A sound like distant thunder broke the air. The water in the pond rippled in tiny waves. The ridge where they sat trembled, not stopping. Night looked down, thinking that a crack might open and he would fall. The stone shook like aspen leaves, and his legs seemed made of water.

Curly stood, looking at his feet. The rock went quiet. Clouds moved east as if nothing had happened.

“Earthquake always comes before Little Coyote,” Night whispered.

The rocks rumbled again. Louder. A deep growl, growing, shaking him off. He held the rock, watched the little trees on the ridge shake. Like reddened rock cracking in a fire, something exploded. Waves of gray ash raced from the top of Fire Mountain. Each overtook the one before, billowing black and gray moving up, growing. The top of the mountain disappeared. Night put a hand on his burden basket and the other on his hat. The sound of standing behind a giant waterfall roared over him. Tiny white pieces of ash rained on his hands. Everywhere. Night wondered—hoped—the innards of the mountain roaring into the sky marked the beginning of a time when Little Coyote would again walk the ridges, running his hands across the tops of trees.

Curly sat with his legs drawn up, head between his knees.

“Curly!” Night yelled. But he didn’t move. “Look at it!” Night wished he could float on top of the ash cloud. “Curly!” he yelled, taunting. “Wake up!”

Slowly the mountain quieted.

Curly lifted his head.

Night remembered all the times he’d seen ash. “The ground always shakes before ash comes,” he said. “If it shakes, we’ll run. We’ll run down while the ash goes up. We’ll be safe.”

“Yes,” Curly said, but he looked like he didn’t believe Night.

They headed toward the mountain, air full of ash, wind from behind, like walking near a forest on fire, air muddy with smoke. Night imagined Sky Lake, which lay on the other side. Its cold water would kill his fever. Sky Lake, where Curly’s mother came

from and the water tasted cleaner than marsh water—it had come down as rain and hardly been warmed by the sun.

They stopped to camp after the setting sun made the sky red. Curly found a place, a little pool surrounded by lava rock, with wet sand full of elk tracks. Curly lit a fire with the embers. Curly gathered water, cooked seed mush and with dried venison, built a wind break of hemlock boughs, buried coals under the sand to warm them. But Night hardly slept, whether for the fever or joy of going to the mountain he had no idea, could hardly think. But he remembered what his father had told him. The river that flowed north from Sky Lake went to the ocean—that was the way Morning Crow had gone, Night knew, and it was the way he would go. North first to the mountain, then to the lake, and west along the river to the ocean.

He remembered, too, the story of a medicine maker who had once called Little Coyote's witchcraft to kill the man who took his wife. The man who had taken his wife died; but his wife died, too, poisoned with the child inside her, the husband's child.

After knowing what he had done, the medicine maker jumped into Fire Mountain.

It had begun to snow when Night finally went to sleep. When he woke, his fever had broken. Snow fell off his blanket when he sat up, but ash lay deep in the fur. He opened his eyes and kept looking at the where he thought the mountaintop lay. Little Coyote.

They leaned into a steep slope. Night grew warm, light and awake, full of the energy, but gut heavy. He said nothing to Curly, but he saw Curly watch him when he tripped and stumbled and caught himself on a root. They went silently onto the black and

gray ridge, barren rock that led like a curving path to the top of the mountain. Ash from the mountain filled cracks and valleys in the bedrock. It left white streaks where streams of it had run downslope in rain.

They walked all day without much talking, past sunset, when the gray sky turned orange, then red. Ash fell like snow, tiny flecks of the volcano, choked his lungs, made him cough. He covered his face with his elbow and walked. Finally Night stopped. Above them stood the summit, close, hidden by the ash until then, a rim circling the crater with a notch in it. A crack in a giant lip.

Mink's Notch. They headed toward it, a river of old, frozen lava leading to the crater. On either side of it rocks the size of an earth lodge had come to rest against one another. Straight into the canyon they walked, silent for a long time. Silence to honor the canyon and all the spirits around it, Night thought, as they picked up their feet up and put them down so carefully that there was no sound. Wind came toward them from the crater, strange wind that smelled like a hot spring, wind silent for lack of trees or sagebrush. Night didn't speak because he wanted never to forget this, he had never seen anything like this, and anything he could think of saying seemed like the squawk of a jay cursing the morning light. That's what he thought, at first. Then as they kept going down the passage he knew that had nothing to do with it, honor and silence and wanting to remember.

It was Little Coyote, his power. They had walked into it, didn't even have to call it. It was in the air, everywhere, which made Night think that he was right: Little Coyote was angry under the mountain.

Night smiled but didn't talk because he wasn't sure he could, this power so strong it bent his thoughts until they no longer felt like his own. As if for some time they had been pushed out and filled by Little Coyote. Night was a watcher, pushed onto a foothold at the edge of his mind where he could hear thoughts and voices. Nothing they said made sense. Some of the voices were whole words, but most were pieces of words strung together like unmatched beads on a necklace. The words laughed at him as they passed through him, as if he was supposed to be able to make sense of what they said. They spoke in marsh language, but others too, and sometimes half-marsh, half-other, part human, part animal, part spirit, together in his head.

It slipped more then. Curly was with. He remembered. He looked for Curly. Things were upside down. Backwards. He wasn't on the flat face of Mink's rock, no he wasn't, he was in the jumble of rocks, rocks three times his height, sharp and newly fractured. He was in the jumble, between rocks or on top of one or caught between two, he couldn't tell, but Curly was nowhere to be seen. The edges—once edges, now the solid flat flow of Mink's Rock, were on the side, and when he looked, straining his neck past old words that weren't words, he thought he saw a thing walking that way, toward him or away from him he didn't know, but it was a thing, and Curly was a thing, so maybe it was Curly.

The thing, which way it went, no one knew, or not him, or the thing, he thought, or didn't think, or someone else thought and he overheard until he knew that the thing at the end of his arm was red. Salty. Warm. Coated red. Someone was cold, far away cold, a body that might have been his.

“Curly,” he called, but he wasn’t sure if he said it aloud, so he said again: “Curly,” and heard the word bounce off the gray rock surface in his face and heard all the voices laugh. So soft was his voice. Laughable. One more time, again, harder, louder if possible, fool: “Curly!” and a quick glance across the giant boulder down the way at the thing. The thing stopped. No one knew if it looked, not Night, not anyone. Stopping was good, though, the next best thing. Then it kept going, the same way it was going, which could have been up or down, hot or cold, your guess or mine.

A tiny thing called Night pressed flat against the ledge holding cracks with his fingertips trying not to fall, he knew of the strength growing around him. Growing voices, words, screams, snarls, but not aimed at him, he thought. Or was thankful for. But problems, big, like whatever this was. Curly or the thing, gone now, and Night was cold, upside down, lying on rock, or rock lying on him, the side or the bottom of the canyon, or maybe now under the world so he couldn’t see it. Once again a first or last glance and the little thing on the rock down the way disappeared over the lip into the beyond.

Time to get up, he knew, like being sick and all fever but the water is outside the house and it needs to drink you or die. Get up now, the water said to the fever, knees on cold rock then feet, and someone had the sense of Night standing. Wind now. The sky lighter, it seemed, trading wind for light, one good, one bad, but who knew. He took it though, jumped on that wind, or into it, a bird he might have well have been, hollow bones, bones hollowed out by the mountain spirits in him and everything old coming up and swirling around the crater for the night. This was just the way it went around here, if you were used to it, just a song for the night that left at day, a welcome to the volcano now go home marsh boy, should have listened to Morning Crow.

Curly.

Night running toward where he thought that thing or Curly was last seen fading into rock and darkness. Running, almost fun now, like pretending to fly but knowing your hand is red and warm, it's in front of your face now, red drips on elk skin, best to move it back to the side where it belongs. Running through spirit thicker than rain that ignores but almost kills you. It must be the right way. Something wonderful waits, down that way, where Curly ought to have been. That made Night fly, that one, he saw it bright like sun in the morning.

“Night.” A voice, weak like the one he thought he had heard from himself. Weak as everything else was strong, a spurt of mud leaping from under a sandal. So he kept running, taunting the voice to become a holler.

“Night!” Stronger. Somehow clear, a word that started and stopped, not a bead on a necklace, a thankful word that must have come from the thing called Curly Snake Skin. Night went back, not sure whether going backward or turning and walking like he always did, but whatever he did brought him to where Curly stood. Curly was all different, but in this something became clear to Night, the first thing in a long time.

“Night,” Curly said softly. “Your hand.”

“I'm all right,” Night said.

“Your hand,” Curly said. He lowered his pack and out of it appeared a wide strip of deer hide. He held it out—like a pit trap, Night thought—but Night put his hand in it anyway. Curly wrapped the hand and lashed it with sagebrush cording. It was coated with pain now too, the hand.

Night looked around. “It's better now,” he said.

“Yes.”

They were almost there, almost at the crater. Night could tell because he could feel heat from beyond where the canyon walls ended. Night looked over Curly and saw the thing that rested on his back like a youngster with hands clasped around Curly’s forehead: a burden basket. Night brushed his unbound hand across his forehead in search of a basket strap and there wasn’t one to be found there.

The pack would come later, he thought, so he kept moving his legs and watched the crater approach, lukewarm air coming from it like breath. At the gap he stopped, but not long, only long enough to look up at the giant rocks. Then he stepped off Mink’s Rock into the crater. Curly a half-step behind. And the fellows from the marsh, only gone a day, had made it to the volcano, which looked like this: naked rock, sharp, hardly touched by ice and rain, piles of cinder non-sensically arranged, all in a circle sinking toward the center, a hole in the middle, black, warm and rotten wind blowing from it. Voices strong as before, but tolerable now, because Curly had heard them too, and he was alive, and Night though he must be alive as well—voices with word-sounds tumbling in the rotten wind toward them, through them, past them. Cracks and vents with steam shooting and billowing, hiding the dark center now, then blowing and fading on the rotten wind. All around the crater rim towering, its surface the shine of obsidian and dull frown of basalt, one rock then another in ones and twos and threes breaking free of the surface, clunk, clunk, clunk, into the hold of darkness.

There was nothing to do but watch, standing as if unseen, nothing to do but gawk and wait. Between then and the coming of day they stood watching until light came against the western wall. Then they left the way they had come, arriving at Night’s basket

where he had left it on Mink's Rock. It was open. The food was gone, cleanly gone, not scattered or partially-gone or broken-into, just completely gone.

Hair in a Cave

That morning, Sunken Lily put a ninth notch on Morning Crow's old medicine pole. One for each day since Night had left. Toward evening, she pushed the dugout onto the marsh to see if she could find Morning Crow. It was beautiful. The wind blew gently across the marsh as she pushed the canoe through the shallows, her dog Little One at the stern like a big, brown fox. She would be able to see Morning Crow if he came along the shore, where bats dove like crazy songbirds that didn't know how to fly.

For the last three days, the sour air from the west had made her think Morning Crow was near. The air made her stomach hurt, but she wasn't afraid. For a year she had waited, knowing he would come back as a skoks because of what she did. She didn't know why it had taken him so long. He would hate her for what she had done—for pulling the tule shroud from his face before they burned him and pinching hair from his head, then hiding it. It gave her power over him even in his death. He couldn't hurt her. If he did, she wouldn't tell him where his hair was.

It made her smile. He couldn't go back to the Dancing Place until his hair was burned.

She pushed the canoe more quickly while the noise of the midges grew toward a scream. Little One's ears pricked and she jumped from the prow and hopped to Sunken Lily on her two front one rear leg. She had been like that since she wandered to the marsh. Sunken Lily kneaded the dog's ears in her fingers and then pushed further south. She thought she could smell him already. His living smell, which surprised her:

something she had forgotten, strange as darkness, familiar as the scuffed skin on her father's knees. A dead smell too, sour and rotten.

The canoe drifted slowly as a duck, the tules in the shallows growing thicker as she went. Further along, a woman beat a blanket and three children ran footraces in the growing darkness. They didn't see Sunken Lily drift by. She passed Long Smiling Woman's earth lodge with its medicine pole in front, the red-shafted flicker feathers at the top dead in the still air. Not far away, the spit of rock where she and Morning Crow used to meet before they married jutted into the water.

The prow of the dugout scraped onto the rock spit and she splashed into the shallow water, tying the canoe to a small, bent juniper that grew from the rock. Then she sat looking west, thinking he would see her and come walking across the water.

Footsteps fell from behind, surprising her.

"Have you seen Night?" she asked, not turning, knowing it was him.

Tiny waves splashed in perfect rhythm against the rock, like a drum. She waited.

Finally, she turned. He stood on the path, looking up the juniper slope.

She had always thought a skoks would look proud. Not like this. White hair, tattered tule. Red eyes, crazy and sad.

"Where's my hair?" he said.

The midges were loud. Wailing.

She reached for Little One, but she was gone, running three-legged along the shore as fast as she could.

"Have you seen Night?" she asked again.

She could smell him, the dead smell, not the old one she thought she remembered.

“Let’s go,” he said, jutting his chin at the hill.

She wet her lips to say something. Then she followed him up the hill.

She could hardly think. She forgot what she was going to say. She walked behind, then beside him, a person’s height away. Cold came from him as if from an ice cave, and now she was afraid. He knew what she had done. Maybe now he was different and didn’t even care about returning to the Dancing Place, so angered was he by her deed. He could kill her by just passing by if he wanted.

She didn’t know why she followed him.

He led her past junipers just taller than he was. She turned and looked down the slope. It was nearly dark. The canoe sat where she had left it. Small from there, like a branch.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He walked. She followed, up the dark blue hills between the marsh and the desert.

“Have you seen Night?” she said. “Can’t you tell me if he’s all right?”

She stumbled over rocks that lay buried in the bunch grass.

“I’m looking for my hair,” he said. “In the caves.”

For a moment she forgot where she had hidden it.

Morning Crow was far ahead now. He might not be able to hear. “Where’s my son?” she asked. “Have you seen him?” She wondered if she had really spoken, couldn’t remember what her voice had sounded like. “I won’t help you find that hair,” she said, or thought she said, but wasn’t sure. Everything was backward. He seemed to have a power over her now he had never had before. It scared her.

Far ahead, Morning Crow threw his left arm in the air, as if he didn’t need her.

They walked up the hill toward the notch. On the other side lay the desert. From the notch they'd be able to see it. He kept walking, just out of earshot, and she followed. Cold air blew down from the hills, up from the desert. Morning Crow was a dark thing on the hillside moving always at the same speed.

At the notch—a gentle, flat one where giant rocks gathered—he stopped. He poked his head into cracks between the giant, gray boulders. She stood back, watching, afraid of him.

“Help me look,” he said. “Where did you hide it?”

They went across the notch.

Far downslope, almost in the desert, Morning Crow stopped at a lava cave.

“Come with me,” he said.

She followed.

She had hidden his hair in a cave like this, not far away. She took the hair, wrapped it in finely grained buckskin, tied it with mountain hemp cording, put the hair in a small basket with a lid, walked across the same notch, and into an old lava tube where the desert people buried medicine makers. They didn't bury them, just wrapped them in tule shrouds and stuffed them in cracks between rocks. She had walked carrying a twined sagebrush bark torch past three burials and put Morning Crow's hair in a crack. From there she had been able to see moonlight coming through a hole in the top of the cave. But she didn't go out that way, she went back the way she'd come.

No one would ever find it but her. She'd almost forgotten where it was.

Morning Crow led her into the cave where the edge had fallen in, where sand and rocks made an easy path. Bats whistled from the opening.

The opening stood like a gray mouth, tall as five men. He walked backward inside where it was dark. She could see his eyes, and she walked toward them, wondering if he had turned like that so she could follow. The floor was mostly sand, some rock. It smelled damp and stale like cold and darkness. The roof was gray basalt, arched like the top of a sweat lodge. All the boulders around her, some taller than her, had fallen from the roof. You could see the empty places above where they had been, like giant flake scars from a toolmaker's hammerstone.

"I can hardly see," she said.

He waited.

He took her by the hand. She let him take it, didn't squeeze his back, didn't pull away. She remembered the deep wrinkles across his palm. It was so cold now, like a dead thing. She couldn't see. It grew colder the further they went, almost freezing, like any cave. She felt as if she were a girl being led by her father and didn't like it.

He stopped. "Rocks here," he said.

He carried her.

"You put me down," she said. But she didn't struggle. She just lay in his arms like a sick child and hardly knew what to do.

"I'm going to find my hair."

He carried her, stepping quickly through the rocks.

Further on, he set her in the sand and went to look for his hair. She lay in the cold, knowing he would come back.

She saw red eyes far away, no bigger than the Evening Star, then she heard him breathing. Only when he breathed out. Like a sick person.

“I couldn’t find it,” he said. “I will, though.”

She felt him lean over to pick her up. She put her arm out. “Did Night ask you to heal him?” she asked.

“Night?” he said.

“Is he still sick?” she cried.

He knelt and put an arm under her knees, the other under her back.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, and pushed him away.

“Night’s good,” he said.

Bats came again from far down the cave. She listened until they were gone.

“Where is he?” she asked.

Water dripped on rock.

“Where is he?” she said. “Is he going to Sky Lake?”

She stood, dizzy in the dark and cold. “You didn’t ask?” she said.

“I don’t think he would go there,” he said.

She kicked sand, hoping it hit him. She thought of reaching down, picking up sand, throwing it in his eyes.

“Don’t you know where he is?”

She pushed the air, hoping to push him, but he wasn’t there. She swung her arm to find him, stepped, swung, couldn’t find him. He laughed. It was sickly.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she said. “What are you laughing at?”

She swung, missed. He laughed, and she chased the laugh.

“He’ll find out what you did to the headman there,” she said.

“He’ll be all right. I’ll check on him.”

“They’ll hurt him when they find out. Fool,” she said.

“Look what you’ve done to me,” he said. “Look what I am now.”

She chased his red eyes. She could see them now. He must have had his back turned to her before.

“You don’t know me,” he said. “Never did.”

She swung at the eyes with her fingers.

He laughed, crying out at the end.

She felt herself spinning in the dark.

She couldn’t see anything. He had to be tricking her, back turned, eyes hidden.

“Now, Lily,” he said.

“Leave,” she said.

“You’d be lost.”

It started like a wail when he laughed again. Bats whistling and crying—in his voice.

“See?” he said.

Him walking, her following. She hated that he reminded her of Night—“see.”

“Heal him,” she said. “Do it!”

“See the drips from the ceiling, Lily?” he said. “See the cold rocks falling on our heads, sharp, gray rocks? The old medicine maker, skinny and dry, behind that boulder?”

“Leave me.”

“Take my hand,” he said.

She took it, hated the hand, hated herself.

They went further into the cave. It sloped up. She thought she saw gray, then they walked on sand, moonlit from a hole in the roof. They walked out the hole. The cave went up into the hole and came out in the desert. Still dark—it could have been the next night, for all she knew—a big sky full of stars. Cold. The desert, east, lay silent.

“The marsh is that way,” he pointed, “the desert is there.”

She walked toward the marsh.

He followed.

“Let me go,” she said, running a little.

He walked behind. Big steps. She looked back, he wasn't there. There he was, beside her, laughing again.

“Go,” she said, pointed west, kept walking.

“I'm looking for my hair,” he said, close beside. “If we come near it, tell me, and I'll fetch it. Then I'll be gone, see?”

He stood next to her. She thought she could see the marsh, but then she walked into a hollow, and only saw the sky.

“Do you remember the summer we met?” he asked. “I remember everything from being alive. Things I had forgotten.”

Straight ahead she walked, up the hollow. At the top he was still beside her, but she didn't look at him. In sight over the tops of the juniper was the marsh, flat, black, and tiny.

“For five days before we married I thought of what I would say to you,” he said. “See. Now I remember everything.” She walked, batted the air. “The first night I said this: ‘Sweet girl from the river. You will be happy in my house.’” He laughed again,

sadly. “The second night. I remember: ‘Crow is smart. Mink is quick. Crow and Mink, take the two, and we’ll be quick as a waterfall, smart as old rocks, black as night sky.’

The third night. Do you remember now, Lily?” he asked. “Lily?”

She walked, kept stumbling on rocks in the bunch grass as if she’d never walked before. She turned her ankle but kept going. Swung her arms way in front, way in back, to keep him away. The marsh looked even smaller now, it did. She turned and checked North Star to make sure, and she was good, going west, but she felt farther from the marsh than before.

“You do,” he said. “I can hear the words I said to you. The third night: ‘You will always have dried elk, always dried salmon, always more seed meal, berries and roots than you will need. For you. I will make sure.’ See. You remember now. I see it in how you walk.”

He was in front of her, walking backward, looking at her stomach. “Fourth night,” he said. He didn’t trip, didn’t stumble, floated over the rocks like a leaf in the water.

“You never knew me, that I thought for days of what I said to you. The fourth night, this: ‘Your foot on the path in meadow. Round heel on sand, Lily, so beautiful. I’ve seen you running like a doe.’ I practiced saying it, said it to the water in the marsh. Over and over, saying, ‘Dear Lily, this day, I want you to know this.’ See?”

Now they went downhill more steeply, through junipers as fat as pines. She cut between trees, stopped, hid, hoping he would be gone, but then she would move from the shadows and he would be there, cold and full of words.

“The fifth night. We’re almost there. Did you know it was five things I said to you, all at once?”

He laughed loudly enough to be heard at the marsh. The coyotes wailing to the north stopped. Everything stopped. “The fifth night this: ‘Lily, daughter of Left Bear. Wherever you walk, I will lay down tule mats, one, then another, in your path. I will keep you safe where you walk, always from this day.’”

His wailing coyote laugh ran down the hill. She tried to hit the tops of the rocks in the grass, to never let her feet slip between them. He walked behind. She felt him watching. “Where are the tule mats?” she said, kept walking.

He walked beside her. On the left. Behind. On the right. “Now I remember how I said it when I married you: “Sweet girl from the river. You will be happy in my house. Crow is smart. Mink is quick. Crow and Mink, take the two, and it’s as quick as a waterfall, smart like old rocks, black as night sky. You will always have dried elk, always dried salmon, always more seed meal, berries and roots than you will ever need. For you. I will make sure. Your foot on the path in meadow. Round heel on sand, Lily, so beautiful. I’ve seen you running like a doe. Lily, daughter of Left Bear. Wherever you walk, I will lay down tule mats, one, then another, in your path. I will keep you safe where you walk, always from this day.”

The rocks were lava rocks. They bit her heels—sharp, tiny bites. There ahead lay a sandy wash, rocks only in the middle, and she walked to it. He was there when she walked onto the sand. She knew he could see her crying. She just kept walking, down the sand to the marsh. She would follow it. It had to go there—she’d never been in this wash. But it went downhill, and she followed it. He saw her wipe her cheek. He walked on her left, and she turned her head away, but he saw everything.

She knew he had said the words long ago, but she’d forgotten.

He walked to a juniper, shook the bough, gathered the dry, blue berries that fell on the sand.

“This is all I need to eat now,” he said. “I eat things that I remember. Do you know what you’ve done?”

He ran into the wash and found cobbles, gathered them in the crook of his arm and carried them. “I’ll mark where we’ve walked,” he said, stopped, piled them in the sand. “When you come back here, when I come back here, we’ll remember. You’ll think of the words I said to you when we married. See the rocks, know the words.”

Marsh air blew up the hill, the smell of dead tules and smoke.

Morning Crow was gone now. She heard him walk away.

The ground flattened as she went down the hill, and the trees and rocks were ones she’d seen before. It was cold as it would get, just before dawn. She stopped outside the lodge and felt good breathing the smoke. She put her hand on the lodge’s side and tried to remember what it had been like when she met him.

In the opening of the cooking shelter were two burden baskets of chokecherries. Goose had left them. Little One lay there, guarding them. The berries in one basket had stems, in the other they didn’t. Sunken Lily sat between them and began to pick the berries off and throw them in the other basket. The cold ground came up through her. She watched her fingertips pull berries from stems. She watched them turn dark purple until they were black and felt her heart pound and heat on her forehead.

All night she had walked beside a skoks, and it had scared her. When she was afraid like this she saw the Beaver mask in her mind, like she did now. The man had

worn it. The man she never told anyone about, the one who came to her in her girlhood. He always came like this in lightning flashes. She felt as if he were sitting next to her: a man with a mask, a smiling Beaver mask with square teeth painted white, and a grin to make him happy. He had always said he was cold when he came to lie with her, waking her while everyone slept. He hadn't been cold, he'd been warm. His hands were warm, and his legs. And between his legs, it was warm, under the blanket with her. He always smelled like someone she knew, which must have been a trick—no one she knew would have done that to a girl.

She pulled a chokecherry shoot from the basket and squeezed it in her hand and watched juice run down her arm and fall. A purple tear like black blood. She threw what was in her hand into the sagebrush where Little One jumped at it, chomping at nothing, teeth cracking. She tried to think if she had ever loved Morning Crow.

Only half the berries were done. Her fingers moved like a spider's legs, but the berries were still not done.

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