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Anukite

If you want to know more about Elsie's story than just the official reports you have to ask one of the grandfathers, because they know all the old stories as well as the new ones, the latest gossip, and sometimes it's all the same stories happening over and over. Someone just changes things up a little bit, a name here, a place there. Elsie's story could go any which of a way. Ask Oscar DuCharme. He can tell you all the stories. No one else seems inclined to tell you much of anything.

Oscar could live in the newest tribal housing project; he qualifies, but he doesn't want to. Instead he lives in the little white frame house just off Main Street, where there aren't any sidewalks, and the view is the back of The Steak House that faces onto Main Street. He and his wife, Ruby, dead now for years, bought the little house years ago, not on the time payment plan, but with one big chunk of money they'd saved up from the lease payments on their land allotments.

Bigger towns touch the gossip one day, one week, maybe one month, and then they reach out to some newer story, but in Jackson, a story as big as Elsie's happens rarely, so it gets handed around for weeks and months. It's been a little over eleven months now since Elsie died, and people have fondled the story so long that they've worn the bumps off it, smoothed it with loving words, polished it with lies, half truths, and omissions. Now it just sits there on the shelf with all the other stories, something that you look at now and then and say, "Oh, yes, that one. Really interesting. I can't remember all the details, but if you really want to see it like it happened, go ask one of the grandfathers."

You walk down the slight hill from Main Street, turn right on First Street, and halfway up the block on the left, there's Oscar's

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house, smoke rising from the chimney telling you that he's home and got his wood stove going. The early January snow, six inches deep, hides the packed earth of his front yard. In front of the skeletal Chinese elm that he planted twenty years ago, a snowdrift finger angles across the yard, pointing its icy tip towards the southwest like a contrary compass. You notice that the bottom right side of the front door has the white paint scratched away in fresh parallel arcs. Oscar must have another dog, you think, and when you knock, a yapping from inside tells you that he has indeed found a replacement for Tiger, his mutt that they told you had died last summer when you asked if he had a mean dog.

The door opens and Oscar stands there, his dark eyes, deep set in heavy wrinkles, blinking a little at the glare of sunshine off the snow. He's dressed in old khaki pants and brown cloth bedroom slippers, a navy blue sweater with a ladder run falling from a half-torn-off little alligator patch on the left side of his chest. The sweater is tight over his big belly. The tail of a faded green plaid shirt hangs in a drape below his sweater front. Cowering behind his leg, a brown ratty dog yaps a high-pitched sound.

"*Hau,*" he says, and then he makes a sharp downward motion with his right hand and the dog hushes. "Come in."

"Hello," you say, and you start to explain who you are, but he stops you before you get more out than your name.

"Know who you are," he says. "Word gets around." He doesn't ask what you want from him.

The room smells of brewed coffee, beans and ham cooking in the kitchen, damp dog and cigarette smoke.

"It's a good day," he says. He snaps brown, bent fingers, points behind the sofa and the dog disappears behind it. "But it's cold. I don't like winter so much anymore. You know, I used to like ice fishing, but not anymore. How about you?"

"No. I like summer fishing."

He hrrumps in agreement. "I have coffee just made. I'll get us some."

You sense that it isn't time yet for you to ask about Elsie's story. Perhaps there are matters of politeness to attend first.

He starts for the kitchen door, taking slow, shuffling steps. The dog darts out from behind the other end of the sofa, dashes ahead of him, toenails clicking on the worn linoleum floor.

The living room is small; walls once painted white are yellowed by the smoke from the old man's cigarettes, festooned here and there with greasy, gray cobwebs that he probably never notices. A battered lumpy sofa in mud brown tweed sits against one wall, an orange velour rocker next to it and in between, a small table with a lamp, an overflowing ashtray and a mostly eaten bologna sandwich. Opposite the sofa, a small television with a coat hanger for an antenna sits on top of a larger console television. Both are switched on to an afternoon game show with the picture in black and white visible on the smaller one, and the sound coming out of the console set. Waist-high stacks of books stand like three wise men beside the television. Here and there on the walls, Oscar has thumbtacked up color pictures torn from magazines – Niagara Falls, a mountain view that could be anywhere in the world, a group of kangaroos shown against a red barren landscape.

He hollers from the kitchen.

“Sit down. Be comfortable. I don't have that powder cream stuff for the coffee. I got that can milk, the kind with the flowers on the label.”

“That's fine,” you say. “Just a dollop. I don't take sugar.” You push aside the newspapers on the end of the sofa and sit.

He returns in a moment bearing two thick tan mugs of coffee. The dog follows, gives one short territory-defining yap at you before it disappears again behind the sofa. Oscar lowers himself into the orange velour chair, and the springs in the seat relax and cup his weight so that he looks like he is wrapped in a moth-eaten trade blanket.

You sit and sip in silence for a few minutes, and then he talks about the weather a little more. Finally, it is time.

“Grandfather, I heard that Elsie Roberts was your niece,” you say.

He puts down his coffee cup on the table, fishes in his sweater pocket for a moment and brings out a pack of no-filter cigarettes.

Instead of having only that one end of the pack torn off, the whole top is ripped open, right across the seal. He takes out a cigarette, leans back and struggles with his hand in his pocket until he has extracted an old scratched silver Zippo lighter. He lights the cigarette, draws deeply and exhales, his eyes squinted.

“Elsie was everybody’s niece,” he says. Then he explains. “You know, it’s the old kinship way of thinking about people. We are all related in that way, so Elsie was my niece in that Indian way, but not white man way. Indian way that makes her your cousin, everybody’s relative – cousin, niece. Indian way, makes me your grandfather, and everybody’s grandfather. How do you feel about that?” He isn’t challenging you; he’s smiling. For one time in your life, you feel included. He goes on.

“See, calling everybody cousin or niece or whatever makes us feel close, family, but it also makes it damned hard to find a mate if you have to think of everyone you meet as a cousin or a niece or some other family member. Some rules must not be broken. Elsie came to be as the result of broken rules, and then she broke some herself, and that’s the heartbreak of it all.”

You don’t have anything to say to that since you are part of the rule breaking yourself, so you just sip your coffee and wait.

Then he begins the story, and you sit still and listen.

“Elsie’s mother was from here, but Elsie wasn’t born here. She was born at Marty Mission School, where her mother went after her husband died. Elsie’s mother was a one only. You know that expression, ‘one only?’”

You don’t, but he explains.

“It means a woman who marries only once, no matter what happens after that. It’s old-fashioned as hell, and women these days don’t pay it any mind, but back in the old days, a one only woman could be one of those demons the Christians talk about, and she would still be respected by her own people, revered even, no matter what else she did, just because of her devotion to a dead man.”

Burning tobacco smoke curls around his head, defines the air currents in the room, floats towards you carrying the words and the feelings.

“Elsie’s mother – her name was Mary – anyways, she didn’t have family anymore, just her husband’s people down here, and six to seven months after he died, she left. Went back to Marty Mission, where she’d been raised up and went to school come from. So Mary goes up there, and after Elsie is born, she moves off to Mobridge and she takes jobs cleaning houses for people, just like she used to do here. Mary’s kind of odd, kind of stays to herself, but she does good work, so people don’t care. They don’t have much to do with her, but they know she’s a one only, so, like I say, she gets a lot of respect. Maybe not friendship, though, you know? That’s a different thing. So anyway, Elsie gets raised up there in Mobridge. They’re kind of outcasts from everybody, just the two of them all alone. But from what people say, they were making a way for themselves, you know, a living. They say.”

His eyes take on a far away look and you know he’s right there, up at Standing Rock, where the official story says it happened, but doesn’t make you feel like it’s real. It’s like Oscar is right there in Elsie’s pocket on the night it happened. Like he’s right there watching, but he can’t stop any of it. He just had to be there. Somebody had to tell the story.

Oscar folds his hands over his big belly and he starts a different story, a story that you think doesn’t have anything to do with Elsie.

*So one day, Inktomi, the Spider was going along
And he was thinking heavy.
All the people were busy going about their business and
Inktomi had no business to go about.
Whenever he tried to work with the people, they told him
To go away and mind his own business.
But he didn’t have any business to mind.
So, Inktomi, the Spider was just going along
And he walked by the lodge of the first man and first woman,
Wazi and Wakanka.
Inktomi noticed that they were just sitting there,
not doing anything.*

They sighed real big from time to time, and they didn't look happy.

So Inktomi stops.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Oh, it's nothing that you can fix," Wazi says.

"How do you know that?" Inktomi replies. "Ask me."

"Go mind your own business," says Wakanka.

"Let me help! I can make your business be my business," Inktomi says.

Wazi and Wakanka just sigh again and look unhappy.

"As it happens, my business is all caught up. Let me help!"

Now Inktomi is begging.

So Wazi and Wakanka look at each other and then Wazi says:

"Our beautiful daughter, Ite, is married to the Wind God, Tate.

And now that she is gone from our lodge, we have no one to boss around.

Tate has honored our daughter, but she is still only human, and so are we.

We want to be gods."

Inktomi considered.

"If Ite could be made a god, would she then make you gods?"

Wazi and Wakanka exchanged glances.

"Yes, but how could that be made to happen?"

Inktomi rubbed his hands together. Here was some business!

So, people didn't want him around, huh? So the other people wouldn't let him help with their business, huh?

He could make them look foolish, and they might think twice before they told him to mind his own business.

"Give me your consent and I will make it happen."

Wazi and Wakanka smiled and agreed.

Inktomi went on then, and went to Ite, and while she was sleeping,

He whispered in her ear.

He whispered, "Anpetu Wi, the Sun, has much power.

He has more power than your husband, Tate.

And you are beautiful. If you smile at him

Just so

If you dip your chin and look up at him through your eyelashes

*Just so
And turn away slowly, looking back
Enough times, he will not be able to resist.”
So, on awakening, Ite followed Inktomi’s suggestions until all the gods
were talking, but nobody was talking about it to Anpetu Wi’s wife,
Hanhepi Wi.
“I am secure now,” Ite said to herself. “I can be the god wife of Anpetu Wi,
when I want to.”
Just then, Anpetu Wi decided to give a feast.
At the feast, Ite looks around, bold.
Boldly, she walks over and sits down in the place reserved for Anpetu Wi’s
wife.
Hanhepi Wi enters just then, and she sees the situation and she demands
She demands that something be done.
Now Anpetu Wi looks around at the little smiles on the gods’ faces.
He looks at Hanhepi Wi’s angry face and
He looks at Ite, lowering her chin and smiling up at him through her
lashes.
He does not see Inktomi, peeking from the corner.
Anpetu Wi looks and his eyes are open.
Anpetu Wi points his finger and half of Ite’s face turns ugly.
He points again and Ite is banished to the earth and ever afterwards,
The people will call her
Anukite*

The Double Faced Woman.

Oscar sits still for a minute. Then he heaves himself up out of the chair and he says, “Let me get you some more coffee.”