

The Spirit Trail

The boy watched the old woman's narrow chest. The intervals between her breaths had lengthened, stretching out until they were fewer than the fingers on his hand. She was going Otang — taking the last walk to eternity. That was what the word meant. But was it really walking? Not precisely. It was more that the others walked *away* from the elderly one. Haru had declared her intentions when the people were loading their sledges with their few belongings — hides, baskets, pots, stone implements — to move on to better country.

“I go now on the road to the spirit camps,” Haru had announced. “I thank you for the privilege of living with you.” The people murmured and commented on her dignity. She shot Tijo a harsh glance. The meaning was clear: *Don't follow*

me! However, she knew it was futile. The boy would follow her to the place she had chosen to die.

When their band left, the boy made a show of leaving as well. But soon, Haru picked up the curious beat of his footsteps; the syncopated rhythm of his lame walk always betrayed him.

When he found her, she was sitting cross-legged with her pipe clamped between her remaining teeth. She began making gestures with her hands, signing but not speaking. Her palsied hands shook, making the signs blurry, but Tijo understood them.

These are the rules: You do not speak. You do not bring me food. No water. You do not make me warm by lying next to me, or bringing me your star blanket. I wove that blanket for you. Not me. If the mountain lion comes, you run and let him eat me. Her hands stopped midair and trembled. And you never say my name or I shall fall off the spirit trail and never reach the spirit camps.

Tijo nodded solemnly, filled with an odd mixture of feelings. He was sad that she was leaving, but he was grateful that he could be here with her. Haru would not die alone.

He had almost died alone shortly after his birth eleven years before. His crooked leg had condemned him. His mother had died in childbirth, three weeks after his father was killed by a mountain lion. Normally, malformed babies were abandoned, but Haru had saved him. She was powerful within her band. She had been an excellent tracker in her day and knew the stars.

Not only could Haru read the tracks of animals and follow the transit of the stars, she was also known as a smeller of weather. She could smell clouds even before they appeared on the horizon. She was as important in the band as the healer, and many thought her remedies were better than his. Perhaps that was why he'd decided to kill her.

Now as she teetered on the brink between life and death, Haru felt relieved that she had made Tijo promise not to interfere with her passage, a passage that she was sure had been hastened by the healer, for she had felt a numbness in her fingers in the days after the corn silk ceremony. The silk from the corn was put into a fermented brew, and she sensed that her cup had been tainted. Most likely the healer had rubbed her cup with the powder of liverbleed leaves, an almost untraceable poison. The healer was cunning, cunning as a coyote. He could not risk poisoning the brew, for then everyone would die. Though he would hardly have mourned if Tijo had drunk from that pot. Tijo was lame but he was intelligent, and if there was anything the healer feared, it was intelligence. But she would not curse the healer. She would not die with a curse on her lips. If she did, she would be doomed to be a spirit walker and never find the way to the camps of Otang. Nor would she be able to find a spirit lodge on earth, a shelter in the body of a living creature — except of course for the crows, or the vultures. The carrion eaters. She would rather take lodge in a coyote than a carrion eater.

She could feel the boy next to her. She thought she could almost hear his tears rolling down his cheeks. *Don't cry*, she wanted to say. *I am off to a good place.*



Haru had not abandoned him to die alone and Tijo would not abandon her. He dared not even think her name, lest he cause her to fall off the spirit trail.

He looked over at Haru. Would she feel lonely if he were not here? Though he knew it was not so much *her* loneliness he was concerned about but the immutable solitude that death would leave for him, the vacant space that had been Haru in this world.

What would happen to him? He had never been accepted by the members of Haru's clan, the Burnt River People. His twisted leg had forced Haru to hide him for the first month of his life. By the end of one month, a baby was deemed too old to be cast out. But even after the Burnt River People had discovered Haru's secret, Tijo and Haru had lived mostly apart from the clan. He was still shunned, but the people were too dependent on Haru for her knowledge of medicine to totally ignore them.

They looked at him, but never directly into his eyes. If Tijo returned, there would be no one to share a cooking fire with, no one whose breath he would hear through the night as he

slept. No one to speak with, no one to learn from, no one to sing with as they scraped the hides for their clothing and blankets.

Tijo would follow the rules, but he would not leave her. Haru would not fall off the spirit trail, and if she did, he would be there to catch her. He might be lame, his one leg crooked and shorter than the other, but he was strong. How heavy could she be? Not much more than the weight of a newborn lamb. He looked over at Haru. Her chest had not risen in a long time. He crept closer. He could not remember when she had taken her last breath, but suddenly she took another. The sound of the air passing through her windpipe was jagged. Her nose twitched. *Does she smell a storm coming?* Tijo wondered.



The smell . . . the smell . . . so different. Goodness, this spirit trail is interesting, Haru thought. There was an animal odor unlike any she had ever known. Not fur but hair. Not human but definitely animal. Heavy of bone, large, very large. Larger than a dog. She felt a flutter of excitement. *So many things on the trail to eternity . . . so many interesting things.* A slight shiver passed through her, as if she were shedding her own pelt. It was a lovely feeling. She was so light. She looked back and saw her body, but it was no more important to her than a discarded blanket, or an animal's pelt she had scraped to make a pair of

buckskin trousers for Tijo. She wouldn't need it anymore. She saw Tijo bending over her, weeping. She wanted to reach out and touch that thatch of shiny black hair. *Don't cry. Don't worry.* She wanted to return and soothe him. But there was no going back on the trail of Otang.

If Haru had turned back, she might have been tempted to keep going, for in the immensity of this star-powdered night, Tijo seemed like the tiniest speck of matter in the universe. He looked smaller, more vulnerable than when she had first found him abandoned on the trail side. But she did not turn back. She kept walking toward a pale and inviting light while the shadows of the night gathered in the darkening forest. A vast silence enveloped the small hunched figure as he drew the blanket closer, the blanket that Haru had woven for him in the first month of his life. But there was no Haru, no warmth, only nothingness and the nagging question in Tijo's mind: *What will happen to me?*