

## Hollow Tree

“Now is the telling.” The elder squatted in front of the big fire. Children gathered close, their eyes keen, reflecting the leaping flames. It was the dark of the moon, a time for stories, a time for coming together, a time for renewing tribal bonds.

“Hollow Tree!” several of the children exclaimed. “Tell us tonight the story of Hollow Tree!”

Though it was a favorite, the elder seemed to consider his options for a moment, as if perhaps he would choose some other story.

“Hollow Tree!” a few adults took up the call. It had been some time since the elder had recounted this tale.

The wizened man raised his hands for quiet, his weather-beaten face giving no clue as to his decision.

“Hollow Tree was born under the bear-star,” he began the ritual telling. Silence fell upon the village. Some of the adults mouthed the words along with the elder. “It was a very good sign, and it had been a very good year. Skins hung by the dozens, tanning on the racks; everywhere the meat of mammoth and sloth, beaver and elk dried in the kind and gentle sun. Pots brimmed with corn and beans, fruits and seeds. It was a time of plenty, and the people rejoiced.”

“The people rejoiced,” came the ritual response.

“Few were born that year. The time before had been hard: long winters and summers of little rain. Hollow Tree was adopted by the entire village, loved and adored, showered with attention. The warriors taught Hollow Tree to fight. The hunters taught Hollow Tree to hunt, the farmers taught Hollow Tree to farm, and the elders taught Hollow Tree wisdom.

“But a cloud shadowed Hollow Tree. He took no joy in stories. He found no comfort in the love of family or tribe. Some evil desire came to dwell in Hollow Tree, an emptiness so vast it could not be filled. Hollow Tree understood it not. He was young, and the void crept in upon his soul slowly, eating away the full parts, leaving only desire and need.”

“Desire and need!” the villagers echoed.

“At first, no one in the village recognized Hollow Tree’s dilemma. The elders told stories. The shaman performed great magic. The hunters hunted, and the farmers farmed. It was a time of plenty.”

“A time of plenty.”

“Many children were born after, in the time of plenty. The tribe grew in strength and prospered. Hollow Tree turned his attention to hunting. He became a great hunter, and for a time he seemed satisfied with his strength, his ability to provide for his brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandfathers and grandmothers, the elders, the shaman, and all the other people of the tribe.”

“He was revered amongst the people.”

“Revered amongst the people,” the elder agreed. “To Hollow Tree, the chief gave his favorite and most beautiful daughter in marriage. Hollow Tree enjoyed the respect and admiration of everyone in the village. He had the love of the tribe, but admiration and glory only fanned the flames of Hollow Tree’s raging desire. Still young, he stood atop the mountain and looked across the bountiful expanse, and in the warm glow of the land’s embrace, Hollow Tree wanted more.”

“More, and more again.”

Branches were stacked atop the fire until sparks flew up to heaven. The elder stood and arched his back, adding the crackle and pop of his spine to that of the big fire. Everywhere, people stood and stretched. Some fetched water gourds and passed them around. No one spoke. It was the telling, and except for the ritual responses, silence was required.

The elder spread out his arms and moved them in the shape of a wheel. Bending slightly at the waist, he took a few steps in place. His head turned back and forth, back and forth, as if searching for something. In one hand, he held a spear of air. He cocked his arm, as if throwing the spear. Then he ran in place for a spell and repeated his dire search. He repeated this dance several times, and then unceremoniously retook his seat.

“Hollow Tree’s only solace was hunting,” he began again. “At first, it seemed that the kill brought him little satisfaction, nor did his triumphant return to the village, litters heavy with precious meat. He sought ever larger and more dangerous game, choosing to hunt the mammoth, the long-tooths, and cave lions alone, unaided.

“Hollow Tree was the tribe’s best and greatest provider, yet his spirit turned sour. He came to resent the esteem of his brothers and sisters in the village. They all hailed him upon his return, rich with meat and skins, but he passed them by, walking instead to his home and giving all to his wife for her keeping.

“A new thing was born in the village: possession, and with it was born envy and ill will. Hollow Tree took to strutting, puffed with pride, and it was no longer enough for him to have what he required and desired. Hollow Tree brought his need to the tribe, gave of it with both hands, and in the envy and hunger of the people, he found satisfaction.

“Hollow Tree soon ventured forth to hunt again, and Weeping Dove, wife of Hollow Tree, with open heart shared her abundance, but the people were beggared. Despite her generosity and good spirit, toward her resentment grew.

“The tribe ate meat until they could eat no more. Everywhere, skins were tanning, and meat was drying, yet off to the hunt went proud Hollow Tree. It was not enough that the tribe felt indebted to him. The art of the hunt brought him satisfaction no longer, and Hollow Tree’s spirit

turned even more bitter. As if suffering from a black fever, for Hollow Tree, only killing remained.”

“Murder and blood,” the crowd responded. “More and more again.”

“The elders spoke to Hollow Tree. They knew that he was suffering, that his hunting had turned to something evil. He no longer hunted the weak, the sick, and the old. He sought ever the predators, the most dangerous prey, the strongest, and the largest. Hollow Tree’s hunting was for *trophies*, for the awe of the tribe, the respect he had squandered in his selfishness. Something was gnawing at Hollow Tree, and there was little of the bear-star left.”

“The bear-star falls, yet it may rise again.”

“The elders spoke to Hollow Tree of the joys of family. Children were what Hollow Tree needed. This, everyone could see. The elders believed that Hollow Tree might still be saved, that he could recover a generous and harmonious spirit. They took Hollow Tree to the sweating place, and for many days, they would not let him leave. In the end, he relented. For a time, Hollow Tree stayed in the village, forsaking his distant, dangerous hunts. The people relaxed and no longer regarded Hollow Tree with worry and fear. In time, Weeping Dove brought forth a son. Hollow Tree held the boy up to the night sky and named him Violet Brush because the boy painted Hollow Tree’s world with joy.

“The light of Hollow Tree’s life was Violet Brush. He grew strong and happy and ran about the village, playing with the other children. Everyone loved Violet Brush and cared for him. Peace settled upon the village, and for a time, The Spirit smiled upon the people.”

“Everywhere and everywhen is The Spirit,” the people murmured.

“Everywhere and everywhen,” the elder agreed. “But the void in Hollow Tree was not filled. Slowly, the haunting crept back into his thoughts. He would stand at the edge of the village and look out upon the plains, or up at the mountains, or down toward the distant sea, and the longing made his body tremble. He yearned and craved more.”

“More and more again.”

“Across the plains sometimes wandered The Others, the water people, those who lived by the great river far to the north. For generations, the people had shared the hunting grounds on the plains and in the forests that ran up to the high and forbidding mountains to the east. Hollow Tree remembered the ancient disputes, and the old ghosts of hatred filled his mind when he beheld The Others from afar.

“One day, Hollow Tree declared a quest. He went to The Chief, his wife-father, and asked for the support of the warriors that he might visit the Rock-Crumbled Mountains, there to retrieve a crystal of quartz. He said that a vision had come to him, that the crystal of quartz was needed to put his spirit right.

“The Shaman forewarned against the quest. She declared, ‘The winds and rains have brought no visions to Hollow Tree.’ But The Chief saw the specters around Hollow Tree, saw his trembling body, his desire, like fevered violence.

“The Chief misread Hollow Tree’s spirit. In there was the lie, yet The Chief saw it not.”

“Desire and need, murder and blood.”

“Something inside Hollow Tree had gone bad. He no longer fought to control the famished ghost. He embraced it instead and made a plan.

“Hollow Tree led forth the warriors toward the high mountains. Across the plains they marched and through the forests. They encountered no Others. The warriors encamped in the foothills, and Hollow Tree climbed the high peaks alone. He searched everywhere for the crystals of quartz, but The Spirit withheld them. In a cold and icy cave, Hollow Tree found a great rock of the Black Stone. For two days and three nights, Hollow Tree chipped at the Black Stone, making hard, sharp points for spear and arrow. Without care for his warmth, he wrapped the points in the shirt from his back and went back down the mountain to the warriors below.

“ ‘Behold!’ he proclaimed. ‘The Spirit has led me to a great cache of lethal points. The way is clear, my vision fulfilled. The Spirit wishes us to rid the plains of The Others. The brave and strong warriors of our tribe need toil in fields or hunt crippled elk no longer.’ ”

“Blood filled Hollow Tree’s speech. His words boiled with passion and evil desire. The warriors had waited for many days, and they were hungry and thirsty. And to their hunger, Hollow Tree appealed.

“In the forest, they gathered branches of ash and oak. With them, they made shafts for arrow and spear. From the village had left the proud and noble warriors of our tribe, ready to defend us all with their lives. Leaving the forest that day, with Hollow Tree at their lead, marched an army thirsty for war and conquest. Hollow Tree pushed them on, the bottomless hole that had become his spirit, the unending need and desire of it frothing his lips in words of encouragement to the warriors.”

The elder stood once again and stretched loudly. Pots of water were placed on the smaller fires, and into them were thrown the leaves and flowers of whitesage. As the water boiled, the air filled with its fragrance.

It was the time of the telling, and the tea enlivened drooping lids and tired limbs. Clay cups were dipped and clay cups filled with the hot, pungent liquid. In silence, the people of the village sat around the big fire and sipped their tea.

In time, the blaze flared in new life with added branches. Some threw on larger chunks so that the embers might burn all night.

“Hollow Tree brought new things to the tribe,” the elder said, retaking his seat.

“Possession, envy, craving, and murder,” the people responded.

“The eternal need that consumes,” the elder proclaimed.

“May The Sprit drive the new evil from the land,” came the reply.

“So it was. Hollow Tree led the warriors forth, and they sought The Others. For many days, they did not return to the village. They hunted The Others in the forest and onto the plain. And not finding The Others, the warriors traveled north toward the great river.

“When Hollow Tree and the warriors encountered The Others, they were hailed as cousins and friends. The warriors paused, but Hollow Tree shouted, ‘Come you no more to our hunting grounds to the south! You steal from us our game, and my people grow thin!’ Hollow Tree ran forward, shooting arrows as he ran. The Others fell back, but few survived. Hollow Tree took their heads and removed the brains and bones. He and his warriors returned to the village with shrunken heads and scalps tied to their belts or slung over their shoulders.

“ ‘We were assailed!’ Hollow Tree proclaimed. ‘But we defeated The Others. We won a victory!’ Hollow Tree held forth his new trophies with great pride. The warriors did likewise, but none clutched as many as Hollow Tree.

“So came a time of woe and war. The Others came in force, like an endless legion of locusts. No one knew they were so many. Our village was besieged on every side. Hunters were attacked and killed in the forests and on the plains. Hollow Tree became a great war-chief, and he led forth men and women to war.

“Still the desolation grew in Hollow Tree. He took some of The Others as slaves. Some of the captive women he took to wife, and Weeping Dove came to embody her name. Hollow Tree sired many children during those lean and horrible years, but he took no joy from them. Killing became his only pleasure, and the more he killed, the more he acquired in plunder, the more he wanted. It became not enough to possess things; Hollow Tree had to *deprive*.

“Though The Others were many, the vacuum burned within Hollow Tree. He was the tribe’s most terrible and awesome warrior. He sallied forth for days or weeks, and always, he returned with more trophies, till The Others became few and sparse.

“But his emptiness called for more. He ruled the tribe then, with a great many sons and daughters, and his bloodlust turned upon his own. Many of the tribe fled the village to live alone or in small families far away, near the cold, high mountains. Hollow Tree hunted them and harkened to no one.

“Then one day, Hollow Tree found that he could no longer leave his home. The Great Wheel had turned the world, and unbeckoned, age had crept into his bones. On the walls of his dwelling hung the heads and scalps of his many victims, while beside him sat Weeping Dove. The Voice of The Spirit whispered to Hollow Tree. Not even he could ignore the call.

“His sight cleared for the first time in many, many seasons, and Weeping Dove beheld again the Hollow Tree she had married.

“ ‘Husband,’ she said. Her skin was leathered from years of turmoil and anguish, yet she was noble-born, a Chief’s daughter, and she had held onto her honor, no matter what Hollow Tree became.

“ ‘Wife,’ Hollow Tree replied. In his eyes were tears, but he could not shed them. ‘I have spent my life impoverishing others of their possessions, of their honor and pride, of their lives, and now The Spirit is going to take mine.’

“ ‘The Spirit has granted you a moment of peace,’ Weeping Dove replied.

“ ‘Only so I might realize how I have wasted my life. In death, I am bereft of everything.’

“Hollow Tree closed his eyes, squeezing a tiny tear from each. The Spirit took him. His life was ended, and everything he had stolen, everything he had acquired, lay useless on the floor.”

“We are the children of Hollow Tree,” the crowd responded. “May we never forget.”

“May we never forget,” the elder concluded. He stood and stretched again, and after a solemn gaze for each of those assembled, he ambled off to his bed.

The End