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The Troll Child: 54,000 Years Ago

The woman who was to become my ancestor strode swiftly down the mountainside. She was in a hurry to reach the lake in the valley, which we today know as the Sea of Galilee. At that time the lake covered a far larger area. Contemporary geologists have retrospectively named it Lake Lisan ('tongue') on account of its elongated shape. What name the woman and her group gave to that great expanse of water is something we shall never know.

She was young and slender with curly black hair, and her skin was a dark brown. She wore nothing but a twisted cord about her hips, from which dangled strings of shells dyed red and green. They swung in time with her strides. Between her naked breasts hung a strip of leather bearing an amulet – the small figure of a bird, made of gazelle horn.

On the mountain the woman had met a man whose seed was now in her belly.

The man was about the same height as the woman, but much heavier and more powerfully built. Their encounter may have been violent, in which case she could hardly have been in a position to defend herself effectively. His face was not like that of anyone the woman had previously encountered; his nose was much larger and broader, and the whole of his face seemed to jut forward. His eyes were brown, just like hers, but his skin was lighter and his hair straight. Above all, he had a characteristic scent, which she had not noticed until he came close. It was an acrid, alien smell.

Although the man and the woman were so unlike, a child began to grow within her. By the time she was due to give birth, winter had come. Though the small band of people she belonged to were still on the shores of Lake Lisan, they had

moved a few dozen kilometres southwards, towards their old homeland. They put up some simple windbreaks along a cliff face, hoping the creatures they had found living in the new country would leave them in peace. The Others – or the trolls, as they sometimes called them.

A chill rain fell. Now the ground was bare of the red tulips of spring time: nothing but a few dry thistles remained along the shoreline. The birth was difficult, but both the woman and her baby survived. It was a boy – an unusually big, robust child. My ancestor wrapped him in a gazelle hide and laid him carefully on a bed of dried grass.

Three days later the shaman performed a ritual, dancing frenetically until she made contact with the gods, while the other members of the group sat around the fire chanting. On returning from the world of the gods, the shaman had much to say about the child's future. She foretold that he would have many descendants. They would be dispersed in all directions, even to the ends of the earth. 'He shall be called the son of the gods, and the gods will give you strength enough to raise him,' the shaman told the young mother.

It was most unusual for her to lavish such extraordinary words on newborn babies, but the shaman was a wise woman. She could see that the woman who was to become my ancestor would need to have a special vocation conferred on her if the child was to survive. The group could not afford to lose any more children, or there would be an end to their presence in the new country.

Fortunately, the boy turned out robust and strong. He had a healthy appetite, first for his mother's milk, then for shreds of meat and plants. He drank out of brooks, and never even suffered from an upset stomach. But he was not quite like other children in appearance. His skin was lighter. His chin was smaller, and it receded towards his throat. His eyebrow ridges were more pronounced. When his hair started to grow longer, it hung straight. And when his mother was out of earshot, the other members of the group often called him the 'Troll Child'. It was said with affection, but they had their suspicions about his origins.

After a while they plucked up the courage to return to the mountains in the north, even though The Others were there. The region we now call Galilee provided such favourable living conditions, abounding in gazelles, aurochs and other game. They found a fine, spacious limestone cave that provided shelter in winter. Only rarely did they glimpse one of The Others, and that was nearly always at a long distance. On one or two occasions they got within hearing range. The Others had a strange way of speaking, and it was impossible to make head or tail of their language. Their garments were plain and unadorned.

The Troll Child was not at all quick in starting to talk, nor did he enjoy stories as ordinary children did. Yet he was at least as skilful with flint, wood and animal hides as anyone else. He just needed to be shown what to do.

During this time the winters became unusually cold, wet and harsh. Many small children fell sick, and several died. But the Troll Child thrived, growing stronger and stronger. The group took good care of him. They gave him extra attention, as was their wont with anyone who was a little different. Moreover – though they never actually voiced this fear – they were anxious that someone might come and take him away from them.

A few years later the woman died, without ever having told anyone about the man she had met that spring day when the tulips bloomed red on the mountain slopes. But the words of the shaman came true. The Troll Child did have a large number of descendants, and they were dispersed in all directions, even to the ends of the earth.