

Excerpt from “Night Heron’s Curse”

by Thoraiya Dyer

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It was not in my nature to be jealous.

Most days, I thanked my ancestors for the fleetness of foot and the gift of patience they had given me. Still, sometimes I secretly longed for a share of the breathtaking beauty that my younger sister, Night Heron, possessed.

My mother gave me the name of Swamphen, though I had been born beneath a rain of stars. I could not have been called ugly, but when I looked at myself critically in the calm surface of the Blue Pool, I saw a skinny figure with practically no bottom. I saw a square face with a flat nose and a crown of crazed, zigzagging hair.

Night Heron, however, from the age of nine, could not pass a campfire without turning men’s heads. She was slender and supple. Her black hair and eyes shone. Her mouth was soft and inviting and her nose dainty and perfect.

Even when she scowled at me in the darkness of the Old Woman’s cave, her face did not scrunch in unflattering lines, but in fierce avian beauty.

“They stare at me all the time, older sister. They never stop. I’d like to poke sticks in all those staring eyes!”

Father would have told her that mountain wildflowers did not resent the admiring glances of men, but Father had died after being buried in a rock slide last year, and whenever I spoke of him, Night Heron shivered and shook as though remembering there was nobody left to protect her. The Elders would decide who she married, now, and they would marry her on her twelfth birthday, not her fifteenth birthday as Father had once assured her. Her twelfth birthday was only a month away.

“Just ignore them,” I said comfortingly. “Pretend they’re not eyes, but river pebbles. Walk by them as though you were walking by the bank of a river.”

Nobody ever stared at me, and it wasn’t just because I had crazy hair and no bottom. They thought I had the Mother Eel Spirit inside of me, and it frightened them. Every time I went down to the creek to place eel traps, I came back with dozens of giant eels. Nobody else was lucky like I was. The men and women muttered. They thought it was magic. This year, I would turn sixteen, and nobody had asked the Elders for me as their wife.

It wasn’t magic. It was just patience and observation. Nobody else watched the sky and remembered where the rains fell. Nobody else rose before dawn to run up and down the length of the great valley, checking the water levels in the pools and streams. The forest was tranquil and the run invigorating. I loved leaping over rocks and fallen eucalypts, past sleepy bellbirds through the morning mist. It felt like being the only human alive in the world. Almost, it seemed as if I might step into the Dreaming, where monstrous talking birds and animals roamed and the world was still being formed.

I tried to tell the others where to set the long woven bags that we wedged into bottlenecks in the creeks, but they didn’t want to know. Eels entered the traps as they moved from one pool to another. Because of what I

saw, I knew which pools the eels would abandon, and when they would stay put. Nobody listened, though, because I was much younger than they.

That is the way of it, with my people. The older is always considered to be the wiser, no matter how smart or stupid they actually are.

“I wonder who the Elders will choose for me,” Night Heron muttered as she placed tinder on the banked coals. “I hope it’s not Crooked Spear. His leg is so horrible. I couldn’t bear to look at him, much less touch him.”

The fire flared, bringing light and warmth to the cosy space. The old women saw that the blaze was lit and abandoned their gossip in the twilight. They shuffled, single file, into the cave.

I hid my blush at the mention of Crooked Spear. He was tall and slender as a spear, but that was not why he had been named. His left leg had a bend in it below the knee, a bend that ought not to be there. It had been there since the day of his birth. He was not a fast runner, and he found it difficult to move stealthily through the trees. As a result, he had to be cunning in other ways. His throwing arm was strong. He could stay completely still, for hours, in the shadow of a tree or crouched in the waving grass. Like me, he studied things carefully before he made decisions.

Once, he told me that my weaving was skilful. Another time, he told me that he envied my morning runs through the valley, and laughed that he must be content to pounce like the owl and not run like the swamphen. On a winter’s morning when game was scarce, he had even asked me where I thought eels could be found that day. Men never asked for advice from young girls. Crooked Spear was not like the other men.

“What’s that?” my Oldest Aunty cackled at Night Heron. “Are you talking about Crooked Spear?”

“Crooked Spear hunts better than any straight-legged man,” Second-Oldest Aunty said approvingly.

“Crooked Spear solves the Tribe’s problems before they begin,” said Oldest Aunty, even more approvingly. “He’ll be the Chief one day.”

I moved a basket of tubers to make room for all the women.

“The Medicine Man has seen that Crooked Spear must marry a perfect woman,” Second-Oldest Aunty declared. “Only marrying a perfect woman can stop the curse on his twisted leg from being passed on to his children.”

My fingers froze on the basket. A perfect woman? There was no such thing. Crooked Spear had to marry a perfect woman?

Oldest Aunty sat behind Night Heron and combed her hair back with gnarled fingers.

“You are the perfect woman, Night Heron,” Oldest Aunty crooned. “You are the perfect woman for our future Chief.”

Night Heron’s mouth tightened stubbornly as she snapped some more small twigs and built up the fire.

“What do you think, Swamphen?” Second-Oldest Aunty smiled at me. “Isn’t your sister perfect?”

My knuckles white on the edge of the basket, I forced myself to smile back.

“My sister is perfect to look at,” I said truthfully.

She was perfect to look at, but she didn’t want to marry Crooked Spear. I wanted to marry him. It wasn’t fair. Why did the Medicine Man have to make that prophecy about the perfect woman? It made my insides hurt; it made me feel like running into the twilight.

I could run like the wind. Surely that would be enough to break Crooked Spear’s curse?

But the Medicine Man had made no prophecy about me.

The next morning, I rose with the stars still cold and hard on the horizon.

Trying to tell myself that it was foolish to dream of Crooked Spear when I had crazy hair and no bottom, I lengthened my stride as I moved away from the caves, following the twisting ridges through fog that retained the deep violet glow of night.

Lyrebirds called with the mimicked voices of a thousand songbirds. A gentle rain wet the drooping eucalyptus leaves. Dampness darkened their ruddy bark.

At last, the mist turned pale with the morning sun. Droplets beaded on banksias and a bedraggled kookaburra watched me flit past. Spirits seemed to hover and breathe at my back.

I paused at Sunning Snake Rock to look out over the valley. Ghost Falls thundered over the edge on the other side. Wind from the waterfall hurled the fog away, clearing a space. The fog collected again in the valley like foam from the waves of a violent ocean.

It was three years since I'd seen the ocean. Three years since our tribe had gone to the coast to trade. We were feuding with the peoples directly to the east of us, so when we travelled it was to the north as well as east. Twenty days travel took us to the Great River That Fed The Sea, where the Seven Tribes welcomed us and fed us their strange fare. Our elders gave gifts of thick pelts, sturdy spears and smoked eel. From the Seven Tribes, we received gifts of superior flints, emu-feather cloaks and ornamental shells.

Last time, my father had deemed me too young, but the next time we went, it was possible that I myself would be traded, to one of the Seven Tribes men. Perhaps that would be for the best. I would not have to watch my sister Night-Heron get married to Crooked Spear. I could start a new life with the Seven Tribes. There must be very many eels in the Great River That Fed The Sea.

With a sob, I ran on, through the rain and mist. It was thicker the further I descended into the valley; it infiltrated the trees, blotting out the world in whiteness. My cheeks grew numb. Fine rain collected on my eyelashes. Shaking my head, I tried to concentrate on the stream that babbled beside the trail; tried to guess how much water had fallen during the night and whether eels would be moving towards or away from the Blue Pool.

It was no use. I couldn't stop thinking about Crooked Spear. And then, dream-like, as though my thoughts had been made flesh, Crooked Spear himself appeared by the mossy banks of the Blue Pool. Knee-deep in mist, he seemed to be floating in cloud.

I sucked in a breath and slid to a stop, breathing hard.

"Swamphen," he said, smiling sadly. "Have you followed the song of my spirit?"

"Crooked Spear," I replied, clutching my chest. "I have blundered here as blind as a banded rail. I apologise for intruding."

I spun around to go back the way I'd come, but he said,

"Wait, Swamphen."

My heart thumping, I turned back to him.

"I heard about the Medicine Man's Prophecy," I blurted. "They say you must marry a perfect woman."

"That is what they say," Crooked Spear agreed, rubbing his short, bristly beard. "Today the Medicine Man will summon your father's spirit, so I may ask him for his perfect daughter as my wife."

I stared at him in speechless misery, thinking: It should be me. He should be summoning my father's spirit to ask for me.

Crooked Spear's brown eyes were gentle.

"You will be my sister, Swamphen. You will leave the old women's fires and come to my fire. Does that not please you?"

I hesitated.

“It would please me more to be the mother of your sons,” I whispered. I felt shocked by my audacity. The words could not be unsaid. I wanted to run, but my legs were frozen.

Crooked Spear nodded to himself.

“I should have asked for you years ago,” he sighed. “You are strong. The Mother Eel Spirit gives you strength. You are as quick as an eel, too. I watched you run and I thought that if I married you, it would be enough to break the curse, but I wanted to prove myself as a hunter, first. Now, it’s too late. The prophecy has been made. I cannot defy the Spirits.”

I took his words into my heart and locked them there. They were the most precious things I had ever owned.

“My sister will make you happy,” I assured him, though I was far from sure. Night Heron did not want to look at him. She didn’t want to touch him.

She would grow. She would learn.

Crooked Spear looked wry.

“I suppose so. To all appearances, she is the perfect woman.”

I bowed my head, feeling hot tears on my cheeks. Then, I turned and trotted away into the mist, head held high. The cold rain mingled with my tears.

When I returned to the camp, Night Heron was gone.

Oldest Aunty seized my shoulders, pinching hard.

“Where is your sister, Swamphen?”

“I haven’t seen her, Aunty,” I answered, startled out of my reverie.

“We hoped she had gone running with you.”

“No, Aunty.”

Oldest Aunty’s mouth puckered tightly.

“Then you must find her before the men discover she is missing. It would be a grave insult. She would be punished harshly; perhaps even cursed. You can run faster than anyone else, Swamphen. Run, now, and bring her back, before the ceremony at sunset. Bring her back before the ancestors are offended beyond all chance of forgiveness.”

I ran to all of Night Heron’s favourite places. I ran to all the best collecting and gathering sites. I ran along all the trails that criss-crossed the mountains.

I found my sister on the trail to the north and east. It was the trail that led to the Great River That Fed The Sea.

Exhausted and angry, I barred the trail in front of her. It was late afternoon, and there was no hope of returning to the caves before sunset.

“Where are you going?” I demanded. “The Medicine Man is calling our father’s spirit in a ceremony tonight. How could you disgrace your own father?”

“Father left us,” Night Heron said stubbornly. “He said he would always be there to protect us, but he lied.”

I shook her by the shoulders.

“It’s not his fault that he died!”

“I don’t want to marry Crooked Spear. I’m going to the Seven Tribes.”

“You can’t do that. What about the prophecy?”

“What about it? I don’t care if Crooked Spear is under a curse.”

I dropped my voice menacingly.

“Don’t you think the Medicine Man will put a curse on you, if you run away?”

Night Heron frowned. She thought about it for a moment.

“His curses can’t reach me if I run far enough. I’m going all the way to the sea. There are different spirits, there. Friendly spirits.”

“How do you know they are friendly? Come back with me right now. I’m bigger than you. I can force you to come back.”

Night Heron looked me up and down.

“You’re my sister. You’re supposed to protect me, too. If you make me marry that hideous, old, crippled man, then you don’t love me. If you make me marry him, you’re not my sister.”

I felt strangled by the rush of words that poured into my throat. Crooked Spear was not hideous. He was not old. He was not even crippled; not really. I was supposed to protect her? I was *trying* to protect her, from the evil curses of the Medicine Man. It was because I loved her that I wanted her to go back. Didn’t she know I would rather have Crooked Spear for myself?

No protest passed my lips. I looked at her and my anger drained away. She was only a child. Just a frightened child.

“I am your sister,” I said softly. “I will protect you.”

I put my arm around her shoulders. We began to walk.

The ocean crashed against the land.

The plump, white bodies of strange birds filled the air. The wind that blew was fierce; it scoured us with flung sand and snatched away our voices when we tried to speak.

Night Heron followed a narrow stone ledge around the cliff, heading south. High, arched rocks loomed above us. Her hair was tossed and tangled. Her full lips were chapped and bleeding. We had taken a wrong turn, somewhere; we had not come out at the campsite I remembered with the bark huts and the sheltered ring of fires.

Still, we had moved quickly, much faster than when the whole tribe travelled together. We had reached the sea in only twelve days, and we had eaten well along the way. Night Heron had found honey, tubers and trees laden with nuts and fruit. I had trapped eels and caught goannas in trees.

This exposed headland was a different world to the bushland of our mountain home. We needed to find the Seven Tribes. On a beach, somewhere close by, I remembered eating fish, prawns, lobsters and shellfish with Eaglehawk’s people, but I could not find these things on my own, and, besides, I could not take them without the spirits’ permission.

The sky over the sea was dense with purple clouds that rushed towards us. I felt in my shivering bones that a mighty storm was coming, and I wondered if it was our ancestors, seeking revenge for our disobedience. I scanned the beach and the tidal rock pools, squinting for any sign of a boat; a discarded net; any evidence of people.

There was none. Night Heron was getting too far ahead of me. Edging along the ledge, I called out to her.

“Night Heron! Wait for me!”

Was it my imagination, or did I feel the rock beneath my shoulder blades trembling?

She didn't hear me. I called again, louder, cupping both hands around my mouth.

"Sister, wait for me!"

She stopped this time, and turned, and there was no mistaking the shuddering of the cliff this time. Pebbles showered down from above. Night Heron shrieked and flung her hands up to protect her head. Larger rocks fell down. I shrank against the curve of the cliff, shielding my eyes, trying desperately to keep my little sister in my sight.

A warm brown hand stole into my palm, and I glanced up to find an older woman with a necklace of iridescent shells crouched beside me. A woman of the Seven Tribes. She pressed her finger to her lips for silence. Then, she beckoned me back the way we had come.

I pointed to Night Heron, loathe to leave without her. The Seven Tribes woman nodded, smiled encouragingly, and beckoned again. When I looked again through the haze of dust and sand, I saw there was another Seven Tribes woman with Night Heron. It would be all right.

Our guides led us back to the sandy cove where Night Heron and I had first climbed down over the hill to reach the ocean. There, they breathed sighs of relief and their patient looks turned to scolding ones.

"Worse than foolish," my rescuer admonished. "Two young girls, trespassing at sacred Yi-ran-na-li, without enough sense to be silent in respect."

I bowed my head quickly; saw out of the corner of my eye that Night Heron had done the same.

"We apologise most sincerely, Aunty. We were looking for your camp. Are you of the Seven Tribes?"

"Yes," she said. "I am Crow, from Eaglehawk's tribe. Where are you from?"

"We are from –" I started to say.

"We are from far away," Night Heron interrupted me. "Very far away, and we can't go back. Ever."

Crow set her fists against her hips and regarded Night Heron levelly.

"Eaglehawk's tribe will not shelter criminals. Not even a beautiful young criminal like you."

"I'm not a criminal," Night Heron said hotly.

"With respect, Aunty," I said quickly, "my sister is fleeing an undesirable marriage."

I felt humiliated by my own lie. Undesirable? Never! I wondered what Crooked Spear thought of me, now. He must despise me. I wondered how he had felt, discovering that Night Heron had run away rather than marry him. The possibility of his pain made me ache with guilt and longing.

"Then you have disrespected your father's wishes?"

"My father is dead," Night Heron answered sullenly.

"Please, Aunty," I said, "can you shelter us?"

Crow shook her head sadly.

"Your people will come for you," she said. "I won't be responsible for a feud between our tribes. Do not try to come south. Do not try to come to our camp. That is the only advice I can give you."

"Is there a place where we can wait for the storm to pass?" I asked in a small voice. The Seven Tribes would not help us. We must live alone, here, forever, or we must move on, into unknown lands, estranged from our ancestors and the mountains who were our brothers. Perhaps we would offend more spirits in our ignorance. There would be no-one to help us; no-one to turn to.

I had made a momentous mistake. I should have forced Night Heron to return with me. Now, it was too late.

"There is a trail over the headland," Crow said grudgingly, indicating the way. "The mouth of the Great River That Feeds The Sea is on the other side."

As if she knew what I was thinking, she added,

“You must not attempt to cross the river. The shell-eating tribes there will not welcome you, either. Nor should you set foot in the Mangrove Swamp to the west. Wau-Wai, the Eel-Shark, waits beneath the waters for those who trespass on his domain. The monster can swallow a canoe in a single gulp.”

Night Heron shivered.

“You should kill that monster,” she said.

“Many have tried,” Crow replied. “The monster’s heart is said to have the power to transform a warrior, so that his inner attributes, his strength and his bravery, his true self, can be seen from the outside. Many a scarred or wounded hero has sought to be healed by Wau-Wai’s heart. All have failed. Now, you must leave.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” I said. “You have been kind.”

“I was young and foolish, once. Off you go.”

I took Night Heron’s hand, and drew her towards the narrow trail that climbed up onto the headland.

When we paused for breath, half way up, Crow and her companion had vanished.

Night Heron clutched her chest as though it pained her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her, alarmed.

“I can feel something coming,” she panted.

I frowned.

“Something coming? What do you mean? Is it the storm?”

Night Heron shook her head. Her eyes widened. Her lips drew back from her teeth.

“Swamphen, you have to help me!”

“Help you? What’s the matter? What do you want me to do?”

“A curse from the medicine man. It’s looking for me. It’s coming.”

“It’s your imagination,” I said, though I felt sick with the certainty that she was right.

Night Heron turned and scrambled desperately up the slope. Mortified and helpless, I followed close behind her. In her haste, her bare feet slipped in loose dirt and stones. She cut her palms and her forearms on the rock, but she didn’t slow down.

We arrived on top of the headland. The wind tried to knock us back down. Across the ocean, the angry clouds boiled towards us, but Night Heron stared in the opposite direction, still clutching her chest; still panicked and short of breath.

I followed the direction of her stare. The mountains were pale shadows in the distance. The Great River That Fed The Sea lay like a silver serpent across the land. I saw the Mangrove Swamp that Crow had mentioned. Across the mouth of the river, a narrow peninsula marked the beginning of a long stretch of yellow sand which must be the home of the shell-eating tribes.

“We have to go down the other side,” I shouted at Night Heron. “We have to shelter from the storm.”

She shook her head. She fell to her knees. I tried to go to her, to help her up, but something powerful and invisible – something that moved against the wind - thrust me away from her.

Terror turned me icy cold.

“Swamphen!” Night Heron shrieked. The earth erupted around her. She flung her arms above her head, clawing at empty space, as her body was sucked down into the headland itself.

Grasses crawled over the spot where she had been, and then were still. The earth appeared undisturbed. My sister had been taken into the hill.

Sobbing, seizing handfuls of grass in the spot where she had knelt in the grip of the curse, I called out her name, over and over.

There was no reply. The sky crackled with lightning. Thunder roared in my ears.

“Night Heron,” I cried, one final time.

Then, as the rain started coming down in vicious spears of freezing cold, I had no choice but to make my way down the other side of the headland, alone.

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(The complete, 8000-word story can be found in *Australis Imaginarium*, an anthology of Australian folklorish fiction from Fablecroft Publishing, available from the Fablecroft online shop:

<http://fablecroft.com.au/about/shop> )