

Crimson Mud, Drying Blood

by Jay Lake

We lashed the lolly to Big Man's bones the day I turned fourteen, same morning I got my facing done.

Ma'am had sent for the best Inker within six days' walk, with his three bone needles and one of iron and secret inks from clays within the sacred banks of the Flywater River. Dawn abloomin' in the east, four of Ma'am's other boyos held me down and Inker-man chewed his leaves until his eyes rolled back with a cry like a hawk's, then blind and trembling drew my destiny upon my face in tiny stabs that hurt so good I cried to laugh.

Then they let me up, packed my face with mud and grass and swore me off washing or looking in pools of water for a week and a day, and we all went back to Big Man. Even Inker climbed up to do a turn on the scaffolds, old-folded as he was by time and sunlight to a piece of drawn-ass hide.

Ain't it great, how you start out life pretty and you end up wise, but the two are like a river's head and mouth -- the springs never meet the sea.

There I was, face itching like someone had laid a masking chantry on me, anchoring the far end of the load rope while the lolly went up. It was medium hard work, and I welcomed the salty sweat and the arm strain to keep my thoughts from my face.

We had us good metal pulleys, found deep in a hole by the Tunnel Runners and brought up to advance Big Man's dreaming years so much the faster. Our pulling ropes weren't half the worth, like as not break if you hefted a hundredweight, but by river and forest, them pulleys would outlive us all.

They had already, hadn't they? Outlived the Little Men who made them, scratching at the metal with fine files and tiny saws in their stone caves of long ago, before light came into the world for good and all.

Up went the lolly, me holding down the rope with three boyos pulling in front of me, past the first deck of the scaffold, and past the mountain deck -- so called on account of you could see the mountains good from there -- and past the high deck, and past the hawks' deck and on to the new deck, which was always the top deck of the scaffold no matter whether it had been built further or stood for years. The lolly itself was a work of art, wrested from a gnarled old cypress that grew over a slab of Little Man blackstone. It was one of Ma'am's sometime studs that done the deed, after a weasel showed him the way in dreaming.

The sometime stud, it might have been Barkdust Bill, I forget 'cause Ma'am drove them all off come last winter so as only to have her boyos' mouths to fill instead of her bedmates' beautiful, useless bellies, he drug that thing home still crusted in roots and bark and dirt and shiny bits of blackstone. Bill and the other studs cleaned it off and freshened it with flower dyes and little secret weaves they had the making of, and presented it to Ma'am like she was to have some doing or other with it.

Ma'am, she laughed her real laugh, not her festival laugh, and had some of us boyos who were dancing attendance on her lay it in the high place above her sandbed, then she invited her sometime studs in and we drew the leafy curtains and they squealed until sundown, missing evenchant and nearly missing

moonrise chant. Preach wasn't happy, but he ain't never happy.

Now spring was here again, and since the winter the sometime studs were out living on the ridges and running rocks and wrestling for the right to claim favor here in the wooded valleys. We were back on Big Man, taking another step toward Heaven, and Ma'am decided the lolly had to go up.

The studs' weaves and dyes had fallen off over the winter, and it was just a dented circle again, with the curves shaved off to eight straight edges, still a bit of red underneath -- a fortune of metal in its face and the stick below. That metal had been the real value of the studs' gift, of course, but men like them will lay eyes on a color and forget everything that matters.

And there's me at one end of the pulling rope, and Inker up on the scaffold and someone's found some good line Ma'am had us trade downriver for -- though there was grumbling about losing tenweight of cured salmon for something you couldn't even rightly chew let alone swallow. And there's the lolly swinging from the new deck pulley and Inker and two boyos guide it in and Miracle -- she's our girl-woman -- takes that traded-for line with its memory of the taste of salmon and lashes the lolly to one of Big Man's ribs, on the inside, where it might serve him for a heart.

Damn all our eyes if that lolly don't rattle in the wind, and shift around to find a good place to hang its weight on the traded-for line, and thump three times on the rib like it just might *be* a heart.

Ma'am stirred in her sandbed, which I knew on account of the shouting and yelling, and four of the boyos helped her in her hundredweights out of her grotto, and she put her thigh bone whistle to her lips and belted out the tune for a festival.

"It's a sign," called Inker in his old-folded voice, though it carried loud as any falling tree. "Big Man's going to wake from dreaming some day soon, and carry us all to Heaven on His shoulders!"

Then they swarmed down from the scaffold, Inker and the boyos and Miracle, and even Preach found a stale little smile somewhere to wear on his face for a while.

We danced reels among the barley shoots, and we did the watersnake below the beavers' second dam, and we sung down the sun with a rowdy even chant fueled by last autumn's corn wine and this spring's first berry beer, and then we sung up the moon like a pack of coyotes, yipping and howling until the furry brothers in the hills howled back. It was the best party we'd had in a while, the kind of noise that would attract the sometime studs back from their lonely heights. "Winter's good and over, studs," our singing said, and our stomping feet set the tread that called them in.

Long about the middle hours the littler boyos had gone to sleep in the fir branches, and most of the bigger ones were thrashing together in the bushes or night swimming with the beavers. I found myself sharing a basket of shallots with Miracle, who I ain't never been alone with to talk to.

"You believe in Big Man, Larkin Grouselegs?" she asked, the greens crunching in her mouth and making us both smell like a freshet.

"He's right there," I said, waving toward the scaffolding. I set my arm back down, kind of on accident touching hers, so our little goose bumps rubbed together, and my fine pale hairs tingled.

Even with the shallots, she smelled better than any boyo. Different, kind of a crisp, sharp smell, like warm snot and workswat and blood and flowers all mixed together. Last fall she'd taken to wearing hide shirts over her wool kilts, about the time she got tall as most of the boyos.

"That's not Him," said Miracle. "Not those built-up bones."

I gasped, for Preach would cuff my ear bloody for such talk.

She went on, unconcerned, protected by her woman-girlhood. "It's the idea of Him. It keeps Him here with us. The real Big Man, He's dreaming, and maybe He's in our dreams."

My dreams mostly concerned themselves with butt-wrestling with Stumpwater Rob or the Firehair twins, or more often than not, just flickery images of Ma'am's people and lands, like firelight in all the colors of nature. I couldn't recall ever seeing Big Man in my dreams, but I wasn't going to admit that. "Uh-huh," I said.

Always safe, that one.

Miracle chewed on another shallot a while, then spat a bit of pulp. Her arm wrapped over mine, skin close enough for warmth and me to feel her pulse. "Ma'am, she talks to Big Man in her dreams. And sometimes even Little Men. That's how she knows where to send boyos to find things."

And maybe send the sometime studs to find the lolly, I thought. Had Ma'am done that? "Was it time for Big Man to have His heart?"

"It was time for you boyos to have your hearts." She smiled, her teeth gleaming in the starlight. "There's a change coming soon to Ma'am's people." Her other hand slipped beneath her wool kilt, then she touched my chin with her finger. It was damp and prickly. "Inker left me a spot of color for you."

After she ran into the darkness, silent as a deer, I touched my chin where she had. It wasn't covered by Inker's work, though my cheeks and nose and forehead were. Her mention of the old man had set my face to prickling beneath the mask of leaves and mud, but I was vowed and sworn to a week and a day.

I found dampness in her touch, which I tasted.

Musty blood. She'd drawn blood from within the secret places of her body and set it upon me. It was then that I felt the wind of Big Man's dreaming, so I climbed to the new deck to listen to His lolly heart rattle against the yet-highest rib in that breeze and feel His breath dance upon my prickling skin.

* * *

Big Man walked across the mountains like I might step over a stick, His feet striking the ground to dig new lakes for all the Ma'ams and their people and the animals of the lands. He was grinning fit to split the sky, teeth chiseled from the dark of the old moon -- for that brightness had to go somewhere -- and eyes that flared like a summer bonfire.

He leaned down and plucked me from the Earth, like I was an ant and He a child. Big Man laid me in His palm, and I grew just enough fit to speak with Him, so that the cyclone of His voice would not bloody my ears, and my own words wouldn't be the buzz of a lacewing to Him. His hand was warm, and even the roughness of it was like the lines the water made on a sand bank, all natural and firm and in a rhythm with my ribs.

"Larkin Grouselegs, Heart-of-the-Aspen," He said, calling me by my first and second names. No one but me knew my second name. No one, not even me, knew my third name, the one that wrapped around my soul. Only Ma'am did, and she wouldn't tell.

"Big Man," I said, and for a moment I had a flash of butt-wrestling and wriggling salmon and the day that lightning struck the highest spruce, like my real dreams were come knocking. "Welcome to Ma'am's lands."

He laughed, in the voice that the spring floods use when an ice dam busts somewhere high up, and his breath smelled like snow on stone. "All the land is mine, Aspenheart. The dirt and the air and every breathing thing."

I got my stubborn on, that sometimes got me a beating. "Welcome anyhow, since you been away."

"Ain't that me down there?" Big Man asked, "with my metal heart rattling in my open ribs?"

I remembered what Miracle had said. "It's you and the idea of you, but you're here with me."

He laughed again, this time smelling like fir and spruce and the first greens of spring. "It's you with me, little Larkin Aspenheart. I've come to tell you there's change afoot, and to mind your step. Ma'ams grow old, and new Ma'ams come. You can take the knife and be a boyo all your life, or you can take to the hills and be a sometime stud. But every time and again, someone has to be a Da to Ma'am. Just like I'm Da to the Ma'am that is the world."

When he said that, I swear the mountains smiled and stars gleamed with pride and I heard the trees in the valleys below us whisper all three of my names, even the one I didn't know.

Then Big Man closed His hand and shook it, like I was a knucklebone fit to be cast into the circle. I cried to be let out, but when I jumped to my feet, I nearly fell off the new deck and there was only the lolly rattling against the yet-highest rib, beating out the rhythm of my three names.

* * *

Later that day, when I was tickling fish out in the lake, Ma'am sent Darling Jack, one of her last, littlest boyos for me. "The want to thee you," he said from a muddy perch in the shallowest shallows, grinning until drool piddled his face.

I'd been out on the lake for some quiet peace, wanting to be lonely as a pinecone and think on Miracle and what Big Man had said in my dreams, but there's no running from Ma'am. I smiled at Darling Jack. "I'll be along shortly."

He toddled off with the news while I bid farewell to the lazy trout. I had thought, but got no more from it than a little smoke. Ma'am would know, she always did, if I could find the words to ask.

She was on her sandbed in her grotto, leaf curtains half-drawn, being fed stewed wild oats by some of the boyos. Darling Jack cuddled between her breasts, each one a sack bigger than that almost-littlest boyo, her nipples pink and huge like sun and moon in a fleshy sky. "Larkin Grouselegs," Ma'am said, "and welcome to your own home." She shooed Darling Jack and the oat-bearing boyos, then patted the huge dome of her belly, as if I might want to lie between her breasts as well.

"Ma'am," I said, "thank you and no. I'll stand." My face was prickly and hot, and somehow the salty smell of her reminded me of Miracle, which made my woodstick stir as if there was boyo butt-wrestling to be had close to hand. My woodstick hadn't ever before stirred around Ma'am, and I felt my body had become a traitor.

"You have the makings of a fine sometime stud," she said quietly, which took me for a shock. Ma'am would no more live quietly by choice than a mountain storm, and there wasn't much in the world that would force Ma'am to anything she didn't choose. Maybe winter's sharp teeth, or a flood, but not much else.

"Don't want to be a sometime stud," I said, matching her unnatural quiet with my own.

"Figured," she said, and grinned me a few of her teeth. "How was your talk with Big Man?"

"I..." What surprised me was that I wasn't surprised. I *knew* Ma'am walked in dreams. Everybody knew that. I just didn't know she walked in *mine*. "He was big, Ma'am."

"Sometimes," she said, and her voice was even softer, "sometimes I think on Big Man. He's an idea of the land, more than any kind of person."

"We're building Him, Ma'am. He's our hope, like Preach always said."

She flapped a soft, meaty hand. "Preach ain't nothing but an old sometime stud without the courage of his woodstick no more. Good as a winter warmer for me, and keeps the boyos in line, but he's an old sister. Don't be listening to Preach too much."

"Then why we building Big Man?" I asked. Her words made my eyes sting. Ma'am's boyos were in the world to bring back Big Man, and Big Man was our ticket to Heaven. "His bones are out there, taller than six sometime studs laid end to end, and that lolly heart's now rattling in His chest. Or did you forget?"

Ma'am didn't never forget nothing, which I knew, but she just smiled at me. "Did you ever think we were living in Heaven now, my sweet Heart-of-the-Aspen? Little Men, they lived in stone caves and worked their fingers to nubs. We get cold in the winter, and wet in the spring, but there's almost always plenty to eat, and we don't do too much work other than building Big Man. What does Heaven have that we don't?"

"Blackstone pathways," I said, "and air-voices, and the gift of flight, and all the things the Little Men had."

"Maybe your Heaven," she said tartly, "but sure as winter ice not mine. Now, listen up Larkin Grouselegs. In a week your face comes clean and we see what Big Man told Inker to place on there. But you got to choose."

My woodstick chafed my leather shorts again, like it was listening too.

She smiled at that. "You want to be a boyo the rest of your days, feeding and carrying Ma'am around, that can be. Preach will cut you and you can butt-wrestle and swim and holler in the trees for the rest of your natural life."

Just a few days ago, I would have thought that was the future for me, but Big Man had come to me, and I wanted to see His change afoot.

"You want to be a sometime stud, I reckon there's Ma'ams in other lands that'd take you in now. A few winters on the ridges, grown into your height, you might be the mountain king, with your pick of Ma'ams to roll with. Maybe someday be an old Preach, live a good long life dipping your woodstick into more Ma'ams and boyos than you can ever keep count of."

That didn't sound so bad, either, when I thought about it. Live long enough to see the world move through the years.

"And that's one more choice than most boyos get, I can tell you. But..." She held up one great finger, fat as an elk's woodstick. "You got another choice. One most boyos never hear of."

"Da," I said, the word rolling unfamiliar in my mouth. I knew what it meant, but I hadn't heard it spoke upwards of five or six times in my life. There was just Ma'ams and boyos, and rare as an albino salmon,

women-girls.

"Da," she said, smiling. "Ain't no bigger job in the world. Big Man comes into a boyo, when he sets out to become a Da. I won't lie, ain't a long job, for no Ma'am can abide a Da once she's ready to pop out boyos for the rest of her days, but a woman-girl just set out, she needs a Da. For a little while."

"Where do old Das go?" I asked.

Ma'am's smile closed down, her lips settling like a grandfather catfish. "Once Big Man comes into a Da, He never really leaves. When a Da is done, Big Man takes him back."

That dream-hand would close in a fist around me, and squeeze like the biggest sometime studs could squeeze an acorn, and I would be no more than a blood drop on Miracle's chin.

My woodstick slipped back up like a trout backing into sand, and my shoulders fell. I wanted to live, smell the pines at every season and see winters in their dozens and play through every spring. I didn't want to work and sweat and fight on the mountaintops, and I sure didn't want to Da my way to a grave as early as any lost nestling ever found.

Her face closed down like her smile, and Ma'am touched her fat fingers together. "You go, Larkin Grouselegs, Heart-of-the-Aspen, and you think on what I said. If it pleases you, ask Preach or Miracle for their thoughts, or climb the new deck and see if Big Man blesses you again. I'll hear your word when the mask comes off your face and we see what Inker wrote there."

I ran from her, without even a kiss or a farewell, through our little village of huts and tipis, along the muddy beach of the beavers' pond, past the reedy shore of our big lake beyond, and for miles up into the canyons and valleys. I didn't want to speak to Miracle or Preach, I didn't want Big Man's words or Ma'am's encouragement.

All I wanted was to be a boyo forever, just like I was, no knife cuts, no running off for a sometime stud, and sure as hell no Da to Miracle's Ma'am, or any other woman-girl that Ma'am might dreamwalk me to.

But the whole time I ran, my chin itched where Miracle had touched me, and the salt-blood smell of her never left.

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Six days in the woods, and though I was tempted, I didn't pick at my mask nor look for myself in streams and pools.

Instead, I ran down a deer, taking her life with a prayer to Big Man and a whispered apology to the flickering of her dying ears. I skinned her, and cut a cloak of her hide, though untanned it drew flies and closed my nose up right quick. What I couldn't eat or carry I cut and laid out for the coyotes and the wolves, and a haunch up a tree for old mister bear.

Then I *was* the deer, ambling through meadows and rubbing against tree bark and sleeping in little hollows in the ferns. The silent drip of morning in the forest was music to me, and the rank smell soon became my own. I tried walking on hands and feet, but my shoulders pulled me back up.

It can't be done.

I tried not to dream, for I was afraid of Big Man and what He might say to me, afraid of Ma'am. Afraid of myself, mostly. Even when I slept, there were only the dreams of the deer who was wrapped me

round like Ma'am wrapped Darling Jack. I nibbled spring shoots and feared the cough of the cougar and worried the breeze for scented news of friend and foe.

Not much different from waking, really.

Then on the last day I walked back to Ma'am's lands, knowing I must present my face. After that I could leave, if I wanted to take a skin and live on the land, but I had to come home one last time.

* * *

Though I arrived bloody and muddy, without the courtesy even of a dive into the lake, the boyos welcomed me back. They hugged me and touched me, these that had been my friends and brothers forever, and I found myself thinking that Stumpwater Rob had been cut once, but the Firehair twins had not yet, and was it different butt-wrestling with one or the other and why did I think some woodsticks were tastier and sweeter than others, until I had to put the whole business out of my head.

Whatever became of me, I would not be a boyo the rest of my life. The cut was not for me. Sometime stud, Da, or runaway animal, I would carry all my parts and pieces until Big Man took me home for the last time.

I shrugged them off, then, throwing my deer hide cloak to the ground and shouting until Stumpwater Rob took my hand and led me to the creek and laid me down and washed me clean, save for the dried mask crusting Inker's marks upon my face.

"Listen, my little Larkin," he said, and I knew that Stumpwater Rob had been cut the spring I was six and I was sure he'd never even been given the choice to be a sometime stud, let alone everything I'd been offered. His eyes were too far apart and he limped funny and he heard bad from the left, and though he hugged real nice and kissed sweet as a trillium, he wouldn't have lasted three days on the ridges with the wild studs.

"Larkin, sweet Larkin Grouselegs." Stumpwater Rob said, combing my hair with his fingers. "Preach has been talking, telling the boyos you were of a mind to refuse Big Man's gifts. I knew it weren't true, and when you come back, Preach got real quiet, but ever since you left Miracle's been crying in her tree house and Ma'am hasn't even let Darling Jack into her grotto."

"I'm back," I growled. When had my voice gotten so bearish?

"We done some more work on Big Man's bones, to raise the ribs around the lolly and hang His arms," Stumpwater Rob said, "and we're ready to hoist the new deck to the clavicle and build the head. I was hoping you'd come raise that deck with me and some of the other big boyos, and the little boyos can get to the rib deck, which is where we hung the lolly, and fill in the chest."

Work was what I needed. He was right. I hugged Stumpwater Rob, gave him one last kiss for luck, and jumped up.

We worked past evenchant and into moonlight, raising the next deck. In the week I'd been gone, someone had chopped three vertebrae out of an old cedar log, that made the spine rise. Ribs traded up the river from the Ma'am's whose boyos hunted gray Leviathan in boats were hung, me at the top of the beautiful pulleys instead of the bottom, helping the older boyos guide them in.

The new new deck was almost like a collar, round and stiff encircling Big Man's neck, and I could see where His head would go as plain as if those fire eyes were staring back at me right then. I looked down in the dim of the evening to see the younger boyos tossing leather sacks in between the ribs.

"Liver and lights!" yelled one of the Firehair twins, his grin gleaming in the starlight.

Then Miracle was there, her hand slipped into mine, and Stumpwater Rob and the other boyos were gone as if they'd never been. I heard the flies whining on the lake and smelled the forest, smelling Miracle as well, though her saltiness was less, replaced with more of a Ma'am smell, woven in with honey and mint.

"You thought about it?" she asked, her free hand fingering my back.

My woodstick surged.

"I thought about it." I'd avoided the thought, as much as I could, but the time was come.

"Boyos are bringing Ma'am out, building a bonfire. Your turn is soon."

There'd be others after me -- there were at least a dozen boyos with spring birthdays, and four of them had spaced so close behind me that they'd be faced this spring as well, but I knew Ma'am had marked me out, brought Inker in from far instead of having Preach do it, or one of the part-time Inkers from just down the river.

I would lead this year's boyos to...to whatever lay ahead. So I squeezed Miracle's hand, and let my finger brush her chin, and followed her down the ladders and ropes, wishing I had some of that women's blood-magic.

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The bonfire roared, challenging the moon and stars with a brilliant orange that could only rise from the Earth, just as the sun did every morning. Ma'am sat on her throne, that she hardly ever used, crafted from Little Man stuff and woven reeds and aspen posts and for all I knew the bones of our Ma'am's long-vanished Da, father to us all.

"Preach, bring Larkin Grouselegs the bucket," she said.

I waited while an ancient Little Man bucket, colored pale muddy blue like water with no holes at all -- something brought up by the tunnel runners -- was set before me by a frowning Preach. He looked like he wanted to say something, a blessing or a threat perhaps, but no words passed.

"Wash," said Ma'am.

I bent over, plunged my hands in the cold, cold water, then scrubbed my face. Inker's mudpack sloughed off like a snake skin.

I didn't look into the bucket to glimpse my face. By the light of the fire, the water would have been a bad mirror anyhow. Instead I stared at Ma'am, letting her see Inker's handiwork.

The boyos gasped, then buzzed among themselves with quiet chatter. Preach stared, his eyes narrow, but he still held his tongue. Ma'am just looked at me a while, her great face unchanging except for the shifting shadows of the fire, then she looked over at Miracle.

Miracle nodded once at me, then faded from the bonfire's light.

"Well?" I said. Usually a face was read out to much merriment, that Deadwood John would be a hunter, or Robin Rascal had the makings of a Tunnel Runner. Most markings were no more than a few lines or an odd rosette, though some, like Preach, had masks across their entire faces, curling like vines in the

spring. This silence was new to me.

"There's aught to read here but what's in your heart," said Ma'am, her voice rough. "Go up to the new deck and see what Big Man has to say."

So I left the bonfire and climbed the darkness to the little round platform with the hole in the middle and the cedar spine rising at the back. I knew I wouldn't take the knife, but the rest of it was still a mystery. Facing was supposed to be an answer.

When I got to the new deck, it was no surprise to find Miracle there, though she had laid aside her hide shirt and wool kilt. Her breasts were small, no bigger than my open hand could cover, not like the great wellsprings of milk that lolled on Ma'am's ample chest. Since our long-vanished Da, no one but the sometime studs had ever seen the salty cleft of Ma'am's legs, them and Preach, when he brought forth boyos in our long-borning litters across the years. But now Miracle's legs were folded as she sat, still showing me a twist of hair dark and curly as what had sprouted around my woodstick.

Which, to think of it, was sprouting as hard as it ever had for butt-wrestling.

Then she opened up her arms and I made my choice under the stars, Big Man's voice booming in my ears as the wind whispered my three names within the tops of the forest.

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Dawn came with no dreams, and I found myself tangled with Miracle, one hand closed upon her breast and the other resting on her back.

"My face," I whispered to her as she slept. "What was upon my face?"

Miracle's eyes opened, and she smiled. She had not been sleeping, I saw, just waiting for me. "Nothing, my sweet." She touched my chin. "Nothing and everything. Inker had needled your own face upon your skin, that you would be free to choose."

"What happens now?"

She wriggled her hips. "I'll close myself tight, let all the little boyos in my body be found by your white swimmers, then I'll adopt a few of the big ones from Ma'am and set out to find my own lands."

Her fate was not mine, though I supposed this was the change Big Man had said was afoot.

"What about me?"

"Stay," she said, "and see." Then she stood, picking me up as if I were Darling Jack, though the night before I'd had almost a foot of height and several tenweights advantage over her, and carried me around the platform to sit upon Big Man's cedar spine.

"Wait," Miracle said, "for Big Man to find you."

Then she was gone, like summer fog upon the lake.

A Da was everything and nothing, I realized, absent sire to a generation of boyos and their deeds. Like Big Man to all Ma'am's people, though a Da's job was as short as pleasure, while Big Man's went on forever. The thought brought me patience, so I sat on the spine and waited. After a while Stumpwater Rob came up to hoist a wickered cage of willow-wands. He fitted it to Big Man's collar, never saying a word even as he closed me within it.

Later some of the other boyos, the Firehair twins and the little ones, brought leather and woven wool and draped the willow cage, which had almost made a head. Someone's arm hung firepots in the lamps of the eyes, and a mouth was cut below where gleaming chunks of pale stone were set in for teeth. Mud was pushed through the nostrils, filling the head with good, honest soil, though it steamed red as if fresh from slaughter.

I sat and dreamed, looking for Big Man though He did not come to me, then for Ma'am, but her face was turned away. I thought I heard Miracle calling me, but it was just her laughing among the wooded valleys, running like a deer from the sometime studs, her adoptive boyos scrambling after.

Then I awoke from my dreaming and stood tall, a web of ropes and wood falling away from me. The crimson mud had set, and a dried fingerprint of blood still itched upon my chin as I strode across the lake. I took none of my children with me on my shoulders, for they already dwelt in Heaven. It was only for me to walk the mountains and watch over their dreams, my metal heart clashing in my chest to remind me always who we had been and would never be again.

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