

Honoured Among Lumpies

The people in the next village are Neanderthals. That's what my dad calls them anyway. He says I should stay away from them, and not play with them. But Grub's my best friend. We're blood sisters, we've already decided we're not going to let anything come between us. Unless it's our Hunter, he's got a crush on her. If dad knew that he'd go hare. I smuggle him out with me sometimes. He's older than me and yards taller, but you know what boys are like. He hasn't the least gumption. But we're good mates, and Grub doesn't mind me bringing him. In fact she's gone a bit daft about him lately. If you ask me she can't believe her luck. I shouldn't say that, I love her to bits, but she's not exactly eye fodder. I haven't worked out whether he's seen through to the adorable person within, or whether it's just her big tits. Well they say boys go on looks. He's a bit of a stunner, our Hunter, the girls in our village dote on him. I half fancy him myself. But at the moment, nothing can wean him from mooning over Grub.

Smudge hates Grub, or pretends to, like kid brothers do. But she looks after him anyway. He's a motherless half-brother actually. She's ever so good with him, I think she's just cut out for mothering. Me I'm not into that sort of thing, my mum says I'm a tomboy. When me and Grub used to play hut, I was always dad. Well one of us had to be! We've grown out of that, well I have, we're a whole village now. I climb trees and throw stones and jump over streams. When Hunter comes with us he's our chief, and flies over the stream like a deer. And Smudge falls head-first in the mud! Later Grub washes him down, he struggles and curses, and Hunter watches her with that funny look in his eye.

They're all ugly, Grub's people, squarish jaws and gloomy brows. Thick-set and short and clumsy, and walk like apes. My dad says they *are* apes, and just as stupid. They're not stupid though, at least Grub isn't, she's cleverer than me, inside, in her thoughts. But she *is* a bit clumsy and takes longer doing things. It's partly because she's short-sighted. She says all her relatives are as well. But talk about ugly, some of them can scare bears. Grub's nothing like as bad as most of her folk, I bet she's pretty by their standards. Though if she was one of us her name would be Toad.

Of course what makes my dad hate them is how they hunt. He says they don't have respect, they'll just kill anything and eat it, without speaking to it and without dancing. It's true they eat things we don't like. Grub will happily eat a rat, or would till she realised it made me feel sick to see her. But they kill sacred animals as well, not as sacrifices but anytime they're hungry, in fact they don't make sacrifices at all. It makes my dad really angry at them. But all villages

have different ways, even I know that. I think if you can get on with them that's what matters.

Not that they're nice to get on with. Even the women, they'll clout you round the ear sooner than spit on you. Grub's mum doesn't tell her off, she just grunts and thumps her one. I've seen her knock her clean across the hut. No wonder the lads grow up fighting. And once they're men and fed up of fighting each other, they sit around plotting which village to beat the ploopy-plops out of next. They don't often attack our village, because they're scared of our dogs. Or at least they know the dogs will sniff them and wake us up. The Neanderthals are strong and vicious, as well as smelly, but unless we're jumped on by surprise our menfolk are better in the fight.

Grown ups are terrible at that anyway, getting on with each other. Most of them don't make the effort. Kids from both villages play in nobody's pastureland, as they call it, and down along the stream. But if grown ups from the different villages see each other they keep their distance. None of *their* kids, not even Grub, dare come to our village. They're told all sorts of horrid things that'll happen to them. I go to theirs, nobody takes much notice, but it's only as long as I'm a kid. The last grown woman from our village who went there, she just wanted to swap some baskets, they raped her.

Two men did it, right in the middle of the village, with women and kids looking on. She'd often gone there to play, in fact it was her I first went with. But because they knew she'd become a woman they raped her, and hurt her ever so. She crawled out of the village down towards the swamp, crying her heart out and sore. When me and Grub found her I ran for help, faster than I'd ever ran. I thought she'd die if I didn't fetch someone to heal her. And Grub washed the grit and blood off her and held her hand. It made me angry against them for once. Not just for raping her, but at the women for standing there and doing nothing. I can't understand it.

A bunch of our men including my dad did a strong dance and howled a lot, then went and killed one of the men. I felt glad they did, at the time, but Grub says it'll only lead to more trouble. Though she agrees they shouldn't rape you. Woman Who Makes Baskets was only wanting to be friendly and do a bit of trade. Neanderthals don't trade, apparently, Grub says they either make what they've got, or take it. Which explains why they've got so little, or why it's rubbish. They're dreadful at making things, being so clumsy and short-sighted and irritable.

Baskets was sore for ages, but she's better now and she's having a baby. Some of the men say they're for killing it as it'll be an ugly Lumpy. I think that's horrid of them. I may not have much mothering in me, but to kill a baby, now *that's* Neanderthal. I don't mind who hears me say it. Well, so long as dad's not around. But I nag my mum

about it. Hunter says: It *is* Neanderthal, they'd kill it sooner than spit on it. Then they'd eat it. Grub nods and bows her head, she's ever so sensitive. Hunter wishes he hadn't said it, and loves her twice over in his heart. If only all her people were sweet like her. It comes from not remembering our ancestors, she says. If she had her way they'd sacrifice, and speak to animals and dance, like we do.

I took her to visit Woman Who Makes Baskets in her new hut. I'm her friend again now, since I ran for her. When children become women, or men, they don't choose children for their friends. But she chose me again, after she got raped and I ran for her. I was ever so pleased. She was surprised to see Grub though. You'll be in trouble if your dad sees her! she said. Don't take her across the ditch whatever you do. Do they know your best friend's one of them. You start saying things like that when you're a grown up, I didn't take any notice. But she doesn't mind them herself, she doesn't blame Grub for what they did. She let her touch her belly. That's where the baby's waiting to get big enough to be born. Grub got that motherly look in her dark eyes.

We're going to start a new village when we're old enough, me and Grub. If Hunter will come and he still fancies Grub he can be our chief for real, and our husband. We'll share him! Well I don't see why not, in some villages the chief has lots of wives. Grub says You can have Smudge, he'll be all right when he grows up a bit. Horrible little brat, he's ugly as a chimp. Anyway, we just want to make a fresh start. We want to sacrifice and dance, and be friends all our lives. And the babies we have will be new people, neither from our village nor from theirs, neither Neanderthals nor us – whatever we are.

Don't tell me you've played with Chimps so long you've forgotten you're a Human Being, is what mum said when I asked her. But Grub says we're Dancers. I think that's a nice name. We don't dance a lot, but it's important to, things don't go right if you don't dance. I think Grub's people think we're as stupid as we think they are. Perhaps there's some truth in it. But, we can see farther and run faster, as well as make nice things and dance. What makes us Human Beings though, we're always told, is what we feel in our hearts – pity and love and all that sort of stuff. Ages ago the ancestors discovered these things, there in their own hearts, and passed them down to us as a treasure.

Baskets gave Grub a little basket, but of course she can't take it home, so I keep it for her. Whenever we go on an adventure, real or imaginary, I bring some nosh in it. No, not rats! Mum gives me a double portion, I think she knows who it's for but she doesn't say. She's nice my mum, I wish I was a better daughter to her instead of being a tomboy and a nuisance. I've nagged her to bits about not letting them kill Baskets' baby. It's for the men to decide, she says, we have no say. Now stop being a nuisance and go gather some watercress.

Hunter has become a man. He was away a few days, dancing and hunting. He's learned how to speak to animals, so they forgive you for killing them, but of course it's a big secret. Mum says the name she gave him, which was Brave Like A Hunter, helped earn him his man's name, Hunter Who Leaps Far. Grub says his childname gave him a lot to live up to – then adds with her bleary eyes wide as the big moon: And he did Boy, didn't he. And doesn't his new name just suit him, Hunter Who Leaps Far. Makes you picture his strong back and his long legs – then she glances at me and blushes. She's been watching him leap over our stream more closely than I thought! I didn't like to tell her that once he's a man he doesn't have to wait too long before choosing a wife, and of course he won't be allowed to choose a Neanderthal. It'll have to be one of them skinned rabbits who're always wiggling their bums at him and he never looks twice at, poor Hunter. And poor Grub.

When he got back from becoming a man I wondered if he'd be different. In spite of his name, he wasn't the least bit brave before, I always took the lead. He's certainly learned to *look* proud and brave, to stand with his shoulders back and hold his head in that way they do. You can picture him becoming a great hunter, if only because his legs are so long. But what surprised everyone was how, as soon as he got back, he gave *me* a big hug, lifting me right off the ground. He said he thought he remembered me being his friend when he was a child, so now he was a man he was choosing me again, and pledging his life to protect me. New men say that sort of thing to their mates, and their girlfriend, never ever to their kid sister. Even mum says he should have known better. But I was proud. It's not one of those things you say but don't mean, it's what they call a binding oath. For in the moon that he's a new man the ancestors take special notice of all he does and says.

Dad said Never you mind hugging Tomboy there, go choose yourself a real woman. Men don't tilt their clubs at flat-chested children. Tilt their clubs is what men call it when their weestick rises up. It had as well. Hunter laughed it off and nuzzled my ear. I was upset though, the way my dad insulted me in front of everybody. I cried later. Mum said You're all right, you've got plenty of time. I haven't I'm nearly a woman, I said. Grub's got huge tits, even bigger than Baskets'. Grub's people are different, she said. Look at me, I was just like you not only at your age but later, when your dad chose me. He loved me ever so, in spite of what he says, though I had no more tits than you have at first. They came when I had Hunter, just handy to feed him with. And you know how he feeds. We laughed.

I've been wondering if he'll want to see Grub again. He hasn't mentioned her. Of course, he's in a special way with the ancestors, all this moon, so he has to be really careful. That's the excuse I made for

him anyway. She kept expecting he'd have asked after her. In the end I fibbed and said Of course he does, and sends his love. But in the moon that he's a new man he's in a special way, and has to obey all the strictest rules of our village. Oh yes, I realise that of course, she said, poor weasel, and sniffed slightly. It's right that he should, a brave new man like Hunter Who Leaps Far. He must obey the rules laid down by his ancestors and prove himself worthy. One day, he'll be a leader among you.

At the end of the moon he has to make a sacrifice, and the goat takes all the information about him, and any other messages, to the ancestors. He lives in our paddock in the meantime, the sacred goat, and we treat him kindly and show him every respect. He has good food, and milk to drink, and we all love him ever so, and bless him for the journey he's going to make for us. I've combed his hair with a comb I made myself, and Grub sent him a necklace of flowers and wishes she could come and visit him. Hunter says he's given the goat a special secret message, which will either make his dreams come true or make the ancestors frown at him. I don't know what it can be.

I've noticed one thing since he became a man, I can't help noticing it. His weestick rises up at the least opportunity. And I'm sure it gets bigger each time. They say you need a great big weestick that wags like a club to be a good hunter and dancer, as well as to make babies in your wife. I had to tell Grub about it, I couldn't stop myself. After we'd done giggling – well, it took a while, we rolled about, I found a tree branch that looked a bit like it and gave a demonstration, I've never seen Grub laugh so much – after we'd tired ourselves out, she said ever so seriously: That's a sure sign he's a proper man and ready to choose a wife, and make pleasure in her, and give her babies. He's probably thinking about the wife he'll choose. And she gazed into the blurry distance. The look of her, sitting on the hillside with her lovesick expression and long untidy hair, stirred the love in my heart. It made me put my arms round her and kiss her. Is that from him, she said. It's from both of us, I replied.

o()o

We've kept visiting Woman Who Makes Baskets, me and Grub, to watch her belly grow and feel how it wriggles sometimes. I also dragged mum along to visit. Baskets has no mum of her own, so she's asked my mum if she'll be her auntie. She lives alone in a hut just outside the village ditch. I don't think she's banished or hated or anything, at least I hope she isn't. It's just that that's the tradition, mum says, if you've been raped, if you're going to have a baby with no dad.

I like Baskets a lot, she's not like most grown ups, she's easy going. I thanked her for being friends with me again. She said Boy, you're such a simpleton, don't you know you saved my life, it should be me thanking you. I didn't save her life, I just ran fast. It was Grub bathed

her and put grass on her, till the men came. When you change your name it should be Runs Fast In Pity, Baskets says. And we'll have to think of a nicer name for you as well, she says to Grub. I whisper the name Hunter has given her, and it makes Baskets smile and Grub blush. I don't think there's another grown up in our village who wouldn't spit on Grub sooner than speak to her. It makes me feel glad in my heart, that Baskets is so nice to her.

Sometimes while we're watching her belly or helping her make baskets she'll sing us a story. I love to hear the singing, especially when it's a really old story that sends a shiver down your back and makes the ancestors seem close. And especially when it's Baskets' sweet voice, I think she's the best singer in the world. My favourite's the story about how we come to have dogs.

One day, our ancestor Friend Of A Wolf was walking a long walk, probably to find a good place to make a village, because from time to time you have to move your village. A bear came along in the other direction, and as they passed the bear paused and said Watch out down in the hollow, there's a rabid wolf liable to bite your head off. I've just had a fight with him myself and I've broken his hind leg, but he's still pretty dangerous. Thanks, said Friend Of A Wolf, I'll go careful.

A bit further on he met a gorilla, and as they passed the gorilla paused and said Watch out down in the hollow, there's a rabid wolf liable to bite your head off. Bear got the better of him but that's only made him madder. I've just had a fight with him myself and I've lacerated his backside, but he's still pretty dangerous. Thanks, said Friend Of A Wolf, I'll go *very* careful.

Near where the road bends towards the hollow a Neanderthal came plodding towards him, and as they passed the Neanderthal paused and said Watch out down in the hollow, there's a rabid wolf liable to bite your head off. Bear and gorilla each gave him a pasting but that's only made him crazier. I've just had a fight with him myself and look, I've bitten his tail off for a trophy, but he's still pretty dangerous. Thanks, said Friend Of A Wolf, I'll go *extremely* careful.

Down in the hollow in the side of the roadway in a pool of blood lay a bedraggled wolf, snarling and slaving, yelping and growling, looking every bit as if it would tear you to pieces if it could and every bit as if it couldn't. It couldn't hardly move because one of its hind legs was broken, and its rump was lacerated, and its tail was torn off leaving a sore stump. Friend Of A Wolf paused and looked at the creature, and he didn't wait too long before stepping towards it. Of course the wolf expected another fight. Crippled as it was it could still have done deadly harm to a Human Being, if he was daft enough to go close. And he was.

And as he did so he said: Don't be afraid of me, I am called Friend. And although you are called Wolf, which means you may kill me if you please, I am a Human Being. And a Human Being cannot bear in his heart to see a fellow creature suffer. I would rather feel your sharp teeth sink into me than harm you as the others have, I would rather join my ancestors than pass you by and let you bleed to death. And by the time he'd finished saying all this he was stroking Wolf, and pouring water from his waterbag on to his back end, and feeling his injured leg. Wolf was probably too flabbergasted to kill him, so instead he lay down and went to sleep. Friend cleaned the wounds, and made a leaf bandage to cover the tail stump, and bound a tree-branch to the broken leg, which makes it fix itself. And then he picked Wolf up and carried him the long walk – he was quite heavy – back to his village, and laid him in a shelter, and fetched a medicine woman. And he took food and water to him daily till he was better.

Now this Wolf was the leader of a pack, and his pack had all been skulking in the trees near where their leader lay dying, unable to help him. And all the long way as Friend walked carrying Wolf he thought he heard sounds behind him, but whenever he looked round he could see no one. In fact, at a distance, the pack followed, for they must always follow their leader. When Wolf was better, by which time of course he and Friend were friends, he went to the edge of the village and called in the pack. They were pleased he was better, for they were all his relatives, his wives and children and brothers and sisters.

And Friend asked Dog – which was the new name Friend gave to Wolf, for when you change your life you must have a new name – if he and his relatives would like to stay in the village. For he could think of lots of ways the two creatures – Human Beings and dogs – could help each other. Human Beings can build shelters and make fire, for example, as well as mend broken legs. Dogs can hunt and fetch, and smell enemies. Dog asked his pack if they'd like to settle down and live in the village with our ancestors, and the pack said yes, because they were like all dogs, daft and obedient. So that's how we come to have dogs, and why dogs and Dancers help each other. Bears and gorillas and Neanderthals don't have dogs, because they aren't friends with them and have no pity in their hearts, and would never dream of doing another creature a kindness. So no creature ever trusts them or helps them or wants to live with them.

To this day the ancestors want us to respect the animals we hunt and be kind to the animals that live with us. And that's the difference between Human Beings and beasts. Of course it's a lot more thrilling when it's sung, and when Woman Who Makes Baskets sings it it's just the loveliest story ever. Grub and me listen to it time and again. When no one can hear us we try and sing it together, what we can remember, for when you sing the words have to be in a particular order. But we soon giggle and go out of tune, neither of us have got sweet voices like Baskets.

Grub says Baskets sings the story to do me honour, for after she got raped that time she was like Wolf, and when I ran fast I was like Friend, saving her with my pity. Then she does *you* honour, I said, for it was you cared for her till the men came. I couldn't have saved her though, she said, I can't run fast and even if I could my people would have killed her sooner than spit on her. It's not true that only Human Beings feel pity, I said. I saw it in your eyes when we found Baskets crawling there, *you* were the one filled with pity and mothering, I just ran to get help. You ran for pity of her, she said, all I felt was helpless, and sick with sorrow in my heart. But that's where pity dwells Grub, I said, that's what it feels like.

I don't want her thinking so little of herself. She's not like the rest of her folk. Anyway, she said, it won't be long before we make our new start, me and Hunter and you and Smudge. If Hunter still wants to. And then we'll be a new people, with hearts full of love. She's still thinking of doing that, of starting a new village. I hadn't thought about it for a while, like lots of ideas you have when you're a kid. But Grub's serious about it. I am too, I think. It's just that I get the bum end of the deal if I have to have Smudge.

o()o

One night, shortly after he sacrificed the goat, Hunter crept under my fur. I thought he was going to try out his new manhood on me. But he whispered: I want to tell you my secret, my message to the ancestors ... Go on then, I said, when he hesitated. Have you seen Beauty Dwells Within, does she ever mention me, have you told her I'm a man now. This is the name he calls Grub. I told him he was a daft oaf – does she mention me indeed! – as if I had enough toes to count. And don't worry, I've told her *all* about you becoming a man. Though she'd have little cause to think you remembered her if I hadn't fibbed.

Oh thankyou, he said, laying his head on my chest. You're a real friend Boy. I couldn't afford hardly to think of her while I was a new man, at least ... not until the ancestors got my message. So the secret message's about Grub then, I said. I've told them I'm choosing her for a wife, no matter what, whether they frown or smile. If she can't come and live here we'll start a new village, me and her and ...

Smudge, I said. You, he said, fingering one of my nipples. I choose you as my spare wife. You can't do that, I said, you're not a chief. Ah but I *will* be if we start a new village – unless you think being a tomboy qualifies you. The thought hadn't occurred to me, though I didn't see why not. All right, I said, *I'll* be chief. You and Grub can be *my* wives. He laughed loud and I put my hand over his mouth, as I bet it's naughty for us to share a fur now he's a man, though we often did when we were kids of course.

It's all the same either way, he said. But I've told it to the ancestors. I obeyed all the rules of being a new man, and we were ever so kind to the goat, so my message is a binding oath. I'm choosing her and that's that. They can either smile on my choosing or oppose me, the choice is theirs. Then he sighed and said, the big daft thing: Boy tell me honest, d'you think she'll accept me. She's your friend of course, you love her and I know she loves you. But d'you think she'll love me, the way I want her to, now I'm a man. Men are just so dim, I thought. She adores you you donkey, she's dreaming about you now or I'm a gerbil. And she still talks of starting a new village, it's not just a thing we used to play at, she'd really do it with you. Grub hates being a Neanderthal. She isn't, he said, she's Beauty Dwells Within.

And big tits without, I said after a while. He was still fiddling with mine, it tickled something beautiful. Yours are lovely Boy, he said. But she's got the mothering in her, d'you think she'll want lots of babies. Yes, and speaking of donkeys, I said, I notice since you're a man you've got the tool for the job. I could feel it against my leg.

I've seen you looking at it, he said, I bet you'd like a feel. Go on then, I said, reaching down – expecting him to jump up and run away. But he stayed put. He really is a man now, brave and proud, like they say. He let me take his great big weestick in my hand, and close my fingers round it. I was surprised how firm it was, and how warm. He wriggled a bit, and moaned, but I squeezed it and wouldn't let go. Eventually he gave a pitiful groan, and his seed leapt out of the end and drenched my little hand. How brave men are to put up with such agony in order to give their wives pleasure and babies.

o()o

I promised my bold Hunter I'd arrange for him to happen to bump into Grub one day. You see, now he's a man he can't sneak out with me as he used to, he can't play with kids or have secret meetings – he's not supposed to *sneak* at all. All that he does he must do brave and upright, and be proud in the report of it, so the saying goes. If he's to go through with his vow to the ancestors, no one must think less of him. Otherwise, what wisdom can there be in his choosing.

Not that there isn't talk of him being crazy. He ignores the ripe plums of the village (yuck!) – who make it obvious they fancy him – and goes and chooses his sister, still a child, as one of the friends of his manhood. He whispers with her sitting under a tree, it's even rumoured he shares a fur with her, that's how crazy he is. Especially as she's a titless tomboy and about as pretty as a Lumpy's bum. Just wait, he'll be choosing her for a wife next, then we'll know he's crazy.

Baskets hears them say these things, it's not just my imagination. Hunter says he doesn't care, there's crazy and there's crazy. He respects the ancestors, he excels in the hunting and the dancing. But

he won't say anything to help his reputation. We should whisper less, I whispered to him, and leave each other alone a while. It'll be my fault if they think you're crazy, it's me they don't like. They'll love you because I love you, he said. Why are you still as daft as when you were a kid, I said, that's not how it works. It does, he said. Didn't I ever tell you why I love Within. He means Grub, he never calls her Grub any more, he calls her Beauty Dwells Within.

Couldn't keep your eyes off her tits I should think, I said in my tomboyest tone. It was you Boy. It was because all my childhood I looked to you, followed you about, wanted to do everything you did. So when one day you discovered a real friend, a friend you loved more than me, more than anyone, more than your own life – I loved her too. I loved Grub because you loved her. I saw her through your eyes Boy, through your heart. I felt your pity for her ugliness, your amazement at her cleverness, your adoration of her sweetness, your envy of her motherliness. I started to deny the last one, but what's the point, he knows me inside better than I know myself.

Are you saying you don't really love her, it's just because I love her, I said. Oh no, what I'm speaking of dwells in my heart, and goes with me everywhere, every day. I love her like waking up on a sunny morning and hearing the birds bickering. I love her like going to sleep on a soft fur, and there she is in the dream place. I'd never heard Hunter talk like this. I didn't tell him, but he was describing exactly how I felt – exactly how I loved her.

Or going to sleep on your kid sister's chest, I said. I am *proud* to have lain there— Shush, I said, Hunter, there are enough half rumours about us already without you being proud in the report of them. I am crazy if I speak loud, I am crazy if I whisper, he said. I've been upright in my pledge to you Boy, if they can't see you're someone special that's their loss. Nor am I ashamed of you feeling my weestick. No one else has touched it. I'm pleased to know that, I said, for Grub I'm pleased. And when I lay my head on your chest, who do you think I meet in the dream place. I know who, I said. She's the only thing I love more than you Boy, and that's because you yourself love her more than yourself. I know, I said, I meet her in the dream place too.

Even mum hears these rumours, and begins to think the worst. It's not true is it, she said one day, very woman to woman. You haven't let Hunter – he hasn't tried – you're not encouraging him to – you wouldn't would you, his own sister. But then before I could answer she said But if not you, it's going to be even worse isn't it. It's going to be that Chimp. Have you noticed mums are good at answering their own questions. I just smiled and kept my mouth shut. Oh Tomboy, she said. If you and Baskets have put him up to setting his sights at that ugly little Chimp of yours ... Chimp is a name they call Neanderthal kids, it means a sort of monkey.

She's not ugly, I said, all indignant. Not when you know the Human Being within her— She's not a Human Being Boy, mum said in a stern corrective tone. It made me feel angry. She's not one of us sweetheart, she's just a Lumpy. She's adorable, I said tearfully, you don't know how nice she is inside, you just hate her on the outside but I see her with my heart. Oh I know you love her Tomboy, that's been another worry to me, you being such a tomboy and all, and copying Hunter like you do. I keep thinking you're not growing up into a woman at all but into one of them boy-girls that share their furs with other women.

Oh can you do that, I said in pretend surprise, and tossed my head with a sort of fake pride, like men do. That sounds like quite a good idea, I'm glad you suggested it. Perhaps I'll *choose* her, that'll solve both your worries. Perhaps there's a point to being flatchested after all! And off I swaggered. Mum's the most inoffensive of people, and so loving and forgiving. It's probably the first time I've ever had cross words with her. I don't know if it's a sign of growing up or a foolish bit of childishness. I cried about it later, of course. Though I didn't regret what I'd said.

I *do* love Grub, and I love Hunter too, I can picture it either way in my thoughts. Being Hunter's wife, his golden head on my chest every night. His great big weestick going up my little weehole, his babies growing in me. And getting big tits. Or Grub being *my* wife, me in place of Hunter. Not just romping playfully, stealing a kiss or a feel now and then like we do, but touching her proudly like a man touches his wife – her big soft tits, her funny-shaped bellybutton, and down into her dark furry bit. Like the adventurers we've so often been in our play, venturing into the beautiful forest, exploring the tender crevice, beautiful in its ugliness, the little pink cave, beautiful within. The place where tickling her makes her squeak, fills her with pleasure from her pudgy toes to her deep dark lovely loving eyes ... Mum's probably right – I go to that dream place at the drop of a feather, day or night.

The only person I thought I could really tell about it was Baskets. I went to see her but never got the chance. Her baby was fidgetting inside her, so eager to get out he was hurting her and making her wee. It's all right, she said, it's good wee, it's a good hurting. He's just eager to be alive bless him. Now run for me again like you did before, and fetch your mum and a medicine woman, there's a good girl. And then come back and witness my joy. But not only witness, my dear Tomboy, for you are the bringer of this joy. Run Fast In Pity and may the ancestors cherish you.

o()o

Baskets had her baby and soon after, some of the men went to look at him. She was scared, but I told her they were having a dance council after, which meant they wouldn't kill him till after the council. My dad was one of them. They came away saying it was the most revolting

thing they'd ever seen, it was Lumpy through and through and should be chucked in the midden. Lumpy's another name they call the people in the other village. I'd seen him get born and thought he was cute. Ugly as a baboon's bum – but cute.

My mum helped. Mum and dad had a row about it, of course, like grown ups do. Mum said it was nothing to do with the baby, a woman must help her niece in childbirth. It was laid down by the ancestors and he could beat her for it later and answer to them, and off she marched. I was proud of her, in spite of our falling out. I scampered after her, back to witness Baskets' joy. He hasn't beaten her of course, my dad, he hardly ever does.

The men danced and then went into a council. It was the first big council Hunter had been to. Then just after dark the strangest thing happened. All the women, led by the medicine women and widows, gathered outside the men's shelter and demanded to be heard. Of course the men tried to shoo them off. They said women can't be heard in a dance council, and pretended to be deaf, or some stuck their fingers in their ears.

But Old Medicine Woman, the leader of the women, spoke quietly and proudly: What about our ancestor Dance In Pity, who taught you to hunt. Did she not come into a council in the time of hunger and show you which animals were good to eat, and how to catch them. If it weren't for Dance In Pity there would be no Human Beings at all, our ancestors would have starved and we would never have been born. It is not that women's voices cannot be heard in a council, she said. It is that women only speak when there is a great crisis, and their wisdom needs to be heard.

It is not a great crisis, one of the men said, we are just for killing a Lumpy baby. That is more of a crisis than you think, Old Medicine Woman said, for the Neanderthals are probably of a mind to attack and kill us anyway, since you killed the rapist. If you kill the baby of the rape, they will attack us for sure. And although they are stupid and sluggish and clumsy they are vicious and strong, and have no pity in their hearts. Great hunters and fighters though you are, you will not be able to protect us all. They will rape your women and eat your children sooner than spit on them.

But if you do *not* kill the baby, not only will they have no excuse, but they will feel in their hearts in spite of themselves a sense of brotherhood to us, for pitying their baby and letting it live among us. Perhaps good will come of it for our descendents. For did not our ancestor Friend Of A Wolf teach us how the pity that dwells in our hearts wins us abiding friendship. The ancestors will smile upon your decision if you are guided by this. I know they will smile because I have cast the ancient medicine pebbles, and that is what they say.

The women are ever so brave to interrupt a dance council and make the men hear them. It's never happened in memory time. I listened to Old Medicine Woman's voice: it not only spoke wisdom, it *sounded* wise, and full of truth. I hope I can be like that when I'm a woman, or if we make our own village. Of course she's very old, the little kids think she's the oldest woman in the world. She carries a tree-branch to stop herself falling over as she walks, and when you get close to her she's covered in freckles.

She led the women away and they waited in the women's shelter. The men mumbled and smoked, and did another dance, and smoked and mumbled. Then when the first birds were twittering, my dad, with the old antler that makes his words true for everyone – the chief must have chosen him to carry it – came to the women's shelter with a few other men, including our Hunter, and told Old Medicine Woman what they'd decided.

We will not kill the Lumpy baby, he said. We will make a sacrifice instead, and the goat will take news of what has occurred, and any other messages, to our ancestors. If you are right they will smile on us, if you are wrong we shall all have bad luck and perhaps the Neanderthals will attack us anyway. We shall see. We think someone should go and tell them, how we have pitied their baby this night, and want peace between our villages. The baby will be called Saved By Women, and we will see that no harm ever comes to it, and that Woman Who Makes Baskets does not die of want. Thank you for interrupting our council and reminding us that women's voices are heard in times of crisis, like our ancestor Dance In Pity, who first made us hunters.

You have made a wise decision, and no one will blame you for it, no matter how things go, Old Medicine Woman said. We are proud to be the womenfolk of men so brave in the hunt, so skilled in the dance, so wise in the council, and so just in the exercise of pity. Thank you for coming to me bearing the antler, so that I know you speak for all the men, as I spoke for all the women. Our hearts all speak the same now.

Baskets just cried and cried, with joy, and hugged little Saved. She says it was mum went to the medicine women and widows and told them that women ought to make their voices heard against killing a baby. I'm glad you did that mum, I told her, you're ever so brave. Well perhaps you'll stop nagging me about it now, she said, and ruffled my hair in that irritating way grown ups do. I fetched Grub to see her new relative, and being very motherish she went all soppy, had to hold him and help wash him and talk googoo talk to him. Baskets likes Grub visiting, and loves her Lumpy baby ever so.

o()o

One day Grub happened to be cutting bullrushes where the stream goes swampy in the dip behind Baskets' hut. Since Baskets got fat with her baby, me and Grub have helped her with the basket making. She was clever where she built her hut, basket stuff grows plentiful down in the dip. And that same morning – what a coincidence! – Hunter happened to have taken a large rabbit and pledged it to Woman Who Makes Baskets, for hunters must never see lone women starve.

Why thank you Hunter Who Leaps Far, may the ancestors cherish you, she said in her chirpy way. My, you are a fine figure of a man. You're just the chap I need to do me another favour, if your kindness to me is not all used up. Fetch me a sheaf of bullrushes that is cut and waiting down in the dip. I've asked Tomboy here to fetch it but you know what a naughty child she is, she refuses to help me! Go now, but do not on any condition come back with it until the sun has gone into the clump of acacia trees. Baskets conspired with me of course. But what a surprise it would be for my lovely Grub, she wasn't expecting him at all. I crouched behind the hut and watched them.

They stood apart for a while. Grub almost up to her furry patch in the water, the tips of her long black hair dancing on the water's surface. Hunter on the edge gazing at her. I couldn't hear. He always used to say Hello Beauty Dwells Within, what are you doing, a bit timidly. But of course that was before he was a man, he's been much more confident since. Grub will certainly notice a difference in him. Though in matters of romance a bit of timidity probably comes in handy. I think she'll say to him, after Hello Hunter Who Leaps Far: I thought you'd forgotten your ugly grub friends, now you're a man – now you hunt and dance and go to councils, and keep company with grown ups.

And if he's any sense he'll say: You are right. I've forgotten my ugly grub friends, for when you become a man you choose new friends, and they need not be ugly and they need not be grubs. I have come here today to choose a new friend, and she's not an ugly grub at all. Her name is Beauty Dwells Within, and any man brave enough to say it isn't is welcome to say it, and I will meet him in a dance of combat, and he won't say it again.

I'm honoured to be chosen a friend of so bold a hunter and so proper a man, she probably said. I can hear how your manhood roars within you like a mountain cat. Come to that, I can see how your manhood rears out of you like a python. She was looking at his weestick of course. But she quickly moved on as they blushed. Yet honoured as I am, I dare say now you're a man you'll have little use for a friend such as I. A virgin barely finished her childish play, and that in nobody's pastureland behind an unfriendly village—

He interrupted her at this point, stepping two manly strides towards her into the swamp. Beauty Dwells Within, your good sense chastens me. What use have I for a friend such as you, does a man and a hunter

choose his friends among children. How could we ever be friends across that pasture you speak of, that lies between people who hate each other. You're right, it's hopeless. I don't want you for a friend!

And he stood and stared at her, his mouth still but his eyes singing. Poor Grub could only stand there in the water with a dejected hunch, looking his beautiful body up and down with her sad face, her deep moist eyes. He was standing exactly where I'd told him, just within that distance from her where things come into perfect focus. He was filling her eyes with his devastating beauty, filling her heart with joy and sorrow. He paused so long her heart must have been bursting. I told him to pause, but I was willing him and willing him to speak.

And finally he spoke. My heart's dearest Beauty Dwells Within. I don't want you as a friend, for I am this day choosing you as my wife. If you will not be my wife I shall weep a whole moon, like a widow, and put ash on my body. If you will consider being my wife I shall smile a whole moon, like a bride, and put ochre on my body. I don't know how is the custom of your people, Within, but for mine this pledge and a long afternoon's embrace are followed by the moon of waiting. And then if you've not changed your mind I'll fetch you and bring you to my people, and declare you my choice. And any man brave enough to say you aren't is welcome to say it, and I will meet him in a dance of combat, and he won't say it again.

I'm glad to have happened across you this day, for if you will spend it with me the afternoon is all ours. Woman Who Makes Baskets has told me not to return with the bullrushes you've cut for her till the sun is in the acacia trees. Watch it go there with me, my dearest Within, and I will love and protect you all your days, and make much pleasure in you, and give you many babies. But if your people have other customs of choosing, tell me how I should do and I'll do it, for I am not dishonouring your village or your parents in the choosing of you.

That's probably how he'd put it, knowing our Hunter. That's how I'd rehearsed him anyway! Grub wouldn't know whether to cry or laugh or leap into his arms. She probably got as far as saying that her people's customs aren't nearly so nice, and anyway they'd marry her to a gorilla sooner than a Dancer, before she could hold herself back no longer. I saw her splash up to him till their fronts met, and being a fair bit taller he picked her up and they kissed. Draped across his strong arms, her hair tumbled down and swaying, Hunter carried her to the dry hillside that looks across nobody's pastureland towards the clump of acacia trees, and laid her in the grass. I went back to Baskets with a strange mixture of joy and sorrow in my heart.

o()o

So began Hunter's moon of waiting. It was still a secret, of course, except from the ancestors. D'you think they smile or frown, he said.

Don't be daft, I said, you can't tell except by what happens. And what amazing things happened, this rainy moon, just as summer waned and our childhood ended. I say it was secret, but of course he covered his body with that orange stuff and went about with a big grin, like a twit, saying: I have chosen a wife. That's the tradition. What's secret is, who you've chosen. The juicy plums were baffled, for each knew it wasn't her of course. No one had any idea who it really was, except perhaps our mum. It's the gossip of the whole village, when a man's in waiting. Some of them still thought it was me, and would shake their heads and mutter when they saw us together.

I thought that's what it must be about, the day the village elders came to see me. I wasn't sent for – *they* came to me. I was obviously in big ploopy-plops. All the leading men including my dad and the chief, and all the medicine women and widows. And Old Medicine Woman leading them said: Do not be afraid, we are not going to punish you. But it is well known that you defy your parents by playing with Chimps. There are rumours you defy them in other ways too, ways I shall not mention. I bowed my head shamefully, as I suppose I was expected to. Your dad may be angry with you. But the village is not. You are just a child, your errors cannot be held against you, our ancestors in their wisdom pity children and forgive them.

You will know that we have an important message for the Neanderthals. But they are stupid and do not speak properly. They speak in gobbledygook and will never listen to the proper way of speaking, never mind to wisdom. Anyway they are brutal and hate us. They spit on us sooner than speak to us, and kill us sooner than spit on us. Since the rape of Woman Who Makes Baskets no one has dared go near their village, except to kill one – and except you. Tomboy, you are brave or foolish enough to go among them still, and although we do not approve of it we know you can speak some of their gabble. We are told the Chimpgirl you bring to visit Woman Who Makes Baskets speaks our language perfectly, which flabbergasts us if it is true. But it is no matter. For we have come to ask you a favour.

I have cast the ancient medicine pebbles, and through them the ancestors have smiled on our asking. Will you please help the village by going to the Neanderthals and telling them what we wish to tell them: that we have pitied and accepted their baby, and named it Saved By Women, and sacrificed in its behalf in token of our pledge never to let harm come to it, and Woman Who Makes Baskets will not be blamed for bearing it, and will not want for food. It will be allowed to grow to manhood as a Human Being, and this can be a cause of peace between our villages, and perhaps even the beginning of friendship. As I (you may feel like saying) am friends with this Chimp (you may say its name of course, if it has one). For we became Human Beings when our ancestors discovered pity and love in their hearts, and we are sick of hating you and killing you, and sick of you hating and raping and killing and eating us. If you wish to think about it or go into council

(you will say, for that is the diplomatic thing to say) I will retire and await your answer.

Scallywag and simpleton as you are reckoned to be, it is well known you believe in these things. The women, and the ancestors too, have heard your foolish talk of your love for the ugly Chimpgirl. We know too how you urged your mum to be auntie to Woman Who Makes Baskets, when all women shunned her. I even suspect it was you who first spoke aloud what our hearts already knew, that we would be wrong to allow the killing of a baby, for sometimes wisdom comes more easily from the mouths of the innocent. So you are the begetter of the situation we are in. If you will be our spokesman, the advantage is you will be speaking truly, from your own heart, as well as for your village.

For doing this favour you will be given a threefold reward. It will be given you before you go, for it is not meet to send a child on a grown up's errand. Anyway if they kill you you will never come back. Although you are not all that well developed, your mum tells us you are not too far from your time of becoming a woman. You are also precocious, and known for the bigness of your heart. We will make you a woman early. It will be all above board, for we speak with one voice and one heart. I am the leader of the women and have cast the pebbles, and look, the leading man carries the antler. There is no more powerful medicine to make things true, except a sacrifice.

And that is your second reward. We will sacrifice for you, something that has never been done before for a girlchild. And the goat will take news of what we are doing, and any other messages, to the ancestors. Since your errand is one of pity and of peace we cannot doubt that the ancestors will smile upon it and grant you the luck you deserve. Your third reward will be your new name: we shall give you a name that will be remembered for ever. You will be called Bringer Of Peace, and we shall pass this name down in our singing, so that all Human Beings that come after us will remember what their ancestor Bringer Of Peace did for them. As we remember our ancestors Dance In Pity, or Finder Of Strawberries, or Friend Of A Wolf.

If you wish to think about it or speak with your family we will retire and await your answer. I said: I'm honoured by what you've said, except for your insulting my best friend. She's not ugly and she's not a chimp. But you're old and the zest of loving friendship is dry in you. I will *both* give you my answer and go away to speak. For I'll do what you ask. But I'm not sure how it should be done, and I'm not sure about these rewards you mention. I must ask my best friends. They are Hunter Who Leaps Far, who is also my brother, and Grub, who is the Neanderthal girl you've mentioned. Then I'll come and tell you what we've decided.

They all looked angry at my words, except Old Medicine Woman. She smiled and said Perhaps you are not such a simpleton after all Tomboy. Thankyou for your answer, and for rebuking me. I shall wait in the women's shelter. And she turned and led them away. Hunter was at the back, listening to it all. He walked with me as far as nobody's pastureland, and we decided what must be done. I shouted Grub from the paddock of her mum's hut. She and Smudge came running out, and we stalked the pasture for a while, won a skirmish with an imaginary Flying Leopard, threw stones at a real skunk. And Grub invited me to visit her granny sometime.

It was after dark when I got back, Old Medicine Woman looked fed up. And this is what I said to her: When women go among them they get raped. Men they kill sooner than spit on. Gorillas they eat. Kids they take no notice of. I must go to them as a child. I'll be content to become a woman when my mum says it's time. Thank you for promising me a threefold reward. Like all grown ups you offer me what you wish me to have, not what I want. A better reward would be to give me what I wish for, and the less you want me to have it the truer a reward it'll be.

You are certainly the scallywag I had you down for, she said, even if you are not the simpleton they say. Tell us what it is you wish to have. I can't tell you today, I said, it'll have to wait for another moon. Then we cannot promise it you, she said. You've already promised me a reward – the only difference is, you've suggested what *you* like the sound of. My true reward is your promise of a reward. You are the most impudent and disrespectful child I have ever met, said the old woman in her sternest voice. I shall have difficult talk with men and women alike. Let me ask you a question. If I refuse your demand, will you refuse to speak to the Neanderthals for us.

No, I said, without hesitation. I've already told you I'll do that and I'll do it. If you refuse me my reward, you'll simply not have kept *your* end of the bargain. So when you meet the ancestors it'll be on your conscience. I thought you might say something like that, she said, suddenly smiling. Well Tomboy, I think you should quite soon become a woman anyway. Perhaps when you do you will come and choose me as an auntie, for I should like to teach you medicine, and the casting of the pebbles. I offer that on my own account, it is not part of the reward. Thankyou, I said, very surprised – for it's a rare thing indeed for the medicine women to pick an apprentice.

o()o

Grub had told me all about her granny. A granny is an ancestor who hasn't finished living yet. Not many kids have them. Grub says her granny's wise and very nice, not like most of her people, not rough and vicious. It sounds like that's where Grub gets it from, for they say whatever you're like you get it from your parents or your ancestors.

But also, Grub's granny is like Old Medicine Woman, she's the chiefest woman of their village and everyone takes notice of her, even the men. Not that she can stop them being ruffians, it's in their nature, and she's old and can't speak very loud. And she can't walk at all.

Luckily Grub likes her granny and her granny likes her. She lives in a big hut in the middle of the village, a part where I'd never been. Other relatives live all around, and look after her. They're used to Grub visiting, of course, but they were a bit surprised to see me. But since Grub kept a firm hold of my hand as we scampered between the huts, and since I'm obviously just a kid, no one chased me off. At the doorflap of the big hut Grub said: The custom is, you kneel and bow your head until she says hello to you. Then you must say Hello Granny Of The People, I've come to pay my respects.

Hello Grub, said a squeaky voice, I'd never heard a voice quite like it before. Hello Granny, said Grub. I've brought my best friend to see you, her name is Tomboy. Hello Tomboy, said the squeaky voice. I looked up at a tiny woman, with white hair that seemed to stand up like reeds, her face nothing but deep curly wrinkles, except for two dark, large, soft eyes, just like Grub's. Her tits were completely empty and hung flat against her belly.

Hello, Granny Of The People, I said. I've come to pay my respects. I said this in the Neanderthals' own language. You speak funny, and look even funnier, she said. What are you. I'm from the next village, I said. A Dancer, she said, sounding pleased. Yes, I said. And are you a boy or a girl. I'm a girl, but my name *means* boy. I am pleased to see you, though I can't see you very well for my eyes are old, and never saw far. I always thought the Dancers were nice looking. I played with them when I was a child, they were my best friends, but it's such a long time ago now, I don't remember their names. Once we became women, we never saw our friends again.

We're going to change that Granny, said Grub. It's not going to make any difference to Boy and me, we're staying friends all our lives. Granny made a little laugh, and said That's what you think when you're a child, but it never works out that way. I'm serious, Grub said, with unusual firmness; we're going to change it, we're going to stay friends. I hope you do. I hope they let you. It's a good idea to be friends. I'm the oldest woman in the world yet you're the first person from the Dancers ever came to pay their respects to me.

I said: They're afraid to, Granny Of The People. Men who come here get killed, and the last woman that came got raped. If they could come without harm I'm sure some of my people would want to pay respects to the oldest woman in the world. My coming is a start. Grub's right Granny, we're not going to be like that, we're friends for life. Well I'm glad to hear it and wish you luck, she said. Thank you for coming. It's a long time since I saw one of your people at all, I always thought they

were nice looking. I played with them when I was a child, one of them was my best friend, but it's such a long time ago now, I don't remember their names.

Granny, Tomboy's come for this reason, to make peace between our villages. But no one's going to take notice, and if they take no notice it won't ever be different. Tomboy's come with a special message from the granny of the Dancers. It's about the woman who was raped – you remember me telling you, she's had a lovely little boybaby. I remember, said Granny, I wish she'd bring him for me to bless. That's just it Granny. Boy's message is about that, and about peace between our villages. But only you will listen to her, and our people will only listen to you.

The old woman held her hand out to me, and I took hold of it. It was as small as my little hand, but very soft and bony. I will hear the message of your people, she said. I told her the words of Old Medicine Woman, as best I remembered them, but in the Neanderthal language. Grub helped me with a few words I didn't know. About the baby Saved By Women, and his being the beginning of peace and friendship, and our being sick of hating and killing, all that. Granny listened, nodding from time to time, she seemed pleased to hear it.

When I'd finished, Grub said: I have something to tell you as well Granny. I've been chosen as wife by Boy's brother, a brave new man, a great hunter, the best young man of their village. If he really means it, I shall go with him when he comes to fetch me, for I love him ever so. That is both sad and happy news, said Granny, taking Grub's hand now. If you love the young man I am glad for you. If I never see you again I am sad. But if their message is sincere perhaps they'll let you live in their village, where our people have never been allowed. And then you and your new family will be able to visit. I will bring my beautiful husband to pay his respects to you Granny, I promise, said Grub, and all our babies for you to bless.

In my day the Dancers thought we were so ugly they puked at the sight of us. Perhaps you are prettier than I was, Grub. No Granny, she said. My Hunter isn't so shallow. He sees me not as I am on the outside but as I am within. That's a difficult thing to get even one of our own menfolk to do, never mind a Dancer. How did you manage to teach him to see you thus. My friend Tomboy taught him, Grub said. He sees me as she sees me. I am glad that young folk are getting better at that sort of thing, said Granny. Perhaps our descendents will be nicer than we are. Oh they will, said Grub, me and Hunter are going to make lots of babies and they'll be new people, they'll be ever so nice Granny. If they are, her Granny said, they will owe it to you my child. You are a lovely girl, I've always said so. And so is your friend who has come to pay her respects and bring me a message. And nice looking too, like all the Dancers. I played with a girl of the Dancers when I was a child, she

was my best freind, but it's such a long time ago now, I don't remember her name.

o()o

Later that afternoon, after we'd eaten something (I don't know what it was, it was awful) and Granny had taken a nap, four men carried a wicker tray, with Granny sitting on it, and placed it in the shade of a big tree in the open space within the village. When she comes there, all the Neanderthals gather to hear anything she might say. Because her voice is faint and squeaky, a man repeats what she says very loud. She spoke my message, she seemed to remember it just as I'd said it. Then she said: Let's call it quits. We raped their basket woman, they killed our rapist. Justice is done. They have not harmed the baby. They have pledged to protect it, they've given it a name in their own language, they will allow it to grow to manhood as one of them. Perhaps it will teach them not to hate us so much. But we too must feel in our hearts something different from the hatred we are used to feeling for them.

They can't help being like they are, pale haired and gangly and fussy about what they eat. They can't help being stupid and talking funny and dancing like idiots. Let's make a new start with them, for the sake of this baby, who is half one of them and half one of us. I should like to see him and bless him – how would you like it if I didn't bless your babies. If the basket woman wants to bring him here and let me bless him, do not hinder her.

And then there will be others. Already this pretty girlchild, Tomboy, bravely and of her own free will has come to pay her respects to me, addressing me by speaking properly, in our own language, and she has called me Granny. She must be honoured among us, as doubtless she is among her own people. I hope she comes to see me again. If she does, and if others will come to pay their respects to me, that will be good. Do not hinder them. And then my granddaughter here, my little Grub, may have her own cause to go to them. She has my permission to go, and my blessing. I am done speaking.

She sat for a while as her kinfolk jostled to kneel in front of her and say Hello Granny Of The People. Grub and I sidled away and left them to it. We chased Smudge down to nobody's pastureland, where all the rest of the afternoon I was brave and pretty – and Honoured Among Lumpies. I'm not so sure about being honoured among my own people. Still, I was chief of nobody's pastureland for a summer's afternoon. Even Smudge bowed to me, and slew several ferocious beasts before falling in the mud. While Grub, my only wife, was the founding mother of a whole new people, with long black hair and deep dark eyes and warm loving hearts, who'll unite our villages in peace and pity for all time.

Old Medicine Woman was there, sitting under her tree, as I crossed our village ditch. I was still waving nightnight to Grub – I always wave till I can't see her any more, long after the poor bat can't see me. But she knows I keep waving. I came up to the old woman and said: Hello, Old Medicine Woman, I've come to pay my respects. That is a phrase I have not heard for a while, she replied. I've done what you asked, and the Lumpies are going to try and live in peace with us and be friends. She looked astonished. You mean, you have taken the message ... I nodded. I was going to arrange for an escort to protect you, and some gifts for you to take ... You mean, that is their answer ...

Did you ever play with them when you were a child, I said, and love one of them, thinking she was your friend for life. All children do, she said, and then they grow out of it. But do they forget or remember, I said. Sometimes forgetting is best. She looked sad even so. I've met her, I said, and paid my respects, and given her your message. She's now called Granny Of The People. She thinks she's the oldest woman in the world. She remembers with love in her heart still, the special girlchild who was her friend long ago. But she doesn't remember her name.

People's names change, said Old Medicine Woman, staring into the twilight in the direction of nobody's pastureland. You're the only other person I know with white hair, I said. She smiled, and she too reached out and took my hand. Is that really their answer Tomboy. It's what she's told them, for she's a kind of chief woman to them, as you are to us. I've seen how they respect her. They'll try to keep to it, I'm sure. Then you are Bringer Of Peace indeed, she said. I shook my head. But we must *both* keep to it, both villages, I said. They think we hate them as much as we think they hate us. And I'm not sure they're wrong.

o()o

The very day he was out of the moon of waiting Hunter woke me up before I'd even heard a bird. Come and help me fetch my bride, he said, and bounded off. I staggered sleepily after him. At the washing place, where the stream widens, he jumped in with a great big splash. As he strode out, wiping the last ochre from his skin and rubbing his fingers through his golden hair, the sun peeped over a distant hill. He looked magnificent, his long legs and his glistening skin, I think I've never seen a more beautiful sight. I'm going to run to the acacia trees to get dry, he said, I'll meet you on the way back. I'm a good runner, I said, and off I raced. Within moments I was watching his back and his bum and his long legs – getting rapidly smaller ahead of me.

I collapsed on top of him as he lay under the trees. He'd been there long enough to get his breath back and break off a hefty branch, which he was stripping of its twigs. You *are* a fast runner Boy, he said, it's just that I can fly, I have wings. You have long legs you mean. No, he said, today I have wings. Today my heart soars with the buzzards. And

birds get up early to catch grubs, I said. He stood up, standing me up with him. We held hands and walked down the pasture towards the back of Grub's mum's paddock.

Neanderthals don't trade, they take what they want. It applies to wives too, apparently. Among our people, when you go to fetch your bride, you must ask the parents what they want for her. If it's not much, you say: I'll come with it as soon as our first baby begins growing within her. If it's an impossible amount you say: I'll bring the first instalment as soon as our first baby begins growing within her. Ten gazelles of the fastest sort that hunters can hardly ever catch, is the sort of thing a dad might say if he thinks his daughter's pretty, or if he thinks the young man's a stoat. You agree and try your best. If you make your wife happy and give her babies and she doesn't want to leave you it doesn't usually matter. But Grub says Neanderthals just take the wife they want, with a big stick.

We marched across the little ditch and up to the group of huts. I led the way to the one where Grub and Smudge sleep, and crawled through our crawl-hole that goes under the wall. Hunter wouldn't fit but now he's a man he does everything upright anyway. So he waited by the doorflap. Grub wasn't all that surprised to see me. Is it ... They don't take much notice of moons, but she's clever, she'd counted the days on a stick. He's a buzzard today, I said, thinks he can fly. He's swooped down for his early morning grub. If you wriggle, he's got himself a great big stick— She giggled, she was thinking better jokes than I was telling. From a tree silly, I said, to give you a whacking. Is that what they call it in your language, she said.

She was combing her hair, it draped her whole back as she knelt there, sitting on her heels, I think I've never seen a more beautiful sight. Well, not since sunrise. Little and lumpish as she is, and all right not the prettiest mug that ever smiled, yet squatting in her shady hut, a mottling of sunlight falling on her through the wattle, her big round tits moving up and down as she combed, as she breathed nervously, excitedly, her dark eyes slightly moist, always thoughtful and always loving – it *was*, it was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

I took the comb, which I'd made for her myself, and combed for a while. And I said what I never thought I'd dare or be daft enough to say. It wasn't very loyal to Hunter, but I didn't mean it that way. I said: Grub, I wish it was me. You can share him, she said, I shan't mind, I love you both. I meant I wish it was me fetching you to be *my* wife, I said, and buried my face in her hair. It *is* you, she said, don't you know he loves me because you do. You made him see past my ugliness— You're *not* ugly Grub, I said, and we were suddenly kissing with our mouths and hugging ever so tight. When she finally pulled her face away she said: Boy, I meant it. I love you both. May the ancestors cherish you, I said.

We stooped through the doorflap into the sunshine, Grub first. I've waited the long moon, rejoicing and wearing ochre, according to the custom of my people. I've kept my choice secret. If you now break my heart and make me a laughing stock in my village no one will blame you, it is your right if you've thought better of it. Her answer didn't need speaking, she was already hugging him. It is our custom to say it, it isn't that I think it might be so, he said, stroking her hair. I will follow our custom of asking your parents what they want for you, if you like. But I know the way of your people is to take what they want, with a big stick, and I'll do that if you prefer. She nodded.

He turned towards the other huts. A few people had appeared to look at what was going on. He brandished his tree-branch with one arm and held Grub with the other, and yelled for all to hear: I choose the girl you call Grub, who from this day will be called Beauty Dwells Within, as my wife. She's accepted me, and I'm taking her. Anyone brave enough to say I'm not can have a whack of this club, for I am Hunter Who Leaps Far, a man and a hunter, and some say a bit crazy.

After this lovely speech – which none of them but Grub understood, though I think they got the general idea – he strode down to the ditch and out across the pasture towards our village, clasping Grub to his side, her chubby little legs barely reaching the ground. Me and Smudge held the rear till they were safely away, fighting off all opposition, Smudge with his terrifying invisible weapons and me so brave and so pretty, and so honoured among them, I didn't even need any.

Woe betide those who opposed our might that day, not a one of them survived. I wrestled twice as many as I've got toes, and Smudge killed a thousand more, between falling backwards over stones. Lumpy bodies littered the way between our villages, vultures feasted for half a moon. The battle of nobody's pastureland will be sung forever – our descendents will always remember the day that Hunter Who Leaps Far fetched his wife, his beloved Beauty Dwells Within, and both villages were beaten into submission by Fighter Who Falls Backwards, and some titless tomboy whose name is forgotten.

o()o

By the time they reached our village ditch, Hunter and Grub were walking slowly, hand in hand. Almost the entire village was there to meet them – for everyone knew Hunter's moon of waiting was over. They stopped in front of Old Medicine Woman. He'll have said (I was lagging behind, fighting the last few skirmishes, so I didn't hear at first): I've waited the long moon, rejoicing and wearing ochre, according to the custom. I've kept my choice secret. She's not thought better of it. I choose this girl, called by her own people Grub, who from this day will be called Beauty Dwells Within, as my wife. She's accepted me, so she *is* my wife. Anyone brave enough to say she isn't

is welcome to say it, and he can meet me in the dance of combat, and he won't say it again.

Then he said (I could hear it now): And also, anyone brave enough to say anything, that a husband pledged to love and protect his wife might not like, can have a whack of this club, for I am Hunter Who Leaps Far, a man and a hunter, and some say a bit crazy ... I've done what is expected of a new man, I've chosen the way I should choose. And I've already told it to the ancestors, whether they smile or frown, I didn't keep it from them. So I ask you now as is customary, my mum, my dad, my uncles, my elders, my friends: here is the wife I have chosen. Welcome your new daughter, your new neice, your new friend, and rejoice with us by sacrificing and sending some of our joy to the ancestors. He looked at me. I nodded proudly. I'd coached him in what he must say, and he'd said it all. Though the bit about being crazy was his own idea.

There was a long silence, and some shifty glancing about among the grown ups. Old Medicine Woman eventually spoke, but not to Hunter. She turned to mum and dad and said: You are his parents, you must speak first. You must be the first ... to welcome your new daughter. Mum stepped forward but dad held her arm.

A man – a proper man – may not fight his own dad, he said. So of the men, only I may say without fear of being clubbed, the things we all know must be said. This is not a woman, son, it's a Neanderthal Chimp. We no more love and marry with them than we do with gorillas or gerbils. I'm not angry with you, for I believe you *are* a bit crazy – I am certain you have been made so by *witchcraft*. He looked straight at me on saying this – my own dad, making the worst accusation you can make.

Leave go your bewitchment with this Lumpy and let your mum and me get medicine for you, to make you see straight. No one will blame you for what you've done through being sick in the heart and bewitched. It cannot come into our village, this ugly Chimp, it's not allowed, as well you know. It cannot come among us as if it were a Human Being. Even if it plays with our naughty, disobedient children (there he goes again), it cannot be a friend to us. It cannot be our neice or our daughter. Believe me son, it cannot be a wife to you. Be guided by those who are wiser. Leave go of the revolting creature and send it back, before the rest of us have to shoo it away.

Oh how I wished she'd never learned our language, poor Grub, for her tender heart to be injured with words that might just have seemed like grunts if I hadn't taught her. Not that I could hold her back, she was always so keen and so clever. As far back as I remember her, we must both have been tiny, every word I spoke she mimicked and remembered. Before I even knew I was teaching her I was teaching

her. They assume she can't understand of course, but that doesn't make it better. I've never in my life felt so much hurt and anger in my heart.

Who carries the antler must speak next, Old Medicine Woman said. Our true chief stepped forward. He hardly ever does any chiefting, he nearly always gives the antler to someone else. He said quietly: Parents know their own heart and are entitled to give their own answer. Each man, each woman, knows his own heart. I do not know my own heart. I can speak only for the men, and for our laws and customs, given us in wisdom by our ancestors. It is against those laws to bring a Neanderthal across our village ditch, and as for choosing one for a wife, it has never been known. That is all I can say.

Then it is my turn to speak, said Old Medicine Woman. But she paused, and said: Hunter Who Leaps Far, tell me this. How crazy are you, really. You may answer me proudly, speaking whatever your heart feels is true, I shall not be offended. Hunter looked down at Grub, and put his arm round her shoulder. I am crazy as the gazelle that runs from the fleet leopard. I am crazy as the buzzard that swoops upon the rat. I am crazy as Woman Who Makes Baskets who adores her own baby. I am crazy in my heart with love for Beauty Dwells Within, who I named thus because I know when you see her only with your eyes and not with your hearts, you will think me crazy.

I am crazy enough to have made a secret vow to the ancestors, which I now divulge. That I shall choose my wife no matter what. If you will follow the custom and welcome her, as you do new wives, as if newly born among you, my parents' daughter, my friends' friend, then how is she not those things, how is she not a Human Being, how is she not pitied and cherished by our ancestors. But if you will not, I have told them I shall choose her still. So if you shoo her you shoo me too. We shall walk a long walk and find a place for a new village, and we shall become a new people. The ancestors can smile or frown. I'll answer to them when I've finished living, but while I live I shall love and protect my wife, and make pleasure in her, and give her babies. *That's* how crazy I am.

We spoke in our thoughts, me and Hunter, I knew it now. I'd often felt it, but this day I knew. He'd made it all up without my help, and it's exactly what I'd have told him to say. It's exactly what my thoughts were saying. That is very crazy indeed, said Old Medicine Woman, smiling. I got the feeling she was on our side. She seemed then to look at Grub. And are you ... my dear ... the Chi – the Neanderthal girl we have heard about ... who understands our language, who helps Woman Who Makes Baskets, who plays with Tomboy. Grub answered: Yes, granny of the Dancers, that is who I am. The whole village gasped in astonishment, that she could understand and speak our language.

Then the old woman looked at me. Before I say my piece, might there ... might there be someone else with something to say ... Everyone

wondered what she meant, it wasn't part of the customary procedure. But I knew. I stepped forward and took hold of Grub's hand. There we were: Hunter, Grub, and me, hand in hand.

I'm going with them, I said. If you shoo them you shoo me too. I shall walk a long walk and never come back. And we shall be a new people, neither them nor us. We shall be who we are in our hearts. And when I've finished living I'll go to our ancestors and see if *they* shoo me. And Within will go to them as well, for her people have no ancestors. I'll fetch her myself from the dead people's shelter and bring her before them, as we've brought her today to our living relatives. But the ancestors will *not* shoo her, nor will they insult her. Nor do they frown on her now.

You all think I'm impudent to say this, a scallywag or a witch. But I know it's true because *you*'ve taught me, all my life, my mum and my dad, my aunties and elders, my friend Woman Who Makes Baskets in her sweet singing, that the love and pity in our hearts are what make us Human Beings. The ancestors won't shoo her because they'll pity and forgive her. I dare bet they'll be looking forward to meeting her, after getting so many messages about her from Hunter and me, who love her ever so. The treasure that dwells in our hearts, and the smile of our ancestors when we sacrifice and dance: all the while we're growing up you teach us how these things make us better than Neanderthals. Either it's a load of baloney or it's true, the choice is yours.

There's one other thing. If you shoo me from my village with Hunter and Within, you will never be able to give me the reward you owe me, for making peace between our two villages. You will never get the chance. You'll all go to the ancestors with it on your conscience, that you came and asked me a favour and I did it, but you never gave me my reward.

Are you ever going to tell us what that reward might be, Old Medicine Woman said. And as she said it she bent down and cast the ancient medicine pebbles, that speak to her for the ancestors, and she gazed at the pattern they made as they lay on the ground. If we stay in this village and Within is my sister, and her children are Human Beings, there'll never be any need for me to tell you. What more could I wish for. You'll have nothing on your conscience when you meet the ancestors.

That is roughly what I thought you might say, my dear Tomboy. The ancestors have given you a special gift. It is a lesson to us, to be outdone in wiliness and wisdom by a child. Speaking of which, it is my duty as the elder of the women to pass judgement on a serious accusation that has been openly made – this girl is *not* a witch. I know there will be difficult speaking among us, for a while, in the women's shelter as well as in the men's. And some of us are going to have to change our minds. For I must tell you all: the child Tomboy is correct.

The ancestors smile on this day's choosing. The ancient medicine pebbles speak clearly – you all saw me cast them. It is not for us to question.

This creature standing before you, that you think is a Neanderthal Chimp, is this day become a Human Being. This Human Being standing before you, that you think is ugly as a Lumpy's bum, is this day become beautiful. This beautiful stranger standing before you, that you would spit on sooner than speak to, is this day become your friend, your relative, or your niece. Or your daughter. And she is indeed Tomboy's sister. For she is Hunter Who Leaps Far's wife – may the ancestors cherish her. Prepare the sacred goat! This evening we send news to our ancestors. That Hunter has chosen a wife, and named her Beauty Dwells Within, and the whole village welcomes her and rejoices.

o()o

It all seems a long time ago now. I don't always know if they're memories or dreams, these days of youth I keep picturing. Or stories sung to me so often and so sweetly, so long ago, that they've entered and become part of me. Look at Hunter leap over the stream, and back and back again, you'd think he could fly. And Smudge ignoring him as he pokes the mud for wormy things. We hope he won't find another, the last one he threw at us and made us scream, the horrid little ... Here comes Woman Who Makes Baskets with an arm full of reeds. Sing us a story Sing us a story we shout, but she goes on her way. Though she never fails to turn, just within hearing, and shout back Come round at twilight and we'll see if I can remember one.

It's faithful Dog bounding across nobody's pastureland, doing a sort of dance when he reaches us, he doesn't know which of us to rub against first. We know who's coming over the rise next, for Dog always bounds ahead of his master, Friend Of A Wolf, slow now he's old and yet somehow he keeps walking long walks, no one knows why. I think it's just in case there's some other hurt creature waiting for his pity ... We visit a goat on the way back, pat its neck and feed it some hay and say Bless you, take good report of me when you go to our ancestors, and of my friends, and my mum and dad. Smudge's mum is already with the ancestors. He says Tell her I'm brave and tall and— You tell her nothing of the kind, we laugh and run on.

Old Medicine Woman sits under her tree. We slow down, and glance at her with a mixture of awe and mischief. She's full of wisdom and authority, but the funny thing is, she always says: Children cannot be blamed for their errors, the ancestors pity and forgive them – I think it means she's soft inside really ... Mum's got a new baby and we want to look at it and say googoo, but it's a baby pig. It comes from the woods, but when she's fattened it up it's going into our bellies. Tomboy where've you been all day, dad says. He's grumpy as usual. You're in

trouble if I find you've been hanging round with them Neanderthals. That's what my dad calls the people in the next village. He says I should stay away from them and not play with them. But Grub's my best friend ...

And that's where I've been, he's right: that's who's been with me, all day. All my childhood. All my life. I can't remember a time when she wasn't in my thoughts. They say you become a woman and turn your back on childhood, and forget your friends' names. I was never like other girlchildren, I never forgot. There was never a moment when Grub didn't fill my heart, when my heart pined for anything but Grub. I never chose another friend. My tits never got bigger. We kept our vow, me and Grub – we were friends for life. For some, that's not very long. I miss her ever so.

I like it best when the little ones come to be blessed, or to pay their respects. Honoured Granny, they call me, that's my name now I'm old. They probably think I'm the oldest woman in the world. They are fair haired and dark haired, tall and short, ugly and pretty and in between. I know they are beautiful within. May the ancestors cherish them all. I hope they have hearts full of pity and love. Their eyes are – for they all have something of Grub's eyes. Yet many of them also have long legs, and run fast and leap far as they play in the pasture. We sing them the story of their ancestor Hunter Who Leaps Far, the great chief, and how he chose the wife he loved no matter what. That was me, I say, when we get to the bit where a girlchild makes peace between the villages and finds her new name. No one believes me. No one but me now remembers.

I don't know if the ancestors smiled on my life or not. When I learned the secret of the ancient medicine pebbles, it was this: that whatever feels right in your heart when you're looking at them, is what the ancestors are saying to you. That's why medicine women have to be so careful choosing an apprentice. It must be someone special. I hope I've done right for my village, and been worthy of the trust placed in me by Old Medicine Woman, and by Granny Of The People. But I don't know. I can't really picture my own life at all. When I wonder who I am, I think of Grub. When I remember who I was, I think of Grub. When a sound of children at twilight coming home from nobody's pastureland reminds me ... how soon I shall be seeing my loved ones again, when they come to the dead people's shelter to fetch me, and bring me into the cherishment of the ancestors ... I think of Grub.

oo()oo

Note

This story was written in 2008. While its starting point is a joke – the father calls the people in the next village 'Neanderthals' and they

actually are – its underlying implications are serious: that Neanderthals and modern humans (*homo sapiens*) co-existed in time and were sometimes neighbours; that the two species interacted and interbred; that Neanderthals therefore did not strictly-speaking become extinct but merged (to some extent of course submerged) into the evolutionarily superior species; and that partial Neanderthal ancestry survives in subsequent human populations. At the time the story was written, none of these four propositions was accepted by the scientific or historical disciplines. Since then archaeological/palaeontological discoveries have dramatically extended forwards the dating of the survival of Neanderthal people; while biological/genetic studies have identified Neanderthal DNA in living humans. A rapid reassessment of Neanderthal/modern human relations has followed, completely overturning the conventional wisdom that prevailed in 2008. Today (in the 2020s) all four of the hypotheses on which I based my story are more-or-less accepted as scientific and historical fact. Paradoxically, being proved right is not necessarily good news for a work of fiction, for it devalues the imaginative creativity, reduces its inventions and presumptions to commonplaces, and emasculates its quirks. I hope this story – which is first and foremost a love story and character study wrapped in a prehistoric fantasy – survives this terrible blow, albeit something of its original oddity is in danger of going unnoticed.

oo()oo

© Tony Simcock 2008 onwards

2008/1