

Pahwakhe
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It's almost dark. My daughter is sitting outside, the bundle still and silent in her arms. The singing voices out on the water are moving, sad fiddles calling out like broken birds. They're coming here. I never imagined them returning.

They're drifting through the dark and fog, toward the shore. She's waiting for them.

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Not long ago, I was a happy man, and not just rich like I am now. Each of my daughters was more beautiful than all the girls in all the nearby villages, but the oldest and the most beautiful one's name was Pahwakhe. She was quiet, and tall, and strong. Any man would happily have taken her as his wife.

The chiefs of the other villages came to my longhouse one by one, bearing gifts for her hand. They wanted me to marry her to one of their sons. But I kept her for myself. You know how a father enjoys his girls when they bring him food, and talk to him, and listen to him tell the old stories.

So I said no to every man, no to every father, no to every son in the villages.

My wife chided me that I would never have a grandson, and after a while, I began to hear people cursing my name when they thought I couldn't hear. They laughed at me. They said terrible things, prayed for terrible misfortunes to befall me. They said I was a bad man for keeping her to myself.

I understood why they said these things, why they couldn't understand me, but still I kept her in my longhouse. As for Pahwakhe, she said nothing to me about it, but endured this waiting cheerfully. She smiled as I told stories, tried to give me my joy, but I could see something within her, slowly changing, growing heavier and more weary of me as the nights grew cooler and the days, one by one, carried whispers of winter's approach.

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One chilly night, there were voices out on the water. Singing, accompanied by eerie music that reminded me of the sound of a broken, widowed bird. One of the old women heard them first, that's always how it goes. She came to me and she told me there was something singing out in the fog, coming up to the beach.

We went down to the water to meet them, but their canoes had already been pulled up onto the stony shore. They stood together in a small group, six or seven men, each pale, ghost-thin, and hairy-faced, wearing wide, bright sashes and skin boots, their brown and yellow hair hanging loose around their faces. A couple of them held strange wooden things under their arms, which they called fiddles. The rest of them carried bulging leather bags.

Stories about them echoed in my memory, things that other chiefs had whispered about to me. It was nothing more than rumors, things they'd heard from canoe-traders and wanderers. Nobody knew how they crossed over from their world to ours, or why they were so pale. That they could kill a man with a yell, that they could kill the soil in a place so nothing would grow there, that they sometimes stole away girls and women in the night because they had none of their own.

The smoke in my longhouse swirled thick, thicker still around their strange faces. They sat all around me on brightly-colored mats and frowned, wrinkled their big noses as they tried to speak our language. I offered them bone spoons and cedar plates loaded with salmon and seal oil and nuts and blackberries.

“We’ve brought many gifts,” they said, our words heavy like stones on their tongues. They opened the bags, and set down handfuls of colorful round beads, hard axes, pouches bursting with long-traveled pemmican, braided sweetgrass, and tobacco. They set these things down before me, and then one of them—their chief—stared across the fire at my eldest daughter.

They gave me so much that I couldn’t refuse their unsaid request. Pahwakhe wept and shivered when I offered her to them. Her sisters and mother beat their breastbones and cried, but what could I do? They could have stolen her away, or stolen all of them, if they wanted. I had no choice. So we married her to their young chief. Our women sang mourning songs as young men danced, feathers swirling in firelight as drums pounded in darkness. After that, our guests made their weeping fiddles sing broken birdsongs until just before dawn.

It was still very dark, though, when their canoes cut out across the water, carrying Pahwakhe out into the fog that separated their world from ours. She did not look back to the shore as the canoe she was in drifted into the twilight.

As they drifted slowly away, we heard their fiddles and the song they played was solemn, a funeral song.

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A year later, an old woman hobbled out of one morning’s fog into our village, and came to my longhouse.

She told me that she lived between the worlds, in a halfway place to the land of the ghost-people, and that my daughter’s husband was a ghost. She told me their bodies were just bones and dust in the daytime, but at night they came to life, sang and danced and made love. Maybe the old woman had once married one of them too, I don’t know. I did not ask her these things. I could tell she was not lying to me.

She told me that my daughter had given a son to her ghost husband, but the child was not wholly ghost, and living with ghosts was too difficult for it. The villagers there thought the child ought to live with us, the living, with its mother’s people. The old woman sat down on a mat on the ground outside my longhouse, and waited.

Half a day passed before my oldest daughter stumbled out of the fog. She was cradling a bundle in front of her, and I guessed it was a baby.

“Pahwakhe!” I was so happy to see her. She was still beautiful, but there was something very tired about her. The skin under her eyes was darker, her face wearier.

“Father.”

“Is this your baby?”

Her eyes were wild, haunted. “I’m tired.” She squeezed the bundle to herself, out of my reach. The old woman watched us with heavy eyes.

I set my curiosity aside and brought Pahwakhe into my longhouse. Then I set out a cattail mat on the floor for her, and let the cedar smoke hush her to sleep.

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I was finally a grandfather. I had not thought of it, had not wanted it, but now that it was true, I felt greedy. I wanted to look at him, to find my face in his own.

But I never saw my grandson’s face. Pahwakhe said he was only halfway one of us, and still halfway one of them. She told me he had to be wrapped for twelve days straight, to stop being a ghost and become a living baby.

I tried to wait, and tried to wait, but my woman, she got me curious. She kept fanning the embers of my curiosity, asking me if I believed her, telling me how pretty she was sure the baby was.

Finally, when I could not wait any longer, I was too curious. I heard the baby cry a little late one night, glimpsed my daughter giving it suckle.

Once daylight came, my daughter slept and the baby made no sound. I wanted to see, so badly; I could feel the want growing inside me, bigger and bigger, as the day went on. Nothing eased it, not smoking, not lunch, not a walk in the bush. Nothing.

So that afternoon, I unwrapped the bundle.

I didn't know what those things were at first, those little white shapes lit by the sun. There was dust all over them. But when I looked closely, for a few moments, I realized what they were.

Bones. The baby's tiny skull almost fell from the bundle, almost fell to the ground.

Pahwakhe woke up, screamed, and wrapped up the bones, but I could tell from the look on her face that there was nothing to do.

It was too late to take back what I'd done.

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The living and the dead are not very different. They both want to see everything in the world, to taste it, again and again. They want to own everything they've ever touched.

So they're coming back, for her and the baby. I think she might have called out to them somehow. Asked them to come for her. She looks at the bundle, speaks to it. She holds it close.

I sit beside her in the darkness, waiting. I want to speak to her, but I cannot find any words. They're heavy on my tongue, too, now.

Their voices are getting louder, the mourning fiddles drifting closer.

Canoes scrape against the shore's cold stones.

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