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## Tending the Fire

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## *Tending the Fire*

*This story belongs to Ron Evans of Saskatchewan and to Jesús Elciaga of Oaxaca and to others from whom I have heard it, in one shape or another, in Tamazulapán and the Sawtooth Mountains and Toronto. In some lesser way the words, and also the places, through which it is told in this version belong to me. What interests me, though, isn't the shifting and tenuous ways in which the story belongs to one or another of us, but the deeper ways in which we all (all of us here, now, in this moment which repeats through space and time) belong to the story — and belong to the places through which it is or might be told. It is a simple — some say much too simple — story after all. As well as a true one.*

It was either a little or a long time ago,  
and the old woman who made the world,  
day before yesterday, had only just made it.  
The wind picked up, and the sunlight cut  
through the air, where it had never been before,  
and the old woman who made the world  
pitched her camp in a high meadow  
not very far from the middle of things,  
and looked at the world, and said to her dog,  
*Well, Dog, do you think it'll do?*  
(She was fishing for compliments, I guess,  
which is usually dangerous, but she did it.  
She said to the dog, *Do you think it'll do?*)

And the dog said, *Grandmother, yes,  
it's the way I have always imagined the world.  
The spruce trees look like spruce trees, the mountain  
larches look like mountain larches, the balsam  
firs have the unmistakable odor of firs.  
But Grandmother, these and the others  
seem to have places to be in the world.  
The rabbit, the mountain cat, the blacktailed  
deer, the varied thrush, the squirrel  
all have their places, like the mosses  
on the rocks and the bright green  
lichen hanging in the lodgepole pine.  
I'm the only one here, Grandmother,  
with no one to chase or to run from  
or to run to, and I'm lonely in this world.*

The old woman poked up the fire and sighed  
and said, *Dog, I should make you someone to love  
and look after if that's how it is.* And she made  
men and women, then, as a gift,  
to cure the loneliness of the dog.

And the dog said, *Grandmother, thank you,*  
and guided his humans out into the world.

The old woman sat there, thinking, alone  
 in the high meadow, tending her fire,  
 watching the anemone and yellow lily  
 sprout through the snow, and the phlox and the grouseberry  
 flower. Then she thought she saw something travelling  
 up the valley, dodging the fallen-log  
 bridges, sloshing through each of the streams.  
 The dog reappeared at the edge of the meadow  
 and trotted up close to the old woman's fire.

*You're back for a visit already, said  
 the old woman. Dog, is anything wrong?*

*The dog said, Grandmother, now that you ask,  
 yes: it's those humans you gave me.  
 They listen, you know, but they don't seem to learn,  
 and I came back to ask you to give them something  
 I think they should have. Grandmother, please,  
 would you teach them to speak? Would you teach them  
 words, so they can tell one another their lies  
 instead of keeping them secret?*

The old woman

shifted a burned stick farther  
 into the fire and reached down a little ways into  
 the ground, and found a jagged, black stone,  
 like a piece of black basalt, and washed it in the stream,  
 and set it in the north end of the meadow,  
 and then she said, *Dog, that stone  
 is the stone of speech and storytelling.  
 Those humans will be able to say what they choose to say  
 as long as it's there. And no one I know  
 would want to disturb it.*

*Grandmother, thank you,*  
 said the dog, and he turned and headed down  
 the valley, to be with his humans again.



The old woman sat in the high meadow  
not too far from the middle of things.  
She watched the swelling swamp-laurel shells  
and the ripening willow galls and the wind.  
She watched the purple saxifrage, the yellow  
heather and the partridgefoot flower,  
and she saw way off, once again, a dark  
shape making its way up the valley.  
The dog reappeared at the edge of the meadow  
and ambled with his long tongue up by the fire.

*You're back again, dog. Is anything wrong?*

*Grandmother, yes. It's the humans again.  
You remember I asked you to teach them to talk.  
but now they just talk and talk all the time.  
It isn't enough, and it's too much.  
Grandmother, please, would you teach them to laugh?*

The old woman who made the world  
picked up a stick and poked at her fire  
and reached a little deeper into the ground  
and took a crooked, yellow stone — pale,  
like yellow quartz — and scrubbed it in the stream  
and set it in the east end of the meadow.  
Then she said, *That stone, dog,  
is the stone of laughter and the stone of dreams.  
Those humans will be able to laugh  
just fine, and maybe have a few  
new things to talk about too,  
when you see them again.*

*Thank you,* said the dog,  
and he went right back to his humans again.

The old woman who made the world  
sat watching the mountain windflowers spilling  
their plumes, and the willow leaves turning  
and the aspen leaves starting to turn,  
and then the aspen leaves falling,  
and the fir scales floating down out of the firs,  
and then she saw something far off, moving  
once again. It had four feet and a tail,  
and it was headed straight for the meadow.  
The dog came wearily up by the fire.

*Here you are again, dog, the old woman said.  
Is something still wrong?*

*Yes, Grandmother,  
I asked you to teach them to talk and to laugh,  
and they talk and they laugh just fine, Grandmother.  
No matter what happens, no matter what  
their dreams say, they keep on talking, no matter  
what their stories say, they just laugh.*

*Grandmother, please, would you teach them to cry?*

The old woman looked a long time into the fire,  
and she reached down deeply into the ground  
and found a smooth, grey pebble,  
like a piece of stream gravel, and cleaned it.  
She set it in the south end of the meadow,  
and then she said, *dog, that stone  
is the stone of weeping and the stone of prayer,  
and those humans'll have tears in their eyes  
when you see them again.*

*Thank you, said the dog,  
and he vanished into the bush  
and made his way back to the humans again.*

The old woman who made the world  
 sat in her camp in the high meadow,  
 listening to the geese bark in the darkness  
 overhead and watching the winter wrens  
 flit through the rhododendron  
 in the shortening afternoon, and the troops  
 of waxwings stripping the blueberries bare.  
 The first snow fell and melted, and the rabbits  
 moulted, and the marmots disappeared.  
 And the old woman saw something slogging  
 up the valley, through the leaf litter  
 and new snow, breaking trail. The dog reappeared,  
 chewing his paws, at the edge of the meadow  
 and came and curled up close by the fire.

*You've been gone a bit longer this time, the old woman  
 said, but you're back even so. How  
 are the humans doing?*

*Better, grandmother,  
 said the dog, but something is missing.*

The old woman who made the world  
 stirred her fire and watched how the coals  
 glowed pus-yellow, blood-red, bone-white and grey  
 before they went black. *Choose carefully,  
 dog, she said. Choose very carefully,  
 dog, because the circle is closing.*

*Grandmother, said the dog, heading  
 up here today, wading through the deep snow,  
 I knew what I wanted to ask. Grandmother,  
 please, would you teach them to dance?*

The old woman

shifted a glowing log deep in the fire  
 and reached down a great distance into the ground  
 and grabbed a half-round, blood-red

(no stanza break)



stone, like jasper or red chert,  
and rubbed it with snowmelt and new snow  
and set it in the west end of the meadow  
and sat back down by the side of the fire  
and shifted another log.

*That stone, dog,  
is the stone of dancing and the stone of song.  
Those humans can dance now, and sing.  
And they can talk and tell stories  
and laugh and dream and cry and pray,  
and I hope it is enough, because the circle  
is closed.*

*And those were your gifts, dog.  
They were yours, and you gave them away.  
Whatever those humans say from now  
on, you'll only hear the pain  
and pleasure in their voices. Soon you'll forget  
you ever heard the words. Now nothing  
but barks and yips and howls will form  
in your own throat. Now when they laugh,  
you'll make no sound. They'll weep,  
and you'll whimper. Now when they dance,  
you'll scamper between their legs. You'll jump  
up and down, but the music will never  
enter your body. The words and the music  
and the tears and the laughter will be theirs.  
They owe you all this, dog, and I somehow  
think they may never remember to thank you.*

— Robert Bringhurst