

THE OLD WOMAN AND THE STORM

by Patricia McKillip

THE SUN ROSE, as it did every day, making the birds squawk, painting the world. But this rising was different. Arram sensed it as he stepped out of his house. His bare sole felt a newness. His eyes filled with a memory of light. He stood still, watching the night melt away, and for just a moment, time enough for the first warmth to touch his face, he knew that this was also the First Sunrise, when the Long Night had ended and the world began to form. The sun had risen so. The earth was old-new underfoot. Dreams and memories stirred in a breeze through the trees. Arram went for a walk in the new world.

The Sun, the painter, got out her paintbrushes of light. She drenched a bird in red and yellow as it swooped by. She splattered purple among the berry bushes. She painted stones and reflections of stones in the river. Arram passed his favorite rock, where he himself had painted his First Name. The Name had come to him in a dream: the First Name which the being that breathed through his body and saw through his eyes had called itself. Now it had Arram's name and voice. Arram had made a gift of the Name to the rock. It slept so calmly in the water, massive and yellow, a dreaming giant. Other people had liked it also: many pictures, gestures of affection, patterned its weathered sides.

Arram filled his belt-skin with water and turned away from the river. The flat earth, the Sun's domain, spread before him in a thousand shades of brown. He faced the Sun, felt her pour hot dark color into his hair, his body. Far away, another stone, huge and rounded with age, smoldered in the morning with a glow like fire. It caught his eye, greeted him with the common greeting: the languageless, timeless memory of the First Morning. Arram walked toward it.

A lizard scurried away from his foot. A hawk circled above him, then hurtled down, a fist of brown plumage. It rose again with a snake in its talons. Minute red flowers swarmed across Arram's path. Animal bones slowly buried themselves in the earth. Tracks of a live animal came across the desert, crossed Arram's tracks, and went their own silent way. A cloud smudged the sky, and another. The Old Woman who hated the Sun was smoking. The distant rock moved slightly closer to Arram. It had changed color: the fire had melted into brass. Have I been to that rock before? Arram wondered. Or do I only remember it from another time? Thoughts rambled pleasantly in his head; the world constantly changed under his eye. Is this walk mine? Or am I remembering an earlier walk? He stopped for a swallow of water. The ground simmered around him, blurred with light. The air droned and buzzed with invisible singers. A shadow passed over him, and he looked up. The Old Woman was puffing clouds all over the sky.

Arram walked on. When he grew hungry he killed a lizard and roasted it. The soul of the lizard went on its own walk, searching for another container. The rock began to loom across the horizon, bigger than Arram had thought. It darkened; the clouds were draining the Sun of color. The air was motionless, moist-hot. If I remember the rock, I should remember reaching it, Arram thought. But I don't. So this must be my own walk.

There was a fragment of red cloth on a thorn. Someone else had come that way and gone. In the dim, steamy afternoon, the voice of the desert was a vibrant bass hum. The Sun managed a final angry shower of light. She burned the cloud-edges of silver, struck sweat from Arram's face, turned the great wall of rock orange. A shadow, black as night, fell across Arram's path and he stopped, as though he had caught himself from stepping into a rift. He glanced up. Then down and up again. Someone lost a shadow, he thought surprisedly. There was nothing, even in the sky, that it belonged to. As his eyes fell again to the earth, a wind came up tasting of dust and rain, and sent the shadow tumbling across the desert like a leaf.

Now that's strange, Arram thought.

He continued his walk. The rain fell, drenching, warm as a lover. He opened his mouth and drank; he walked through water as through air, for who could know how many times his soul might have been a fish? He had dwelled in water, under the earth. He had died again and again, and been reborn to the same earth. Now he was a man, with a head full of misty memories. Dreams of other lives. There was nothing in the world to fear; he had been, or he would be, every shape in the world. But still, when two boulders crashed and split over his head, and the sky flashed a frosty color that was no color, the man decided it was time to run.

He reached the lacework of caves in the rock just as eggs made out of ice began to fall out of the sky. One struck him, a hard blow on his shoulder that drove him to his knees. He crawled the rest of the way into the cave, sat against the wall in the dim light, rubbing his shoulder and wondering at the force of the storm. The rock above his head seeped into his awareness. It had been battered times past counting, nothing could destroy it. I would like to be a rock now, Arram thought. A puff of smoke made him cough. A stone-painting on the cave wall was no longer a painting. It was the Old Woman. She lifted her pipe, made lightning flash, and Arram saw her face.

He stopped breathing. She was the ugliest woman in the world, as well as the meanest, and he wasn't sure what to say to her. He wanted to move very quietly and take his chances with the ice-eggs. But he hesitated, and as he sat motionless, the Old Woman passed him her pipe.

He took a puff, not knowing what else to do, and passed it back to her. "So," she said in her croaky voice, "you want to be a rock. Go ahead. Walk outside. You won't be a man very long. You won't be anything recognizable." She laughed a reedy insect-laugh. Her hair was white as river-froth, her nose humped and battered like the rock they sat under. She was shriveled, light as a bundle of twigs. She was crazy with jealousy of the Sun, and she was dangerous. Her eyes were the color of lightning.

Arram sighed. He thought with longing of the butterflies along the river, of his love putting her hands on his bare skin. Who would have thought a walk in the morning would have led to death? "The storm will end," he said softly, and she answered, "I am the storm."

His eyes flicked at it. The sky was growing darker, the ice was still falling constantly as rain. His throat closed suddenly. He wondered how far it could spread. It could batter homes to the ground, it could kill children

"You're so angry," he breathed. "Why are you so angry?"

"You made me angry!"

"Me? What did I do?"

"I saw how you looked at the Sun this morning! She rose and touched your face and you followed her without a thought "

"No, that isn't the way it was! She-I-"

"How was it? You looked at her as if she had never risen before. I saw you."

He nodded, confused. "That's the way it was. She was-But I-I was only remembering, the way I must have seen her first. When I was a child. Or in another time. The world-"

"Could you ever look at me like that?"

He leaned back, sighing again. He was silent, drawing his name on the ground in the dust, feeling the air in his lungs, the blood beat in his fingertips. "All right," he said after awhile, his voice detached, faraway. "You can kill me now. But first stop the storm."

She only growled something and the thump of ice in the dark sounded louder. Many living things would be left looking for shapes that night. He gazed at her, bewildered.

"Then what do you want?"

"Well, look at me! I am rain! I am thunder, I am lightning, I am bitter, bitter winds. I never have choices! Make me another shape. One that will move you to look at me the way you look at the Sun." She waved her pipe again, and the lightning swam over Arram's amazed face. "Do that, and the storm will stop "

"I'm only a man," Arram protested. "I walk naked in the world. I kill lizards and paint rocks and then I die. I have no power."

"But you don't know what power you might have had. In another time." She snapped her fingers impatiently and thunder rolled. "Think! Remember."

Arram tried to think. But each time he tried, the thunder snarled and the lightning spat. He could only think of the quiet river with ice-eggs smashing into it, the forest bruised and broken by the storm. He couldn't remember a life of magic power. He didn't even know anyone who could remember. The Old Woman herself was the most powerful being he had ever seen. More powerful it seemed, even than the lovely Sun, who had fled from this storm. Maybe, he thought suddenly, the Old Woman is so strong, so angry, that she never sees the simple world. How can she? She throws fire at it, she rains on it. Maybe if I tell her what I see she'll believe that I will have to die to make the storm stop, because I can't help her.

So he said, "In my forest there are red flowers, so big they overflow two hands. They are very beautiful, with many petals reaching toward the sky." The Old Woman was beginning to look annoyed. Her white brows flew together and a boulder crashed down the cliff outside. Arram cleared his throat and continued hurriedly. "They weren't always flowers. Once they were all young women who had no lovers. They cried and pleaded for lovers, but all the young men had died in a battle, and no one knew what to do. One day the great black Hunting Beetle came to them and said, 'I'll be your lover. The only lover all of you will ever need.' And of course they laughed and threw stones at him, making him scurry into a hole so he wouldn't get squashed. That night he crawled back out and looked wistfully over all the arms and legs and breasts of the sleeping women, all of whom he loved at once. He wished for them, and wished, and they sobbed in their sleep for the young men who would never come. And his desire and their sorrow kindled a magic between them, for all things are connected and the earth takes care of its own. In the morning, where the young women had laid, grew the loveliest flowers in the world. The beetle had his wish. And so did the young women: for even today the Hunting Beetle roams over all the flowers in the forest, feeding on their honey and freeing their seeds to the wind. "

He stopped, feeling a little confused. He had meant to tell the Old Woman a simple story, but this had a magic in it he had never noticed. She was watching him puzzledly, puffing brief puffs on her pipe. The terrible sound of the ice storm seemed to have lessened a little. The Old Woman said finally, "That's no use to me. I wish and I wish, and nothing ever listens to me. But tell me another one."

Arram drew breath soundlessly and decided to tell her about the rock in the river, which surely had to be

the simplest thing in the world. "In the heart of the river beside my home there is a great rock. It is very old, old as the First Morning. It is very peaceful, so peaceful sometimes you can hear it dreaming."

"You can?"

"Yes. It is hard and massive, so hard the river itself scarcely wears away at it. Only one thing ever came close to cracking that rock, and that thing was light as a breath. A butterfly. You ask me," Arram said, though the Old Woman hadn't, "how such a light thing could"

"Get on with it."

"It's a simple tale."

"It doesn't sound simple."

"It's just about an old rock in a river. Anyway, one day the rock decided it was tired of being a rock."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? I don't know. Someone told me the story. Or else I heard the rock remembering. It was very young then, and many things were still new. Caterpillars were very new. One big purple caterpillar fell out of a tree onto a leaf floating on the river. The leaf carried it downriver, where it bumped against the rock and the caterpillar crawled off with relief, thinking it had found land. But it toiled up a barren mountain instead. The hairs on the caterpillar's body tickled the rock, waking it, and it wondered what strange little being was trudging up its side. After a time, the little being stopped trudging and started spinning, for its time for change was upon it. The rock went back to sleep. For a long time there was silence. A star shone, a leaf fell, a fish caught a fly. Then one morning, the shell that the caterpillar had spun around itself broke open. The rock felt feet lighter than bubbles walking about on the warm stone. Their dreaming merged, for the butterfly was half-asleep, and the rock half-awake. And the rock realized that the purple hairy being which had crawled up its side was now a fragile, gorgeous creature about to take to the air. And the rock was so moved, so amazed, that it strained with all its strength to break out of its own ponderous shell to freedom in the light. It strained so hard that it nearly cracked itself in two. But the butterfly, who felt its longing, stopped it. 'Rock,' it said gently, 'you can live, if you wish, until the Final Evening. You saved my life and sheltered me, so I will give you a gift. Since you can't fly, I will return here on my Final Evening and bring you dreams of all the things I have seen along the river, in the forest and desert, as I flew. And so will my children. You will not need to fly, and you will not need to die.' And so, even to this day, butterflies rest in the warm light on that rock and whisper to it their dreams."

Arram stopped. They were both silent, he and the Old Woman. She puffed her pipe and blew smoke out of the cave, and far away a forest fire started. "I don't know this world," she said slowly. "This is the world She knows. The Sun. The world I know is harsh, noisy, violent. Tell me a story with me in it instead of her. And make me beautiful."

Arram accepted another puff from her pipe. His ears hurt from the thunder, his voice ached from his storytelling. He couldn't remember whether it was day or night; he couldn't guess whether he would live or die. He supposed he would die, since there was no way in the world to make the Old Woman beautiful. So he decided, instead, in his last moments, to tell her about the one he loved most in the world.

"The woman I love is not very beautiful either," he said, seeing her face in his mind. "She is very thin, and her nose is long and crooked. When she was younger, the other children called her 'Crane' because she

grew so tall and thin she stooped." He paused to swallow, no longer caring if the Old Woman was listening, for he wanted to spend those last moments with his love. "She thought no one in the world would ever love her. But I did. She was light, like a bird, and shy like a wild thing, and full of funny movements. When I told her I loved her, though, she didn't believe me. She thought I was making fun of her and she hit me. The second time I told her, she threw a pot at me. So I had a sore ear and a sore shin. I went down to the river and sat wondering what I was doing wrong." He heard an odd, creaky sound, but he was too engrossed in his memories to wonder at it. "I decided to bring her all the beautiful things I could find and pile them at her door. I brought her flowers. I brought her bright snake skins. I brought her feathers, colored leaves, sparkling stones. I fell on my head out of trees collecting speckled eggs for her; I roasted myself in the desert to find purple lizards for her. And you know what she did with all those treasures? She threw them, she walked on them, she gave them away—every single thing. Finally, one day, I brought her the fattest fish I had ever caught, all roasted and ready for her to eat—and she burst into tears. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to cry. I wanted to pull her hair. I wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled. I put my hands on her shoulders, and a madness came over me, and I kissed her so long we both ran out of breath and fell on the floor. And when I looked at her, she was smiling." He paused. "Like you are now." He laughed himself at the memory, and at the shining in the Old Woman's face. "Look at you. You look just like her. Look—" His breath caught. He stared out at the quiet sky, at the blazing colors that arched from one end of the world to the other. The Old Woman's smile. He stood up, watching it, marveling, his face a lover's face, until the smile melted like pipe smoke, and the Sun burned away the clouds.

He went back home. His tall, shy, crooked-nosed love saw him as she filled the water-skins, and came to meet him, smiling. He took the skins from her; she tucked her hand in his arm.

"Where have you been?"

"For a walk."

"What did you see?"

"A rock. A shadow. A rainbow."