

The No-Account

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*Knowing many stories is wisdom.
Knowing no stories is ignorance.
Knowing only one story is death.*

—John Arch-in-the-Ruins,
late Union sage

“HELLO, I’M A young bureaucrat in training.” That was a line I rejected. Another one was “I come in peace.” Something good and neutral, that’s what I needed, like “Hello, my name is Evander Henson, and I’m here on a mission from the government of Pixburgh”—which I considered, but it seemed to lack something. From the maps, it looked like today might be my last day walking before I got there. As each step through the tall grass took me a little closer I started wondering if I was gonna end up just saying “Don’t shoot.” Did they have guns? If not they prolly had bows and arrows.

There was a lot I dit’n know about them, and it seemed like more and more the closer I got. The well-intentioned sheaf of anthropological field reports that the Special Subcouncil on Outlying Regional Diplomacy had assembled for me said plenty about their clothing, their foraging-horticultural economy, the way their governance was (or wasn’t) structured. But the latest reports were from over a decade ago and a different village. The

village I was coming to might have disbanded by now, or everyone might have died from an epidemic or starvation, or they might have just moved to another site, which they were known to do.

Even if I found them I had no idea what kind of welcome to expect. The ethnographers had included only the facts in their reports, which was responsible, but I wondered if they could've at least tried to come up with some acceptably rigorous way of telling whether the peeps were friendly or whether I would wish I hadn't come. I found myself looking for clues in some old, pre-Rational texts that one of the authors had quoted in putting together a history of the region. One of the last available records from before the Long Strifes had described the peeps' forebears as "uneducated and insular hill folk," so I had that to go on, but then if I was hesitant to accept work nearly twenty years old as useful, why did I think I would get anything out of biased records from nearly two hundred years ago? I tried to read between the lines in the more recent reports. None of the ethnographers sounded like they'd ever quite made friends in any of these places. When they said they never camped inside the villages I couldn't decide if I believed it was for their stated reason, to avoid influencing subjects, or because they weren't welcome. But it couldn't be too bad, I reasoned. All the peeps who'd come to this region had at least come back unharmed. As far as I knew, anyway.

Aside from keeping my mule Ma'am on task, though, I had nothing else to think about. For the first few days, at least I'd been able to take my mind off things with little towns I'd never seen, new blisters to avoid angering. But for nearly a week now I'd been surrounded by uniform nowhere-ness. The road had dwindled into a narrow dirt path and then faded out altogether amid a soft, broad stream of spring-green grass and goldenrod, springing up through the time-softened asphalt of the old highway; there was no path, no indication even that anyone had ever come this way before, except the old roadbed itself and a few lonely an-

cient stripped signposts, by now crumbly rust not worth pulling up. To my sides were forbidding hills clothed in coarse-woven forest, and winding amid it all the stream, maybe one stream or maybe a succession of them, I coul't'n tell, sometimes by my side, sometimes out of sight and unaccountable, sometimes evident only by an unplaceable trickling. Besides that, nothing. As I crested each rockslide today, I found I was peeking nervously over before walking on, something it'd never occurred to me to do until now.

My mind was still busy trying to come up with the right introduction when, as I came over a slide that I'd determined safe and picked my way down the far side to the broad clearing below, some bushes shifted out of my line of sight and revealed a man in the grass, swinging a big blade. I tried to take back a step I'd already started taking, missed the ground, and tumbled like a satchel of potatoes all the way to the grass.

By the time my lungs started working again and the alarm bells in my head quieted down enough that I could push myself up, the blade man had already run up to the top of the slide, grabbed Ma'am's lead rope, and led her down. Now he was standing in front of me, blade still at the ready, in control of the mule whose bags held anything I could use as a defensive weapon.

"Yaaraat?" he said.

"B— beg your pardon?"

"Aa said, Y'arraat?"

"Oh! Yes, I'm fine, please, thank you! Hello. Hello; greetings," I said, this time catching it through the unfamiliar accent. English had changed a lot here since the area had last had regular dealings with the city, though not as much as I'd feared. "Actually, I've slipped on a couple other rockslides this trip. I've kinda picked up a knack for how to keep from getting too badly torn up."

"That so?" he said. "Well aa spose if you're gonna do it, may 's well do it raat. You seem to've found which way's up naya.

Hir's your myull's laan."

"Thank you. Sorry, thank you very much. My name's Van, by the way," I said, and held out my hand.

He looked at me sideways. "Name's Burrows," he said finally, and accepted it. He looked about as old as me, but with more sun-weathered skin and wirier muscles. He had no shirt on; his shorts were old buckskin. His eyes had a faraway look to them, and it made me unsure how to talk to him. When I'd realized he was helping me with Ma'am I was ready to say everything would be fine and I'd spent the whole walk worrying for nothing. Now I wasn't too sure.

"Um ... excuse me, I'm not from around here—"

"No kiddin'?"

"—and I'm trying to find a village or a community I'm told is here. Can you point me there?"

A moment's consideration. "Well aa can jus *take* you there if you'll hang on jus a secont," he said, and quickly tied together several bundles of what I now guessed was thatch, then hoisted them over his back. "Les go." He led me off to the far edge of the clearing and down over the edge, onto a rocky dirt path lined with the stiffly waving spiky brown heads of last year's teasels. The trail took us to a narrow spot on the stream with flat stepping stones studded across. As I began the slow process of convincing Ma'am to cross this, Burrows paused on the far bank and watched.

"Naya, pfaur I take you to the cmuney," he asked, "y'ain't comin in to scope the place ayot for a raid, are ya?"

I almost missed the next stone, but managed to find my balance this time and splutter, "No!" Even as I did, Burrows was laughing a high, hearty laugh that told me that the general cloud of blunders that apparently surrounded me had already cleared me of any suspicions. "No," I repeated more quietly and defensively, turning my attention back to Ma'am. "I've been sent by the government of Pixburgh. They don't want anything you've got. They're just trying to keep in touch with neighbors and stay

on top of what's going on out here."

"Oh, is that all."

"It's a sort of diplomatic mission too, actually," I said, trying to recover some professionalism, as Ma'am stepped back on shore and we got back onto the trail. "I'm here to trade news and to learn, but I also have a proposal for whoever makes decisions for the"—what'd he call it?—"commun—ey. I'm hoping while I'm here I can arrange to talk with the ... Meetin?" I ventured, hoping such a thing still existed.

"Hn, well, that shoul'n't be a probm. They'll be meetin the day after the full moon—an that's three naats tonaat," he added, seeing I was about to ask.

"Oh, well, that'd be—perfect," I said, a little flustered. I thought it'd take me at least a month to arrange that, and be trickier. "I just go in?"

"Yep."

With nothing else to ask about it, I suddenly found I was fresh out of conversation topics. The trail took us through tall, airy forest, loosely following the stream, climbing up and down little draws and gullies. "Pittsburgh," Burrows said after a while, using the archaic pronunciation. "Aa don't blieve aa know of innyun 's ever wint that far. Once in a whaal some-un comes through with some stuff to trade they got from some-un got it from some-un in Pittsburgh, but far 's I know I never met innyun 's bin there. What's it laak?"

"Well ..." Where to start? "Population around seventy-five thousand. It's self-governing, and governs the surrounding towns too. The city itself is completely full of buildings—the same way there's nothing but green here, well, there, it's nothing but buildings, except the streets between them to walk on. What else? It's—"

"Aa guess aa mean maur, What's laaf laak there? Say, for you?"

"Me? Well, I just got finished studying at the University." And I told him what the University was, and how I'd gotten

my degree with focuses in architecture, philosophy, and anthropology, all of which I also had to explain. Meanwhile Burrows walked in front of me and Ma'am and dit'n say much. It wasn't long before I got the feeling that I'd lost his interest, but he dit'n tell me to stop talking either, so I kept going.

It was happening alright, now: Here I was, I'd made contact with a local, I was going to the cmuney, I coul't'n change my mind now. And I had no idea what I was doing. Is this how you carry out a diplomatic mission, by telling peops about your schooling? Of course building rapport is a good first step, but I coul't'n really picture the next one, how I'd make my case at the Meetin, anything. I'd passed enough relevant classes that I should be able to figure it out, true—but a lot of them only barely. I was on this mission not courtesy of my great promise for the next generation of Rational Governance Council advisors, but thanks to my parents: the current generation of advisors, Dad for Agriculture, Mom for Transportation. They dit'n have a lot of strings to pull, but enough at least to set me up with one final chance to offset my grades' blemish on my résumé with a practical mission, and perhaps still be a Council advisor myself in time.

We forded back over the stream at a broad slow riffle and climbed steeply. Soon Burrows stopped in front of me and gestured up ahead. The forest opened out into sun in front of us; we were coming up on the cmuney from below. I followed him out into the light.

Nestled between the trees and the sharp southern shin of a mountain was a wide, gently-rolling clearing, buried chest-deep in a colorful quilt of corn, squash, potatoes, sunflowers, peas climbing up cherry trees, and dozens of other plants I coul't'n name. Crouching amid the vegetation, half-submerged, were what looked like tan yurts, all with doors pointed east like a congregation of ancient frogs greeting each sunrise. Grasshoppers clicked through the air and early butterflies wafted from flower to flower. Barely distinguishable in the middle distance behind

all the greenery, red-orange fences enclosed scratching hens, and I thought I saw goats too.

"Well, hir we are," Burrows announced to the back of my slackjawed head. "Did you have in maand innywhere in ptclar you wanted to go?"

"Do you know of someone I could ax about ... a place I could put up a tent for a while, maybe weeks or even months?"

"A tint? Aa blieve we can do you one better 'n that. But lemme put dayon this bundle first." So I followed him off to the right on a path along the edge of the cmuney's clearing, to two huts set apart from the rest, in the shade of the forest, angular and ramshackle, not much like the other houses I'd glimpsed. Burrows set down his bundle next to one. "Aa come to live ayot hir to learn from the priest. People never made much sinse to me innyhaya." He nodded toward an ancient, gaunt man I hat'n noticed, who was sitting in front of the other hut, staring in no particular direction without acknowledging us. I pretended I understood. Burrows led me down a different trail into the center of the cmuney and I stopped breathing so shallowly.

Burrows knocked on a door and I stood back as he quietly explained about me to an older woman who answered the door. She threw the door open, came out, and introduced herself as Lookayot, and called out her husband Leaf Staurm too. Burrows now stood around silently with a gaze wandering everywhere else, but Lookayot and Leaf Staurm were waterfalls of friendly talk, so fast I coul't'n keep pace with all the new dialect and lost at least a quarter of it, more when they spoke at the same time. I did understand that their youngest daughter had just married off into a different house, emptying their second house, and I'd be welcome to stay in it. The Special Subcouncil had sent me with fine stainless cookware from the salvage forges in Pixburgh to trade, but all Lookayot wanted in exchange was Ma'am, which suited me fine since I had nowhere to keep her. When Burrows saw that I had somewhere to stay he wandered off with a nearly imperceptible wave, but Lookayot had already started treating

me as a lost soul in need of a bit of motherly guidance, and as I got settled in to the round house I told her about my mission and she suggested things I could do next, once I'd rested up from the long walk, of course.

So by night I was already home—with a real straw mattress, even. When I heard the coyotes that night I just kept on sleeping. I spent the next three days before the Meetin mostly just staying out of the way, cooking, occasionally introducing myself to peops, and quietly looking around. The house wasn't really a yurt after the classic Central Asian nomad type. The walls were shaped by a ring of sapling posts, and were woven solid with a tight weft of twigs and reeds, draped outside with hides, and capped with a conical roof like a whimsical uncle's hat. For such primitive materials it was very cleanly made, though to my mind not quite as impressive as the shirts the peops wore, with two broad stripes of colorful, intricately interlaced symbols running down each shoulder, bright against the rest of the coarse, dull white linen, all of it woven with obvious dedication from the flax patch at one edge of the cmuney. I'd seen line drawings, but in person there was something almost alive about them; I reread the in-depth study of them that I'd brought but somehow still had questions.

I imagined the Meetin as a circle of grave, taciturn faces around a fire. When I got there I found a bunch of gray- and white-haired peops in a house sitting around a table with cups of tea, talking animatedly in turns. They made room for me, and tea too. I told them about my mission, and Cleveland's governmental reorganization and alliance with Pixburgh, and the RGC's proposal for further alliances out here. They listened but made no attempt to decide on anything. Which was to be expected. "We don't rilly desaad innything pfaur eryun has a pinion on it innyhaya," one man told me. "You jus start tellin eryun what you tauld us, an venchly we'll all figure it ayot dgether."

They decided it'd be no problem for me to stay indefinitely so I could do that, and so I could observe, in order to have some-

thing to report when I got back. The way I would observe would be to go in the morning to Listens Through (who as they told me this raised a hand with her fingers in a circle to indicate herself—a gray-haired woman with an enveloping but kindly gaze), and ask what needed to be done around the cmuney, and she would tell me where I could help. If I was needed for the same work the next day I'd just go back, and if not I'd go ask Listens Through again. I'd eat lunch with whoever I was working with, and since I hat'n had a chance to plant a garden of my own this year, Listens Through would collect any overabundance from peops she knew (which was everybody) and give it to me to cook dinners.

So within a few days of finding a home I also had a way to make a living, which was good since my supply of Pixburgh rice and beans was dwindling. Now that I felt like a real peop, I also gave myself permission to start trying to make friends. To my relief very few peops were as inscrutable as Burrows and the priest. I helped Minnow harvest cattails in the backwater below town, and helped Circles plant a late crop of beans (which I then did outside my house too), and came to find that by and large everyone I met was as interested in hearing me as I was in hearing them, and had plenty to say. I began daring to believe that I might actually accomplish what I was sent to do. There was real promise here, promise hanging in the air so thick I could almost taste it.

"Oaks sure got a lot to say today," Frogsong said to me one day as we were passing each other on one of the paths, near where acorns were clonking down the curves of the old car-steel roof of Patience's smokehouse.

"Sure do," I smiled. But after he rounded a corner, I stopped there, then backtracked all the way to my house, flopped down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling for a long time. *No, oaks don't say anything*, I yelled silently. *Because they can't talk. Because they're trees*. It wasn't Frogsong's fault. He just used a sim-

ple metaphor. But it reminded me one more time than I could stand to be reminded: *I can't communicate with these peops.*

I'd been in town five months now and hat'n accomplished a damn thing. All my major accomplishments were behind me by the end of my first week. "Jus start tellin eryun what you tauld us"; it sounded very simple. Except it seemed no one could hear me. I'd noticed it with Burrows before I even first saw the cmuney. But it wasn't just him; that I could've understood, because it turned out the priest was what I would've called a "shaman" and during Burrows's tentative apprenticeship neither one of them spent much time in the human world unless necessary. It was everyone. For the first month or so I met a new peop almost every morning, and they all had a variation on the same question: "What's Pittsburgh laak?" So I eagerly told them what I told Burrows on the path. And each time I got something like the same blank look, the same "... and?" waiting politely unsaid on their lips no matter how many of their questions I answered in however much detail. While cleaning fish at the traps by the Crick with Minnow, I managed to get through the entire list of the Principles of Rational Governance as laid out in the Constitution, waiting for occasional nods from her so I knew I was rendering the theory-dense terms at least understandable in what I'd picked up of the earthy dialect. And when I finished she just said, "Well aa spose that all makes sinse." And after a little while looked at the water and started telling me that since pure water washes through all life on Earth on its way to a river, the river is where we have to come for all life's magic, as the Crick had once told her grampa, and ... as if I hat'n said anything, and I didn't have the heart to keep trying.

Within three months I figured I'd described the details of Rational Governance to every adult in town and some of the more patient kids. But when I went to that month's Meetin, held in the forest's shade this time with creek-cooled sumac tea, to ask if they were ready to make a decision on the alliance, they told me the "nature of haya Pittsburgh works" was still "unclir

to us." I asked what more they needed to know and they said I should just "tell us maur." I dit'n know how to do that without trekking back to get a copy of the tax code, but I tried—and then after a couple more weeks of failure I just gave up.

My mission dit'n have a set timetable but I knew if I wasn't back by winter, peops would look askance when I did get back, unless I quickly produced a tall stack of publishable ethnography, which I felt in no way capable of. I coult'n make heads or tails of their cosmology; every time I thought I'd gotten the whole puzzle together, the next day someone would idly mention some detail about angels or spirit-works that would wreck the whole thing. I could maybe write a page on how this nameless village was a frustrating and perplexing place, friendly but distant, and from there go on at length in highly non-journal-worthy terms about how I felt invisible and at least a little unreal. I had begun to wonder if at some point on my walk here I'd slipped and fallen into a closely neighboring dimension, and now led only a halfway sort of existence here in the real world—appearing each morning as if for the first time, not remembered except in a vague impression everyone carried that they somehow knew me. If I gave up here and went back home, would my parents recognize me?

Whether or not they would, it seemed more and more like the only rational option I had left. I had stopped trying to get through to anyone, and anymore I just showed up for work each morning. I knew I could keep living an amiable existence on the fringe here, but clearly it was slowly driving me literally insane.

But lying there on the bed, I slowly realized there was at least one more thing I hat'n tried. Her face kept cropping up around the edges of my thoughts. I could go ask Listens Through.

I never had understood her well enough to consider thinking of her as a friend. Every time I went to see her I felt unnervingly as though she was reading my mind. But she did seem to know the answer to every question I'd ever brung her, including ones I hat'n quite axed, and ones she shoul't'n have known anything

about. (Maybe when she told me it seemed like my parents were more interested in my career than I was, it was an uncomfortably lucky guess.) And everyone in town came to her for advice. They said angels helped her. I preferred to involve as little superstition in my personal decisions as possible (or religion, as they called it, though I'd never quite grasped the subtle distinction that was once, according to my philosophy professor, thought quite crucial). But it looked like I might have to swallow my objections and try it.

I got up off the bed, walked over to her house, and called "Hello!" through the thick, hanging blanket-door. "Come on in," she called, and I walked in through the familiar curtain of garlic. Most of the roof was also hung with drying plants, many of which, even trying to imagine them un-desiccated, I coul'tn remember seeing in the gardens or in the forest. She was sitting at her little table eating a bowl of strange musky-smelling soup, and waved me to take the guest chair at the other side of the table. She finished the soup as I did, then took a teapot and poured herself a cup of tea with a different strange musky smell. As many times as I came here the smells always surprised me, rarely the same one twice.

"I came to ax you a question," I began tentatively.

"Ast me a qeshion," she invited, sipping.

"Well," I said. I hat'n come up with a good way to ax it and now I regretted not pausing to think before calling in the door; force of habit. She seemed to have figured out a way to stare at me while still looking at her tea. "Well—it's about my mission, and how I'm supposed to teach everyone about Pixburgh before the Meetin will decide anything. When I teach that, nobody seems to understand. They hear me, but the next minute—it's gone." I was gonna explain more, but she held up a hand.

"Aa was wonderin if you was *ever* gonna come in ast me bayot that," she said, and relief warmed every pore of my skin and forced out more breath than I thought I had in my lungs. "So you want maa advaace, huh?"

"Yes. Please."

She sat there for a moment, just looking at me. I shifted in my chair.

"Well, you ever traaed talkin to people?"

Great. Thanks for your sage and perspicacious comments. "Well *yes*, that's what I've been *doing*. It's just, like I said, when I do, no one understands."

"Aa *heard* what you said. An aa'm astin, Have *you* ever traaed talkin to people?"

"I ... What?"

"Aa don't know *haya* it is where you come from, but hir people can't hir what you're sayin unlest *you're* talkin."

"And you're—telling me that I'm not actually the one talking when I talk to peops?"

"Ain't hardly heard you yet. Once in a whaal."

"Then who is it?" Was she gonna tell me I was possessed by a bad angel? I groaned inwardly.

"Aa was hopin maybe we could figure that ayot."

I waited for her to say more. She dit'n. "Okay, how do we figure it out?" I cooperated.

"Wrong qeshion."

This wasn't a fun game. "Could you stop messing around with me and just tell me what you're trying to tell me? ... please."

"Hey, there you were for a secont there!" I gave her a sharp look, which she seemed to enjoy quite a bit. "Well, *naya* that you're hir, Van, maybe we can figure it out dgether. *Naya*, to me it sayonds laak who's usually doin the talkin for you is the whole city of Pittsburgh. Xpecially all your teachers at the University, an your mom an dad too. Damnedest thing, but that's what it seems laak. An the harder you traa to xplain sumpm, the maur aa hir you lettin thim do all the talkin. Least aa think so. But: I ain't never bin to Pittsburgh, so tell me, does that sayond bayot raat to you?"

"That—" I didn't like it. Involuntarily, I remembered all the times someone here had asked me a question and I'd tried to

remember exactly how the felicitous and eternal-seeming words of one of my textbooks had phrased the correct answer.

"Aa thought so," she said after I didn't continue. "So, first thing is, you need to learn to talk from your heart, not from a city smwhere far away."

"First thing?" That seemed like enough to work on. "There's another thing?"

"Well, you'd probly figure it ayot venchly from there, but yeah, there's sumpm elts you'll have to learn."

"What's that?" I said, my head slumping toward my chest.

"Well, a long taam ago, there was three squirrels," she said, and took a sip of her musky tea. She waited a moment, then took another sip. I started to wonder if she actually thought that constituted an answer, and finally opened my mouth to object, when she went on, "Naya these was the last three of the riginal squirrels from the bginnin of the world. An they was the last three in the faarest knew how to faand nuts, too. They'd taught all the young ones where all the laakly spots was, an those young ones got baa well enough, but olny the three auld ones knewed haya to sniff ayot maur when some tree daaed or din't have a good mast yir. An naya these three was all maur 'n a thayosand yirs auld, and they knewed they couldn't stay there in the faarest frever, and they'd have to pass on what they knewed pfaur they passed on theirselves. But thing is, is no one'd ever traaed to pass nothing on laak that pfaur. These auld ones knewed erything they knewed already when they come poppin up atta the grayond, an whin the young ones din't know something, they jus come asted the auld ones. So the auld squirrels din't know *haya* to pass it on.

"So they got dgether one day and talked it over. 'Aa know what to do,' says one of 'em. 'Aa'll go to the biggest tree in the faarest an scratch a smooth spot into the bark, an then scratch *instrutchions* in there on haya to faand new nuts. An it'll last frever there.' An so she wint an did it. An with all that scratchin she waur ayot her claws first, an thin her teeth, an thin as she

finished up the last scratch with a sharp rock, she faanly waur out her heart too an daaed.

“An the two who was left watched the young squirrels go to the scratched-up tree, an they learned, an they ate alraat. But thin after tin ginerations, well, wouldn’t you know it, that old tree faanly blew over in a windstaurm, after all those yirs, an withayot it the young ones couln’t member nothin.

“Well naya, the two auld ones gets dgether, an one of ‘em says, ‘That shows we can’t trust this knowin to last on innything you can touch. Erything daas venchly, but we want squirrelkaand to live frever. Aa know what to do. We’ll keep it all in the young squirrels’s *maands*. Aa’ll make up a tellin of erything a squirrel needs to know to faand new nuts. An,’ he says, bein pretty braat, ‘aa’ll make it rhaam so it’s easy to member it word for word, an they can pass it on gineration to gineration jus haya aa teach them.’ An so he spint the next yir settin erything he knewed to a long song, an thin he started teachin ery squirrel in the faurest his song, one at a taam so he knewed they all had it. An the strain was so much that after the last student, he fell over dead.

“Well, that last auld one, she watched the young squirrels singin the gone one’s pretty song each fall, and they ate alraat. But after a whaal a couple funny things happened. One, they started mixin up the words, little by little. An two, the way they talk started changin—laak you an me talk different—to where the young squirrels couln’t even understand erything they *did* member raat, an after twinty maur ginerations they all knewed the song maurless but it wasn’t no good for nothing nmaur.

“Well, so, there’s that last squirrel. An she hadn’t said much, but she alwas was the waasest of the three. So she said to herself, ‘Aa know what to do.’ An she thought of sumpm worked so well, squirrels is still doin it today, and people is too, cause we come after the squirrels, and learned it from thim.

“Naya what do you think that last squirrel did?”

“I don’t know, what?”

Listens Through threw her head back. "Aa ain't gonna jus *tell* you!" she horse-laughed. "If you don't get it for yself you'll never believe it jus cause some nutty auld woman drinks weird-smellin tea tauld you!" How did she know I thought the tea was nasty? "But aa tell you what. If you wanna figure it ayot, aa know a good place you can do it.

"You go up the aulroad to the first landslaad upstream of the cmuney, an you faand where there's two big trees leanin on each other, an that's the Waas Couple. You go in ptween them an take the little rabbity path dayon to the edge of the cliff. There's a perfic place to sit an think; the squirrels is layod there. Go there tmorra, if you want, take as long as you need. Could be jus a minute, could be a few days."

"But you're not gonna tell me."

"Woul'n't be any poent in it."

"Well." I got up. "In that case, thank you very much for listening to my questions and for ... answering them," I said, searching for politeness.

"You bet."

"Be alright," I said, and held up my circled fingers to her.

"Go arraat," she said, and linked her fingers into mine, a gesture of connection I'd grown to like, though my heart really wasn't in it just now. We unlinked and I stooped out into the sun, feeling like a mouse just let go by a cat.

The next morning my uninterested feet stumped three miles up the familiar crumbles of the aulroad, more out of spite than from any hope that I would actually find anything. Maybe if I waited there all day, or two days, and nothing happened, I could come back and tell Listens Through, and she would admit that she really just thought it was funny to send a confused outsider up the road to listen to squirrels, and then tell me the answer. Or so I fantasized as I walked.

The path down off the road to the edge of the cliff was even

more rabbitiness than I'd imagined, but with enough guesswork I made it down to the edge. Nowhere good to sit, it looked like, just a narrow lip of jagged exposed limestone between the grass and a sheer dropoff. But I picked my way gingerly along the edge a ways, squeezed around a boulder, and found what must be the place Listens Through had mentioned. The boulder turned out to be the beginning of a wall that ran along the edge, and now I was on a ledge between the dropoff and the wall. A few steps further on, the wall curved away from the edge and then back, forming a little nook. I sat myself down in the nook with a put-upon grunt and finally took a moment to look out over the edge.

I was looking directly into the upper halves of the oaks, maples, chestnuts, and sycamores rising up from the floodplain of the Crick below. I didn't feel entirely welcome in their private canopy domain. *Did we invite you?* "It's okay, Listens Through did." That seemed to satisfy them. After I settled down properly and quit rustling the dry grass under me, I could just make out the sound of the stream burbling peaceably along out of sight.

I took a couple minutes to admire the view, since that seemed the right thing to do, and then set about getting down to business. What I came here for: what the damn last squirrel said that was so marvelous.

What had Listens Through given me to go on? Not a lot. There was some way of teaching that would last the generations through. Not writing (the obvious choice), or, apparently, song, or maybe well-organized lists of principles. And what else. And apparently listening to squirrels was supposed to help me.

Sure. Fine. It could be almost anything. That last squirrel might have taken to communicating in semaphore. Perhaps a little interpretive dance. A thousand-year-old squirrel, if she was magical, still ought to be able to pull off a few moves. It occurred to me, by way of a sinking in my gut that signaled the death of the little germ of hope I'd been nurturing, that even if I did get the right answer I had no way of knowing. And if I came back and

asked Listens Through, "Was it by building some kind of squirrel school?" she'd just say something like, "What do you think?" I was supposed to just *know* I'd gotten it. "Have a little mercy on a clueless kid in an incomprehensible new world," I shouted with a little bitterness into the upper leaves. It dit'n change my situation, but it did make me feel a little better.

Attempting to comb through my memory of her story for clues, I began to discover how true it was about the squirrels being loud here. Around the forest I could hear near and faraway sounds of squirrels chasing each other, rustling in the leaves, gnawing open walnuts. I coul't'n actually see any until one started climbing up a tree close to my perch, pausing every few steps to chirp loudly at anyone around. "It's okay, I don't like acorns," I assured it. It kept on chirping. I was at a loss to imagine how Listens Through thought the noise would help me. I could hardly get a train of thought going in the first place, with everything I had on my mind. With the squirrels, any time I actually did—I counted this a victory even if I wasn't thinking about my puzzle—as soon as it got moving I'd get distracted by some explosion of chatter, and eventually have to retrace my thoughts practically from the beginning. If they were telling me anything, it was lost on me. I dit'n speak Squirrel.

Chatter within punctuated by chatter without. The cloud-exhaling chill of the morning surrendered to a trickling midday warmth. I ate some fried onions and *jrooslems* with goat cheese from a tied-shut pan in my haversack. I fell asleep. I woke up into a haze of disorientation lit by a sun I was jarred to find westering. If I wanted to figure this out without coming out a second day, I should really be trying harder. I kicked my mind into gear. Okay. Semaphore and interpretive dance are prolly not real contenders. What other modes of teaching are there? What do I remember from rhetoric class back in first year? The four ... the three types of instruction are ... Socratic dialog ... uh ... and ... boring class anyhow ... where was I ...

And when the sun got close to the horizon all I had to show

for the day was an empty pot and restless legs. But halfway back to the cmuney I stopped, turned around, coul'tn face the idea of returning unsuccessful, even if I did plan to come back out first thing in the morning. Somehow I'd had an idea this might happen. So I had my bedroll.

The air chilled me awake shortly before dawn. I warmed up with a walk and found a hickory tree, unharvested. I brung a shirtful of nuts back to the nook and spent the morning cracking and eating. By midday I was full but also out of distractions. I threw my hammer rock down off the cliff and wrenched my attention back. Ruefully, I thought of my notebooks from Intro Rhetoric, in a trunk at my parents' house. Failing those, I tried building up a theory of teaching from first principles, and finally discovered something: that that's hard to do.

After a while I decided to just give it a rest and listen to the wind and Crick and squirrels. Once I dit'n mind that they were distracting me, I could enjoy them, just let the sounds surround me like air out of a hot oven on a cold day. I began to feel a little less bitter about this whole enterprise. I took another walk and found a pawpaw tree in a dense thicket, small but with a couple ripe fruits. When I got back I was still hungry and I hat'n gotten perceptibly closer to an answer, but to my hazy surprise I found I was okay with that. Why think myself into miserable knots if I can get nowhere just as fast wearing a dopey grin, I figured.

At sunrise of the third day I seesawed in and out of waking, my mind amid the treetops, maybe left floating there by a dream. I would come back to the nook as I woke but then snooze back out again. The light just played through the leaves so entrancingly. I felt like my old cat when he sat under a sunbeam and tracked specks of dust.

How old was this closest oak, anyhow? I wondered as I came more firmly into the material world; how long had squirrel claws been scabbling up its bark? Oaks hardly bear acorns

until they're old men of fifty, Leaf Staurm had told me once while we were crosscutting firewood, and this one was full of them, but I had a feeling it was older still. No tree nearby had it matched for size, and its canopy spread out in story after story of luxuriation. Maybe a hundred. Or older. Maybe it started growing here when the cmoney was just coming together, however that happened. One day a tattered crowd of peops with fraying Union-era hoodies and makeshift packs came wandering up the Crick, some on the aulroad and some down below, looking for a place with flat ground, where they could plant a few seeds and put up a few houses. One of the boys had a slingshot and killed a squirrel to add to the night's dinner. That squirrel was the only one who knew where the acorn was buried that grew into this oak. Hm, I thought, so the tree's thankful for the gift, and it wants to give back to squirrelkind. Maybe that's how it happened.

And how about you, sycamore? I wondered, and then stopped short: it was all fine to get nowhere yesterday, but if I did it again today I knew I'd have to go back for food, and somehow I'd rather not. I started trying to gather in all my drifting wits for another attack on Listens Through's puzzle.

And yet ... and yet ...

I eyed the sycamore. "You say something?"

No, it dit'n. It's a tree.

And yet ...

And yet dit'n some young man decades ago wander up from the cmoney with his love and carve both their initials into your bark? And isn't his daughter, perhaps, the only one who still knows about it, knows who those now illegible letters in a still visible heart signify?

I snapped back and blinked my eyes a few times. Oh.

I dit'n need to pay attention to the squirrels, specifically. Just pay attention. Just listen. Then you'll get it.

All the same I thanked them, and the trees too, and the Crick with its patient shoosh. I got up, edged back along the cliff and

up the path and under the Wise Couple, and walked the three miles directly to Listens Through's door. She hollered to come in, and I came to her table and dit'n bother sitting down. "It's stories, isn't it? Stories are how you teach."

"An don't you just love thim squirrels?" she said.

"The trees had a hand in it too."

"Seems laak it woulda bin a branch."

"Whatever." She managed to make me feel elated and frustrated at the same time. I breathed heavily and felt lighter and lighter for it.

"So that's the answer," I said after a while. "But you know what I think?"

"What do you think?"

"I think it's kind of stupid."

"Oh do you naya!" Listens Through grinned.

"Alright, so I get that stories make things easier to remember. Because they're more full of life. I see how when I stopped trying to decipher the forest and just let my mind—my heart, whatever—listen, it started telling stories. I even see how if the world changes and makes an old story wrong, a new storyteller can just change the story and keep it useful. That's all good. But in the end they're still, you know, *untrue*. You can't teach truths by telling lies. You have to dig through all that and get to just the bare facts. Teach with those, to avoid warping things. And I know people here could handle learning like that! Everyone I've met here is *smart*. They don't need *stories* to help them remember things. Antlers knows the name of everyone in the cmuney *and* which bonfire they all get their next year at. And I've seen him figure out the *story* of where a deer is by looking at three hoofprints and a nibbled branch. And yet when I tell him about the Council back in Pixburgh, he says 'Sure' and wanders off somewhere and the next day it's like I never said anything. You're telling me I need stories to explain this stuff? Why not just explain it?"

"Jus explain it!" she said. "Jus the facts! As if you could ever do

such a thing. Is that haya they traa to teach at your University! No wonder you hafta stay there till you're a full-grown man." I frowned. "Spose you tell me a naked aadea, with no staury tatched."

"Okay ... well, any two objects attract each other with a force that's stronger the heavier they both are, and weaker the farther apart they are, and that's why things fall towards the Earth. F equals G , times m sub one times m sub two, over r squared," I added quietly for my own benefit.

She accepted this without a flinch and said, "Arraat, an whin you think bayot that insaad your head, what two things do you see pullin at each other?"

Unbidden, Newton. "An apple and the Earth, I guess. Or the Earth and the moon. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, but it does! Cause whin you forget which way things fall an you're traain to figure it ayot agin, you're not thinkin bayot thim *ms* an squares. You're thinkin a staury: 'A apple falls cause the Earth is pullin it all the taam.' Shaurt staury, but jus as good. An your apple maat be maa rock: a aadea ain't made atta the air some-un tauld it to you with, it's made atta your own brain stuff, made all atta *you*, from the first moment you know it. An you maat think that staury's olny tellin you which way things fall, but look close, an it's probly tellin you sumpm bayot a gaa a long taam ago sittin netst to a apple tree, an holotta other stuff psaaads." Startled, I suddenly had to consider that she may have read about Isaac Newton somewhere. Had I ever seen a book here? "Trees is made of wood an thoughts is made of stauries. Whin you traa to tell a aadea without a staury, olny thing happens is you don't know you're tellin a staury, an the most danjous staury of all is the one you don't know you're tellin.

"So whin you traa to tell some-un bayot Pittsburgh, an you just give 'em what you figure is facts, all atta aurder an nothing to hauld 'em dgether, sure, inny-un *could* traa to put dgether the staury behaad it. But people figure if you din't tell a staury,

you had a good reason. Maybe you realaazed you don't atchly member nir as much as you thought, and you're gonna think a little an tell the staury later. Or maybe you realaazed you was bayot to tell some secret you shoul'n't. Or maybe they jus don't know *what* to make of the scrambled-up stuff you said. But anycase, whatever it's laak in Pittsburgh, inny-un aa know will figure *if you din't tell a staury, you din't mean to tell a staury*, an they'll leave it at that."

I tried to think of something to say to that. There was too much in it; I coult'n pin down anywhere to come at it from. I'd pick it apart later. For now I just weakly said, "But ... I don't know *how* to tell stories. I mean, maybe simple ones. But anything with a lesson behind it? I have no idea how to stick it in there. If I told stories they'd be a joke."

"Aa got a feelin you know better 'n you think you do," she said. "Jus tell a staury you blieve, an the lesson is arready in it. Anycase, aa know jus when you could traas it ayot. You ain't never bin to a chestnut bonfaar yet. Well this yir's is comin up. Eryun's gonna be tellin stauries prackly all naat long. The whole cmuney'll be there; it's where people teach innything they think ought to get membered. Naya you been achin to teach us all *sumpm* bayot the city. Les hear it." It wasn't a command, exactly, since the notion of commanding someone was foreign here, but I knew I had to do it, and I got started dreading it right away. "I'll think about it," I told her. After some indecision, I added, "And thank you." And we linked fingers and I left.

I smelled the bonfire long before I saw it, sweet, leafy smoke weaving through the trees and on up to the cmuney, where I caught it in faint wisps. It was late morning before I finally followed the scent down to the broad floodplain across the Crick, where only trees, who dit'n mind a wet home, lived year-round. But today it was dry, and twigs cracked under my feet on the steep path down. As I came to the ford I could see the whole

shape of the celebration. The main bonfire burned over at the far corner of the plain, nestled in the roots of a hill that piled up behind it in soft mossy-green convolutions and towered over all of us below. It was kept fed by a rotating team of eager kids, reined in occasionally by a parent. Around its edge were six tiny fires burning in bowls, where, more ceremoniously, older kids scooped coals from the main fire in with dried bundles of something to produce the copious billows of smoke that had guided me there. Besides this crew, everyone else in the cmuney—and some people I was pretty sure I'd never seen before (visitors? from where? arrived how?)—was gathered around a scattering of smaller fires, which burned among the widely-spaced trunks of trees that occasionally showered us in leaves.

Once I got into the thick of it I lost all hope of being able to follow everything. Around the satellite fires people were cooking, exchanging gifts of woodcarvings and wool blankets, singing. I wandered, looking for something to attach to. I had come to the cmuney too late for the ramp bonfire, but I'd been there for the raspberry bonfire, which was held right next to the Crick, and where there was much splashing in the water and smearing berries in each other's faces. After dark a single big fire had been started, and everyone had enjoyed a lot of raspberry wine laid up the year before. I'd figured all the bonfires were more or less like this, excuses to let loose and get a little goofy and drunk. Now I felt lost all over again.

"Van!" Hellbinnder hollered as I wandered past the fire where he was sitting. "When's your birth moon?"

"November?" I said, wide-eyed.

"Come here!" he ordered with a sweeping arm. "Din't inny-un tell you you hafta make a crayown today?"

"A what?"

"For the yir dance!" he said, and took some leaves from his lap and shook them at me.

"The what?" Sense of foreboding. I knew what.

"Jus sit dayon hir an aa'll show you," he said, scooting over

to make room on the log. I had helped Hellbinnder move his mother's house up to steadier ground when the ground under it slumped, and then swum with him in the Crick afterwards to cool down (and again at the raspberry bonfire), but beyond that I coul'n say I really knew him. But I could've said something similar for almost anyone here. Everyone at this fire was weaving leaves together, a big pile of them next to each peop. "You can use some of maa paal, aa'm gonna hafta get maur innyhaya," Hellbinnder said, and showed me how to chain them together using the leaf stems, with little twigs woven across once every few leaves for reinforcement. "The heavier it is, the better it'll stay on, which is whaa people use sycamaurs. So weave 'em taat an strong, but it has to fit on your head whin you're done."

"But what's this for?"

"The yir dance! You was here in the summer, you seen that one."

"I saw a lot of dancing."

"The one where they jus kep *on* dancin till eryun fell over or coul'n't take it innymaur. Same aadea, but this one, you wear the crayown an you dance till it falls off. An thin you're a year older. A good crayown an some good moves, an you maat be the last one dancin."

I dit'n bother protesting that I woul't'n really be a year older until November twentieth. Happy to have something to do besides wander confused, I spent the next hour or two weaving the heaviest crown I could, and listening to the bright flow of talk. The people celebrating their year this fall ranged from Clear Water's soon-to-be-one-year-old up to Thistle Flower, who had to be at least seventy-five and sat in the Meetin. She insisted this year she'd dance not only the longest, but also the funkiest. I managed to talk a little too. I started talking about birthday parties in Pixburgh, but before I could quite understand how, I was telling the leaf-weavers about the trouble I constantly got into in elementary school, the secret code my friends and I devised to pass notes, how boring it was to sit and listen to teachers talk,

the time my friend and I climbed the University's Belltower and threw an old desk off it, and soon everyone was asking me to tell more. At which point of course I got flustered and said that was all I could think of. Once I was done weaving, now wearing my crown, I wandered from fire to fire, sometimes giving sheepish repeat performances, mostly just listening. I started feeling pretty good about my ability to tell about my life, but then I'd start trying fruitlessly to figure out how to tell The Rational Nation of Pixburgh as a story, and only snap out of it when someone at the fire spoke to me directly and I realized it had been many minutes since I'd heard anything anyone had said.

In the afternoon the small fires began to go out one by one as people left them for the main fire. Evidently something was happening there. I could hear a drum and see a school of dancing people, but as I got close the song ended and everyone shot off in different directions, like beads off a twirling necklace that breaks, exhausted, cheering. With the crowd parting, I could see the fire. Behind it Frogson was sitting next to an enormous drum, sweat flowing freely down his forehead and bare chest. Behind him, on a cluster of boulders, stood six singers. I knew all of them in passing but I'd only ever heard Coyote Yell sing. On a separate boulder with only room for him, Naat Watch sat with a dulcimer on his lap.

After a couple minutes the crowd tightened back up around the bonfire. At some point Frogson judged the moment right and gave the drum four immense whacks that reverberated off the hill.

Coyote Yell had once explained to me that life is woven together from songs. Each song strengthens life that one little bit, and if it ever happened that everyone in the world stopped singing, all the life in the world would come to a stop. Fortunately, that can never happen, because even though people are undependable, a bird is always singing somewhere. But it's still necessary to sing, because without enough songs life becomes drab and starts falling apart like old gray cinders. The whip-

poorwill sometimes sings in the night when it worries about the world. And listening to her now, I could almost believe it, when she beamed out the first line in a clear, keen voice that pierced through the crowd's murmuring and directly into my ear.

First leaf of the fall—

Her hand moved up one beat and down the next, and the other five singers, watching it, joined in—in harmony: not any kind of harmony I'd heard before, though, but craggy, torrential chords like gnarled branches.

Wander on the wind!
 A angel for this lost saul,
 With help an drections to lind.

The voices threw me backward; they swirled together with their own echoes off the bottom of the mountain to wrap me inside the song. I realized I might be hearing music made by people who believed in music for the first time.

When they finished the verse they circled back to the beginning. Now Naat Watch joined on the dulcimer, and its warm crowding notes mixed in with the voices so that the singers seemed to be twanging and the dulcimer singing. The third time around Frogson came in on the drum, and the crowd quickly began to shift. People sorted themselves into a periphery of those still catching their breath and a center where a series of even lines coalesced. Caught between the bonfire and the lines, I tried to get safely to the edge, but someone grabbed my arm and pulled me in to even up the length of their line. Then, all at once, the lines started moving. I quickly chose a neighbor to copy, and scrambled along as the lines moved back and forth against each other, then stopped so everyone could elaborately spin a few times on their own, then somehow exchanged people from line to line, and all I could do was try to keep up. The singers spun

into a different section of the song, but I coul't'n follow the words, because I was being passed to a different line. The dance never seemed to repeat itself exactly but looped through similar moves; I caught sharp, cryptic yells from someone in a different line, and wondered if these were instructions in code. Finally the flying threads of the song gathered together and all settled to the ground at once with a boom, and there was silence. Followed by an exhaling collapse of everyone in the lines. I ran clear of the crowd and fell onto the leaves. Minnow—*she* was the one who pulled me into the dance!—fell down next to me, and said, "What'cha think of *that*?" I could only smile and keep panting. By evening, I almost had the hang of it.

When the time came for the year dance the sun was easing down to the ridge of the hill. All the fall birthdays formed a circle in the center, surrounded by everyone else. I looked around apprehensively. There must have been forty or fifty of us, including Clear Water holding her crowned baby so she could dance on his behalf. Leaf Staurm, not crowned but with an air of importance that made me almost fail to recognize him, came inside the circle. He moved to the center, stopped, and looked around the circle for a moment, grinning. Everyone quieted down. Then, giving a quick look of warning, Leaf Staurm snapped to a taut position, one leg forward and both hands thrust into the air.

Naat Watch plucked a chord on the dulcimer and the peops in the outer circle nearly gave me a dizzy spell by starting in on a song I knew, but set to an utterly transformed melody, familiar but no longer repetitive and childlike, now driving, soaring somehow on the wings of twisting minor intervals:

Happy netst yir to you!
 Happy netst yir to you!
 Happy netst yir, our dir ones!
 Happy netst yir to you!

As soon as they began, Leaf Staurm started dancing in the

center, and I understood quickly that all of us had to do our best to copy him. Naat Watch twanged slowly and I found, to my surprise, that I dit'n have too much trouble keeping up. Once he judged us warmed up, Leaf Staurm began bowing his head deeply or throwing it back every few beats. Naat Watch gradually sped up the song.

Then Leaf Staurm quit playing it easy. He was over twice my age but I discovered he had the quick grace and casual disregard for gravity of a nuthatch. Within the space of two repetitions of the song I went from calmly following along to barely keeping up. The circle expanded and contracted as he moved backward and forward on a precise line. People dropped out rapidly and the circle became tattered. It dit'n take long before an especially thorough shrugging-swirling motion made my crown slip onto the side of my head, and although I lasted a little bit longer by keeping my head sideways and trying to hook it over my ear, it finally came off, and I stepped back, one whole year older. Thistle Flower outlasted me and I must say she did have funk. The dance came down to a fierce duel, which Hellbinnder lost when Circles managed to actually turn a somersault and keep her crown on. Lookayot confirmed there were no pins or clips involved, and declared her, beaming, the winner. It was a topic of talk for quite some time.

A few mothers and fathers left to tuck the sleepest kids into bed, but most people started finding spots around the main bonfire, with a few mutters of, "Well, we gonna have some stauries thin?" I coul'tn see how everyone was gonna fit, but (from nowhere, it seemed) people pulled out stumps and logs and made several concentric arcs around the flat parts of the fire's perimeter, and anyone who could climbed up onto the toes of the hill where it surrounded the fire. I claimed a mossy spot a little below the boulders where the singers had stood. When all was said and done there was practically nowhere to step without stepping on

someone. It was a good thing the little kids were in charge of feeding the fire, because the aisle kept clear from the fire to the woodpile was barely wide enough for them to scamper through. I hoped I woul'tn have to get up to pee.

Once everyone had settled in and the general shuffling died down, someone whispered something to one of the kids, and instantly all of them ran out down the aisle and came back carrying big woven baskets. They set these down at the edges of the fire and grabbed out handfuls of some kind of packages. Once they had as many as they could carry, they turned and somehow started picking and weaving their way into the crowd, handing them out. They went back and forth for armload after armload and worked their way through to the outermost circles. "Here you go," whispered Breeze when she got to me, and pressed a warm cloth-wrapped little bundle into my hands with her tiny ones, smiled, and disappeared behind me. My neighbors were all untying theirs, so I undid the string and the square of cloth fell open in my lap. Chestnuts! Hefty little things, giving off a steamy, sugary smell, with deep brown shells, peeling back from a scored X to show the yellow tan of the nut inside. I peeled one open with my fingernails, rubbed off the papery skin like everyone else was doing, and popped it into my mouth. Sweet, warm, rich, smoky: they tasted like fall in a way I dit'n even realize something could taste like a season. It was my first ever. I ate them one after another while they were still warm. The sun slipped behind the hill, and the fire became the only visible thing in the deepening shadows of the forest, casting its orange-red light on rows of content faces all popping chestnuts into mouths and whispering to each other.

One by one we all finished our chestnuts and the whispering died down. Then nothing seemed to happen. There was an inaudible new buzz of excitement, but still everyone just sat there silent, looking at the fire and around at each other.

Finally Strong Wood spoke up, across the fire from me: "Aa got a staury." Dozens of heads swiveled to look at her.

“Aa’ll tell it like my grampa tauld me. It happened a long taam ago, pfaur there was a cmuney here at all. It happened sayoth of hir in the haaer mayontains, the mayontains called the Blue Mayontains. It’s the staury of Chestnut Woman.” And she went on to tell about Kylie Grossmueller.

The way I learned it, Grossmueller was born in 2011 in what was then the state of Virginia, at a time when wild chestnuts had been gone from the continent’s forests for nearly a century because of a blight. After getting a degree in ecology she decided to champion the effort to reforest the tree across its whole native range, using resistant varieties that were just becoming widely available after a decades-long breeding program, and her efforts at promoting the project are seen as crucial in reestablishing the tree.

The way Strong Wood told it, Chestnut Woman was born in a drafty wood-heated frame house, quiet and with her eyes open, and learned to climb trees before she learned to walk. As she grew up she could feel that something was missing from the world, something that would soon be very important, and finally learned what it was when her grandmother told her about *her* grandmother, who would always go out, as a girl, with a big basket to collect chestnuts, and one day came back with not just a full basket but also the boy she would later marry. Chestnut Woman quickly found a fellowship that had been healing the sick spirit of the tree, and after spending years learning from them, she went traveling, carrying thousands of nuts, planting them everywhere they asked to be planted. She often cut down other trees to give them space and got thrown out of place after place for her troubles by people who said those trees were theirs. So she made friends with the wind and hid inside it, appearing like a ghost and disappearing just as silently, and traveled up and down the mountains from the hot Green Mountains in the south to the cold White Mountains in the north, and by the time she was an old woman anyone anywhere in the mountains could walk to a chestnut on a fall morning and come back with nuts

by lunchtime.

With that, a door opened wide, and stories flowed through. I could have spent the whole time trying to figure out how to tell my story, but as I came to understand how this night would work, I realized it was a golden opportunity to finally piece together the different fragments I'd heard of the cmuney's world-view into something I could write a paper on when I got home.

The next story came from tough, sweet old Hackberry, who simply told the old fable of the ant and the grasshopper. I hat'n expected to recognize anything tonight, but when he got a little ways in, with a slight startle I remembered seeing it in a textbook's chapter on the ancient Greeks. Other stories later sounded very vaguely familiar, old fairy tales maybe, but it ended up the only one I positively recognized all night. After each story, there was a rustle of muffled cheers, then silence. Sometimes a lot of silence.

"Aa got a staury," said Patience, and told about two cousins whose grampa told them that when they took a certain trail over the hill in the evening, they always had to knock on wood as they came to the top to keep away coyotes. One boy always knocked, while the other told him that was just old silliness. Then one day the second boy walked alone, dit'n knock, and sure enough got attacked by coyotes and eaten up. That seemed pretty straightforward. Patience had raised five children of her own, and deserved much of the credit for the kids in the houses nearest hers, and was now on her first grandchildren, so she had plenty of reason to be concerned that kids should listen to their elders. But then Haa Wind, who'd been one of the most rambunctious kids she helped raise, until he became a rambunctious young adult, piped up, "Aa got a staury. This is the staury of the raccoon famly"—to which Patience said, "Oh, *good!*" He told about a family of raccoons living in a hollow log on the ground, who hide there from a fire, a hunting party, and a hailstorm. Then a big rain comes and the youngest raccoon gets scared and says they should move out of the log into a tree—and all the older

raccoons tell him the log has always protected them and they'll be just fine. But still he climbs up a big tall maple, and then a flood comes and carries that old log away never to be seen again. Which seemed to directly contradict Patience's story, but apparently she'd been itching for him tell it.

Around this time I stopped trying to fit them all together in real time and worked on remembering them for later, and for now just enjoying them. At one point the priest called out, "Aa got a staury"—and when I heard his high thin voice I realized it was the first time I'd ever heard him speak. The voice sounded a little rusty from disuse and I expected hoarse, dire portents. But he told a story, a long wandering tale that seemed to have four or five barely-related plots, and drifted freely between the forest and the sky, and when it eventually ended left loose ends lying all over the place in two or three realms. I coul't'n make sense of any of it except maybe the hunter who, because an angel tells him to, leaves the antlers of every buck he kills lying there in the forest, even though his cmuney ridicules him for it, and soon ends up the only one who can find any deer at all, until they follow his lead and regain their luck. Everything about the stars and the talking mulberries and the rest was lost on me. The silence after the priest's story felt deep and contemplative and lasted a long time.

Not everyone in the circle had a story, but sometimes it seemed like it. I kept trying to work up the nerve to tell mine, but then I'd wait too long and someone else would say, "Aa got a staury," and I'd listen again instead. Some spun into long ramifying webs of stories within stories, some were done in a moment. The night darkened; the air chilled down. I wished I had more warm chestnuts.

The moon came up from behind the hill and as it coursed across the sky, now jet black with stars caught in the high branches overhead, the pace slackened. Finally there was a long pause while everyone stared quietly into the bright coals and slowly crackling wood. I looked around for somebody else to start be-

fore me, or to confirm it was definitely time for me to go. The pause drew on.

"I've got a story," I said.

Immediately the silence seemed to intensify. The darkness seemed to darken. Over a hundred faces turned to look at mine. *Can I say "Just kidding"?* I cleared my throat.

"Once there was a man named August Quorrensley."

"Why was he called August ... Corns ... Lee?" asked Just Enough, who must've been about five. "Mom, what's 'lee'?"

"Shhh," his mom said, "don't talk in on a stauryteller."

"He just was," I offered anyhow. "It doesn't mean anything."

"He was born over a hundred years ago, during what we call the Long Strifes. That was a long time where there were no leaders, no one to make decisions when peops disagreed. A lot of peops *wanted* to be leaders, and they would fight and fight to take control of different little places all over the land, maybe a city, maybe a few towns and some farms. But no one could manage to stay in charge of any one place for more than a few years at a time.

"So things fell apart. The old roads—the aulroads—crumbled into dirt because no one would agree to fix them, and the buildings fell down, and there were a lot of people who went hungry because places that food used to get brung to, no one could bring it anymore." I felt boring. I looked around. No one was telling me to stop.

"Now August Quorrensley was a leader of a militia, a bunch of people with guns, and he worked for someone who was ruling Pixburgh and doing okay at it, a man named Carl Woodstock. But August Quorrensley dit'n like Carl Woodstock's way of ruling, just telling people what to do because you have more guns. Quorrensley got news from all around, and he knew that everyone who rules that way, sooner or later there's someone who finds them while they're asleep, and now *that* peop has all the guns.

"Quorrensley was a military leader, but he also loved to learn

about history. So he looked at what there was to learn from books about the old Union. That was a country that stretched from here clear to Pixburgh and ten times further too, but a *long* long time ago, before the Strifes. But when it was around, it *stayed* around, for nearly three hundred years—and most of the rulers Quorrensley knew of were lucky to get past three. He wanted to figure out what the Union did right.

“And the thing that kept sticking out to him from the history books was that they built the whole country starting from *reason* and *truth*. The people who started the Union grew up seeing a lot of ways people lie to stay in power, or use guns to stay in power, and they dit’n want any of that to happen their time around. So they made some rules to start out with. And the biggest one was that to decide who ruled—whether it was who ruled the whole country or just who was in charge of deciding where to build roads—everyone got to vote on it. That way instead of the top ruler just picking his best friends to be in charge of the little things, and always picking himself to be in charge of the whole shebang, everyone in the country could decide who *they* thought would be best. Which made it so they actually got people who knew what they were doing and wanted to do a good job, not just get more power for themselves.

“And it worked—mostly. But then it fell apart, and it was because lies got back in. People who wanted power would lie to everyone, before the vote, about how good they were for some job, and then when they got the job they’d change rules to make it easier for their friends to lie and get in too. And then they would *all* lie about how good a job they were doing, and by the end, well, it was just a big pile of lies one on top of another, and the floor gave out underneath it all.

“Well, that was the old Union. So, now August Quorrensley got an idea. He said to his boss Carl Woodstock, ‘How about instead of building that next big stockpile of guns you were thinking of, we build ourselves a school instead, a University, a place where people can go to learn reason and truth?’ And

he said they could build a whole new kind of country, where all the rules were set up to keep lies from getting in, and make sure everything was done in the rightest way possible, and he explained his whole big idea to Carl Woodstock.

"Well Carl Woodstock looked at August Quorrensley kind of side-eyed, and said, 'I'm really not so sure it'll work, but you're a smart man and a good man and I trust you.' So they built the University and they used it to set up the government. This is how it works. Everything about the country is decided by a Council, which is just like the Meetin here. On that Council are peeps who are experts on every different aspect of running the country—farming, transportation, building, you name it. And that's exactly what the University is set up to teach.

"Carl Woodstock picked the first Council by hand, and put August Quorrensley in charge of rule-making. And August Quorrensley made a rule for everyone on the Council that when they stepped down, they had to choose the next peep for the job themselves, and pick the most qualified peep who'd learned at the University. The beautiful thing about it was, that made it so *no one could lie* to get on the Council. The way you tried to get on the Council was by writing papers and books to *prove* you'd be good on the Council, and they made sure no one faked that. And anyone could have a shot at getting on the Council, because the University was free for everyone. They dit'n have to be rich or charming or have a lot of guns, they just had to be the best for the job. Even if they were a little less than the best, they could get a job helping out the best, or doing other work they were good at. It was fair for everyone.

"Well all of that happened seventy-six years ago, and August Quorrensley is long dead, but the Council is still working just like new. Pixburgh is the first Rationally Governed nation ever created, and no one knew if it would work, but it's only gotten better and better over the years.

"And here's what's exciting. Pixburgh's Council has been talking for a long time with the leadership of another city nearby,

Cleveland, and encouraging them to try Rational Governance too. Well last year Cleveland finally did it—they reorganized as a Rational City—and now the two cities are friends, and to celebrate the friendship they’ve sent people out to their neighbors on all sides, the little towns and the places way out in the woods, because they want to turn the two-city friendship into a whole Rationally Governed country. And that’s why I’m here: to ask if you want to join too.

“Not much would change. You’d get more visitors from the city with things to trade, and we’d send experts here to help you make your lives easier and more comfortable, and you’d all be free to study at the University anytime—and all we’d ax in return is that if anyone axes, you tell them you’re part of the Rational Cities Federation.” I felt suddenly very pushy and stopped. “And that’s all.”

I wasn’t expecting applause, but the silence still threw me off. Climbervine, sitting next to me, clapped his hand onto my back and whispered, “Hey, you did it.” Well, damn right I *did*. I told a story, start to finish, and I was pretty sure I believed everything I said, too. Some kind of stove damper inside me opened and some old dim coals caught tentative fire.

Peops stared at the fire. I coul’t’n gauge any reactions. After a while I got scared that I’d told the last story, that everyone had been counting on me for a grand finale about life in the exotic city, and I’d ended the whole bonfire with a big fizzle full of stuff from half-remembered history textbooks. Then I heard Listens Through’s voice: “Aa got a staury.”

Even the crickets and frogs seemed to fall silent. I gathered that Listens Through was regarded as a good storyteller.

“It happened thin, in the taam whin people lived asleep even whin they was awake. That was the taam they called the Merican Dream. It happened not far from hir, dayon this Crick to the big river an up the secont crick further on, at the place called Haa Cliffs. That’s where Dulcimer was baur’n.

“The Dream was a taam whin nothing was real. It was dark

taams thin an hard ones, cause that was the taam whin a devil was in charge of the whole entaar world. Not jus raat hir in these hills, or even all the way to the oceans. This devil rulled over damnear ery man, woman, an chaald on the face of the Earth: and you can't even imagine haya minny people that was back thin.

"An what that mint was, was they all had to do jus what the devil said, all the taam. An: they couln't go sneakin off to the faurest smwhere to get away from it, neither, cause the place the devil lived wasn't in a big castle yellin aurders at them.

"It lived in their *sauls*.

"An that's whaa the whole world was burnin.

"The way it happened was this. Away back pfaur Dulcimer was baurn an inny of this happened, there was a staury, one atta hundreds an thayosands there was back thin. Now you know aa hope that there's angels in erything, from the tallest mayontain, dayon to you, dayon to the dirt. An ery staury is a angel is a staury is a angel. But ery *once* in a whaal, you get a staury that goes devil.

"This one started out humble as you please. All it said was: 'If you work hard an get maur for yself, you can be happier 'n them who doesn't.' That's a quick way to tell it. Aa think Hackberry did a wonderful job earlier tellin it naacer.

"But this staury one day got the aadea that it would be the king of all the stauries. An that's the day it wint devil. It sat there an it thought and thought bayot haya to be the king. It knewed if it just wint along bein the same staury it'd alwas bin, it would live a quaaet laaf, a good long one cause it was a useful staury, but it'd never *rull* over nothing.

"Then faanly a clever aadea came to it. It would make itself *littler*. Naya you know most stauries grow whin you tell 'em. Ast anyone who knows a hunter. But this devil figured ayot it could go the other way.

"So pfaur you knew it, the staury wint: 'If you work hard and get maur, you can be happier.' An no one even noticed the

change. Cause it sayonds amost the same, don't it? But now they wasn't just traain to be happier 'n the person who doesn't work. They was traain to be happier than their own selves. An what happens when you traa to do that?

"But that devil wasn't satisfaaed yet, not baa a long shot, an after a whaal, whin it figured it was safe an they was used to it, it did it agin. It took out the work part, so now it was jus, 'If you get maur you'll be happier.' An agin no one noticed xcept they started stealin from each other an from the Earth. Pretty soon the *-er* part too: 'If you get maur you'll be happy.' An thim who was already happy forgot they was, an joened in on the stealin.

"But that devil, it still din't have *eryun*. So it worked itself up an worked itself up an faanly made itself the smallest it could possibly be: jus, 'Maur.'

"An that did it. It was so small naya it could worm up into *eryun's* sauls. An what did it do wunst it got in there but *swallaed all their other stauries up*. An naya eryun in the world, amost innyhaya, was ayot after *maur*, maur this, maur that, and couldn't even member whaa, but they din't have no other stauries, so that was all they did.

"An the weirdest thing was, this was a taam whin the world had so minny stauries, stauries on top of stauries, maur 'n you could listen to in tin laaftaams! This was a taam whin people would come clir acrost from the other saad of the world to tell a staury hadn't bin tauld pfaur, an eryun would listen. There was people, maur people even than you ever seen, who the only thing they did all day long was sit an think of stauries an how to tell 'em. But did it do innyun inny good? Not hardly! The devil Maur wasn't scared of all the stauries; it just swallaed each one up as it came into you, an said to you, 'Yep, that's a good staury bayot haya to get *maur*,' or if that wouln't work, then, 'Well there's a naace thing to do whin you're takin a little break from gettin *maur*,' or sntimes, 'Naya that's what happens whin you let other people get *maur*.' You could ast some-un, 'Do you know inny stauries?' an they'd say, 'You bet aa do!' an tell you

the most marvlous shaanin heart-twistin stauries you ever heard all naat long an till the hills wear dayon. An then netst maurnin they'd get up an go raat back to gettin *maur*, an you'd see they din't blieve a word of what they jus tauld you.

"It coulda happened with inny staury. Inny one coulda wint devil an shrank itself dayon laak that. Maybe only Maur could do it the whole world acrost, but there ain't no way of knowin. That's jus haya it happened.

"Well naya Dulcimer, she was baurn nir hir, laak aa said. An she was a *uncommon* chaald. In those days whin eryun was livin the Dream, she had aaes open waad laak a little gardner snake, an she was bayot the olny woke-up person innywhere rayond. An wunst she started walkin and talkin, what that started to mean was, was she was untameable. She was laak a dir: alwas ayot runnin rayond in the woods. She'd come to the hayoss for meals, but she'd jus take the plate full of food an run raat back ayot into the woods with it, an if her mom an dad was lucky she'd bring the plate back next meal an maybe say thanks an give 'em a hug. They traaed to go ayot walkin with her sntaams but they would stay on the trail an her feet never set a step on a trail unlest to cross it.

"But waald as she was, you traas to put one over on her, tell her you got her nose or you could pull off your finger, she just looked at you like you was dumber 'n a bowl full of mud, till you got embarrassed an wint to talk to some-un maur your speed. When she was faave a money man come—money, that's a dark spirit-work disconnects what's connected—come to traas to trick the famly into givin up their hayoss to get atta a little trouble he'd put them in. Whin her mom an dad was bayot ready to say okay, Dulcimer come in the room, never seen the man pfaur, an walked raat up to him said, 'You're a laaer,' an he got bent atta shape enough, that was all her mom an dad needed to see, an they kicked him ayot. You could say people trusted her. Whin they could faand her.

"The one thing could bring her atta the woods an even make

her sit still was stauries. At first her famly they read to her atta books, an tauld auld stauries they knewed. After each one she'd stand up, an even if it was paurin rain go ayotside to let it settle in.

"Pretty soon she got taared of the stauries her parents knewed an started appirrin atta the woods at the neighbors' hayosses an astin to hear all their stauries. An readin stauries too, wunst she got the hang of that, ones from thayosands of yirs ago an ones from aalands no one's never heard of an ones told baa crazy people, crazier the better. An alwas after each one she'd go ayotsaad an mull over it. Some says she talked it over with the trees an animals, others says with the angels. Aa say same diffrence, but innyhaya.

"Well. Dulcimer could see she wasn't never gonna get that 'maur,' but she never wanted it innyways. The devil Maur gave up on her pfaur she could even talk. But she din't give up watchin *it*. She kep an aae on it workin, leadin on eryun she knewed, makin 'em burn dayon the world. Holotta naats she craaed bayot it. But it was a strong devil, an she was little, an she couln't think of nothing she could do, psaad craa. She got far enough to tell herself: 'This is what happens when we have olny one staury. The world goes crooket. *Maur* coulda bin a good staury if we had diffrent stauries too. But instead eryun's alwas an alwas takin, an no-un givin, not givin the world taam naur attention naur n'even pissin on it.' But, she thought, if people could know stauries withayot atchly knowin 'em, haya could *she* could hope to make 'em *really* know the stauries an blieve what they was sayin theirselves—which would be the way to kill the devil?

"Naya Dulcimer, she had a brother, called Chase. He wasn't nothin laak her, he was as Dreamin as they come, but he had a good heart an she loved him. He was older 'n her, and whin she was still young he was all grown up and startin to feel the pull of that devil. So she had to watch him start chasin after maur, maur of all the things people had back in those days, all the diffrent black smoke machines an a big square hayoss all his

own. It bayot killed her, but she couln't live his life for him. Long as he kep gettin maur, tho, he was happy.

"An then one day he din't. In the space of one moon the money people come in the naat an took away all his machines, one baa one, an faanly his hayoss, an he had to come back live with the famly. He still had food, but he was scairt, cause the same thing happened to half his frinds that same yir, an the other half it was comin to 'em. Chase he suddenly realaazed maybe he wasn't *never* gonna get maur, and neither wasn't nobody, cause it was plain to see now there wasn't no *maur* left to get. An jus laak that, the devil Maur popped like a bubble atta his saul.

"Good, raat? But naya suddenly he din't have no stauries at all.

"Well what do you think? A person with no stauries is laak a turtle with no shell, and that was how Chase felt, cauld, naked, and scairt. Dulcimer din't know what to do. She traaed to help him. She traaed to tell him things he could do, she traaed to give him hope an pull him atta the fir, but none of it wasn't no use, he couln't believe none of it, an she felt him slow fadin away. An one day he jus gave her a sad smaal an disappirred ayot into the fog an never come back. She ran ayot lookin for him but she was too late. She come home when she knewed he was gone an she din't eat for tin days, naur talk to no-un, an it rained the whole taam.

"An thin whaal she was wastin away givin up, she faanly made herself go ayotsaad, an raat as she got into the woods the sun come ayot, an suddenly she knewed what she could do. She couln't help her brother, but she could help other people's brothers an sisters an sons an daughters. Chase faded away cause he had no stauries. He daaed of the fir of it. An she knewed there was people all rayond her—all over her town, all over the may-ontains, all over the world—daain of the same fir. But none of them knewed that was what was killin 'em. They just thought the world was crull an on faar. If they'da knowen, well, that woulda bin a staury they coulda used to stay alaave.

“She seen now she din’t hafta kill that devil, cause even when a devil wins, it loses. The Earth jus won’t have it in the ind. The world goes crooket, but it’s like eryun sittin on one caurner of a raft—it won’t stay crooket for long. It’ll dump eryun off an start fresh. An the devil drownds, but thin so does eryun it took along with it. Her job wasn’t to kill the devil, is what she figured ayot, it was to rescue the ones who fell overbaurd. Once they was free, they could hir.

“She started with her own tayon, the netst day (after she ate bayot faur dinners an seven breakfasts). All those yirs of listenin had gave her a second saat. So she wint ayot to all the places where scairt people go, the quaaet places an the dark places, an she jus tauld each of ‘em, ‘Come to maa hayoss on the full moon.’ Simple as that. But whin she said it—well, they din’t know what was gonna happen there on the full moon, but the way she shaaned, laak the moon herself, people had alwas trusted her, but now they trusted her more than they’d ever trusted innynthing, even theirselves, xpecially theirselves.

“An on the full moon whin they showed up, all of ‘em a little shiverin, a little see-through in the skin, a little aaes-bugged-out, she had built a faar, jus laak this one, with sweet smoke comin off it an places for you can’t even cayont haya minny people to sit. An wunst eryun was sittin there an quaaet an wonderin what was gonna come netst, she jus said:

“‘Les tell some stauries.’

“Now eryun there thought they din’t know none at all, an that’s what she was xpectin, so she tauld the first one. An she tauld the staury of the devil Maur, laak I jus told you, an she ended the staury so it come raat there to that faar, an they seen they’d bin insaad the staury the whole taam.

“An thin you wouldn’t blieve haya the stauries flowed. Cause eryun there seen they had maur stauries than they ever knewed an they din’t all disappir whin Maur did, they jus thought they did, cause they couldn’t reconize them for stauries withayot that auld devil to xplain them. An ery single person there tauld a

staury, some of 'em two or three, an as they tauld it they heard it theirselves for the first taam, an baa the taam they finished the stars was all fadin away an the sun comin up. An they did it agin, the netst moon, an diffrent people come. An the netst moon after that, an each taam the people got stronger, an soon the people rayond those faars quit hangin out in the dark places an the daain tayons, an wint off into the hills an started a new cmuney of their own. It was a cmuney where the one gaad star was to alwas keep a good garden of stauries—pass on all the ones, auld an new, that ask to be passed—so eryun could blieve as minny diffrent things as they needed to inorrda really live. An that cmuney gave birth to another one, an that 'n to another, an soon the hills was full of 'em. An that's how me an all you come to be raat hir.

“An that's all.”

That was the last story of the night; how could it not be? The next afternoon, having slept not a moment nor gotten a rest all day from the whizzing circles my mind was turning, I came to Listens Through's door, and she invited me in. “Jus the person aa wanted to talk to,” she said.

“Aa guess you know the Meetin met this maurnin,” she elaborated once I'd sat at her table and accepted a cup of tea, hoping it was a relaxing kind. I blinked. Yes, it was the day after the full, I supposed. “We desaadad not to joen the Rational Cities Federation. Aa guess you can probly understand whaa?”

I looked at her, thrown off. At length: “Yes, I understand. But that's not what I came to ax you about.”

Her eyes widened with curiosity. “Oh?”

“I came to ax about staying here permanently.”

And woul'tn you know it, the city with no stories (as the city with only one story was pleased to imagine itself) finally did tip off its raft; when I walked back the next spring to visit my parents and explain things to them and to the Subcouncil, I found the

Subcouncil disbanded, the whole RGC hanging onto control by the ends of their fingernails, the streets full of peops demanding the end of University control over everything (to the exclusion of those deemed less rational and less correct), and my parents holed up in our house wide-eyed and shellless. In retrospect the signs were embarrassingly obvious, down to the last-gasp attempt to reverse public opinion through headlines of a shiny new alliance (with a pliable neighbor). At the Council Hall I saw a group of peops my age trading a megaphone among them to cheers from a crowd. When they left the stage and the crowd went home I found them and suggested we have a bonfire, because I knew a story they'd find interesting. Their eyes shone. It might be only the second story they'd ever heard.

Sometimes I stay in Pixburgh, and sometimes here in the cmuney. Some peops there still call me Van, but after twenty years most peops have gotten used to calling me Walks Far. I walk that road one way or the other two or three times a year anymore, and I can do it without a mule now. I'm not a leader of the changes there and often I can barely even follow it all, but I try to be there to listen and speak during anything important, as I judge it—and back here to plant my garden, which is always important. But whatever happens there, I never miss being here in the fall to tell my stories and hear all of yours around this fire.

Chuck Masterson is the long-standing pseudonym of Nathanael Bonnell, editor of New Maps. This story originally appeared in Into the Ruins No. 12.