

The Cave Solution

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Because I felt an empty space in my chest that would not go away for a long time, I filled it with nature. I signed up for a service where I could volunteer to grow a tree inside my body. I went to a greenhouse outside of the city to get the seedling implanted inside of me. It means that I do not have very long to live now, but maybe the tree will carry on some part of my spirit. It's better this way. I want to experience what it is like to have life inside of me, but I don't want to have children. The human race is overpopulating the earth.

Because a tree is growing inside of me, I feel the emptiness fade to make room. I wonder if this is what pregnant women feel carrying babies in their wombs. I've known many women to become pregnant and deliver as I've been incubating my tree, which takes several years—a slower process inside of a human body. My sister is having her fourth child. She's sent me a photograph of herself wearing a THIS IS MY LAST ONE, SERIOUSLY shirt with a little decorative arrow pointing at her belly. She is beaming, and a healthy glow radiates from her skin. I think she is a good mother. She should have all the world's unwanted children.

I rent a cave along the side of a cliff overlooking an ocean where stalagmites and stalactites are inching toward each other over time. It is better for the tree, which is in its last stage of growth inside my body. My rent is discounted because I volunteer in the wilderness preserve where my cave is located. I install wood posts and string wire through them for my visitors. I put caps on the posts along the cliff trail so that their tips don't splinter when it rains. I count birds in the early dawn and deer at night. Sometimes, I help with the removal of invasive species of plants.

When it is my time, I have to make a pilgrimage away from the ocean and into the forest where the type of tree I am incubating is more common. I was told that this would be automatic, that I would just know where to go. So I trust my tree and don't worry about preparations. It reminds me of the behavior of animals who travel immense distances to mate and reproduce, something innate that brings each generation back to the same places.

There are others who rent caves nearby. It's a perfect place for simple living and extreme concentration. My neighbor's name is Varun. He has dark hair and it flows down his back. He is a drummer. I think he must be the best drummer in the world, if only for the devotion he has for his art and finding the perfect acoustics. He is especially skilled at the ghatam, which sounds good in caves. I am mesmerized by his hands as he slaps it, fluttery and fast like butterflies.

Astrid lives in the cave above me, the only one that gets direct light. She makes tapestries out of glass beads. Her cave is the most splendid of all. Its mouth, which faces the sun, is like a stained glass cathedral window. I can tell that Astrid contains great sadness, but it emerges in the world as beauty and light. She works on a very long tapestry as she stares out at the quiet gray air and the great waves crashing against the cliffs. I've asked her about her project: she will be done when the tapestry finally touches the sea.

And finally, there is Leopold who is the youngest of us and wears his flaming red hair in a bowl cut. He collects mushrooms, often disappearing into the woods to go hunting after it rains. He brings back a small cardboard box full of the strangest shaped fungi. It's heaven out here for mycophiles.

Sometimes we get together around a fire and talk about our lives. Every once in a

while, we pause everything we do to listen to the galloping of wild sheep as they cross overhead.

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I read a lot at night. Erotica. Romance. Sex books with lots of pictures. I am not interested in relationships anymore, but in the feelings that those pictures and fantasies elicit in me when I am alone, the parts of me that hurt and pulse. I want the tree that grows out of me to remember the human body: to long, to be sensual.

I open a book called *Transcendental Sex* when I cannot sleep. I skim through it and look at line drawings of nude couples in positions of closeness. Each page prescribes an exercise. My favorites are the Love Mantra and the Heart Mantra. The Love Mantra goes like this: when you take a breath, you imagine that you are filling your body with love. When you breathe out, you say “love” and imagine that you are sending all of your love out into the world. The result is that by the end of the practice, you should be loudly chanting “love, love, love.” I have woken up my neighbors doing this. The Heart Mantra goes like this: I place one hand over my heart and the other I rest on my genitals, and through breathing exercises I travel the pathway between them, the center point being the tree.

I can feel the tree growing inside of me in the quiet, participating in these exercises. It's a pulsating thing when I lie still. I can sense it striving. Sometimes, when I burp or fart, I get a whiff of the earth that is building up inside of me. I am on a meatless diet of strictly mushrooms, plants, herbs, and berries, and my scat starts to look like that of a wild animal.

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There are some things that we cave dwellers have in common. For instance, we are sensitive. Holidays make us feel melancholy. We are claustrophobic and nervous in crowds. We could go full days without opening our mouths. Out here, we live sparsely and celebrate one holiday: the brightest full-moon night that illuminates the forest in this very beautiful way. On this autumn night, we celebrate clarity and openness.

In preparation for this day, we make puppets in whatever shape we want them to be, effigies constructed out of forest brush. They are big and elaborate. Mine is a fish; Astrid's is a bright bird; Varun's is a bat. Leopold builds a fantastical creature he sees in his dreams. We march through the forest with our puppets. The deeper we go, the bigger and taller the trees. We pass large spruces, an abundance of skunk cabbage.

Leopold leads us to the dwelling place of the Humongous Fungus. On the surface, it doesn't look like much, just a white stripe on some trees here and there, slowly cutting off their nutrient pathways. But under the earth, the Humongous Fungus is colossal, the largest known organism on this entire planet. We offer up our puppets for the Humongous Fungus to devour. We contemplate its destructive power, the shortness of life. Silently, I ask it to spare the tree growing inside of me. Varun plays his hand drum, and we dance ecstatically until we fall asleep in the woods.

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Leopold invites me into his cave after our visit to the Humongous Fungus because he wants to show me something. He leads me toward a stack of petri dishes and a microscope in a dark corner. He raises a petri dish and holds it up for me to see. “If you put

two samples of fungus in opposite sides of the dish and watch them grow toward each other, you can determine if they are both part of one individual. At the meeting point they will either blend into one or form an intense wall of conflict, releasing toxins to try to kill one another.”

“Nature is cutthroat,” I say to Leopold while he shows me other petri dishes with fungus in various stages of approach, not quite touching yet. Leopold strokes my arm, but I pull it away. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t know what to do with the time I have left.”

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The tree inside of me is taking over. I leave my cave often and sit at the edge of a cliff staring at the sun, my arms extended. I root my feet into the ground. Astrid joins me sometimes with her beadwork in hand, threading her tapestry as she chats with me. “You’re brave,” she says, “for giving up your life.”

“I hope the tree carries something of me when I go,” I say. “I have been trying to imbue it with human depths, but lately I’ve been thinking that maybe the tree growing inside me is causing this depth that I didn’t feel before. It’s been with me for so long, I can’t tell.”

I watch Astrid meticulously bead her tapestry and think that we are not so different. We both want to leave behind something beautiful, something that connects us to colossal time, like the land and sea.

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I was told I would fight back at the greenhouse; I would struggle with letting go. At night, I can’t sleep, and even the mantras don’t help. My body burns, the same way it feels when I forget something important and it’s too late to go back. I am full of regrets. It is then that I begin to hear the voice. It’s a quiet, slippery voice that speaks in pulses and streaming cytoplasm instead of words.

I follow the voice through the cave system, further in than I’ve ever gone before. I shine my flashlight in the direction of the voice. Then I see its source: a glowing, yellow, bulbous thing. It oozes down in strands before me. The Humongous Fungus has been growing beneath me, in darkness, forever expanding outward. It is contacting me, my tree translating.

“Great forests die,” the globby mass says to me, “but I have lived and thrived for thousands of years. What are you?”

“I am human,” I say. “Our lives are short, but we try to live them with purpose. What are you?”

“I am the passage of time,” it says. “I wanted to meet you, and your tree.”

I protectively cover my belly with my hands. “What will happen to my tree?”

“Don’t be afraid. It will grow big and tall and soak in many days of sun and rain. We shall live entwined in the forest for a long time before I devour it,” it says.

“I will go where you can’t find it,” I say, “far from here.”

“Dear human,” it says, “but I am the voice that you’ve been waiting for, the voice that will lead you into the forest to your home.”

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After my encounter with the Humongous Fungus, I return to Leopold’s cave and I

lie down next to him on his green blanket.

“You’re shivering,” he says.

“I want to feel closeness before I go,” I say. We take off our clothes and press our bodies together. I run my hands over every part of his body so as not to forget it. A mound of soil pours out of me.

The next morning, as Leopold sleeps, I look through his samples of fungus. The one that we looked at together has blended into one.

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There is a party for me in advance of my departure. We eat sautéed mushrooms and drink honey water. Varun plays the ghatam at my request, and I watch the flutter of his hands one last time. Astrid gives me a little patch of blue-green beadwork to place beside my tree, to remember the ocean by. Her tapestry is so close to touching the ocean that she hesitates to finish. “It’s my life’s work,” she says. “I don’t know what’s after.” Leopold is quiet, pensive. They all promise that they will stay with me, walk with me into the forest, and visit my tree over time.

When I actually do hear the soft voice of the Humongous Fungus calling for me, I sneak away and leave the others behind. All along the path, the trees have been taken over, and this image unsettles me. The odds seem against my tree, but I know it is time for me to go and for the tree to try. The woods are covered in this mossy carpeting. It is so soft. When the Humongous Fungus tells me I’ve arrived, I kneel upon the moss and gasp out a puff of dust and look up at the sky. I wonder how different humans would be if we must disappear when it’s our children’s time to begin. *Remember me*, I think as I breathe into my tree one last time, and then I am gone.

