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### There was no time

When the rains came, without warning, they fell on bone-dry ground. Flowers grew from seeds deep in an earth that had no memory of wet. When they blossomed they were strange to the people, not for the way they looked—this they knew from pictures—but for the way they smelled, of which there was no record.

The shining city on the edge of the horizon held no sway now. Fresh water glistened in the wells, and the wicked magnet of the metropolis, where everyone knew some families sent their sons and daughters in exchange for water, pulled little.

The first crops were small, but enough. Enough, even, to feed the old woman who wandered into the village on the first feast day. She had no sores, and was missing no teeth, so she was given a bath and a seat at the table. It is possible she was mad as a cut snake, but the stories she told, to the rhythm of the rain that still thrilled when it fell, were wondrous. By dessert, when the stone fruit was served, there was a crowd of boys and girls circled on the floor below her, and even the men and women clearing away dishes moved slowly to catch a subordinate clause, a pregnant pause. When she finished the tale of a town hidden inside a mountain where the sun glowed every day, where no one alive could imagine rain, and all the water they needed dripped down stalactites that hung from the ceiling of the cave and held up most of the houses, she looked around for a soft patch of earth for sleep. The competition among the adults to have her as their guest was friendly but fierce.

Over the seasons the old woman moved from house to house, honoring each with a tale before she went to bed. She was in great demand. During the day she sat in the public square, in the sun when temperate, and under a shelter some older girls had constructed for her when it wasn't. Those passing by could beg a story, though she tended to trail off if the listener hadn't been thoughtful enough to bring her something to eat.

The children didn't know any better, and asked her how old she was and where she came from. Before she could answer, a parent would chastise the little one for being so rude. The truth was that the grown people were afraid to ask. The old woman had come in with the first feast; she was an omen. And you don't ask the credentials of omens. In any case, the old woman asked for almost nothing, offered her stories without repetition, and came quietly to be needed by the village. Most developed a tentative affection for her. But she was like someone whose face has been permanently disfigured into a smile, and none could really say they knew her nature.

The village grew—new houses made for young couples only needing room for one or two more. The space expanded between the central square and the edges, and there were more places for the old woman to sleep. It was possible to go a week without hearing a new story,

though the village was comforted to know that she was telling one nearby.

And then the rains stopped. At first no one noticed. But then the well levels went so low that a baby fell in and did not drown. People began to bathe every other day, and the decorative gardens in front of the houses dried up because the village could not spare the water. The houses at the outer limits of the village emptied out as some of the young couples moved back into the houses where they had been born. Fields lay fallow, and teething infants were given sticks to chew on, because there was no water to grow the herbs to make poultices, and anyway, there wasn't enough water to mix a poultice.

The city loomed on the horizon, shrouded in a wet mist.

On a desiccated morning, a man passing through the square noticed the old woman had slept all night in her shelter. He roused her gently and asked how this had happened. She said she had not slept indoors for months, nor had she been invited. The implication was clear: no story. He gave her some of the bread he carried in his pocket (no cheese anymore—the cows didn't have it in them), and hurried off to find someone on the Council. This explained everything. With village growth it was harder to keep track of where the old woman was and who was hosting her, and then, what with the drought and the young folk moving back into their parents' homes, many had no room. If lapses in hospitality could be rectified, the rains would return.

A feast was scraped together for the old woman, and the mayor himself invited her to be his guest. She took the meal in utter silence, ignoring the children's entreaties. Wordlessly, she entered the mayor's house and went to bed. A hot wind began to blow dust, obscuring the moon. It blew all night.

By dawn the village was in a fury. Moving like an animal, the villagers burst in on the old woman, demanding that she speak. She shook her head. The mayor himself knocked her to the floor.

She relented, and she regaled.

For 28 days straight she told the tale of a flood that ended the world before this one. And water fell from the sky the moment she began, and never stopped, not even when the old woman evaporated into a cloud of mist.

The seedless, bone-dry ground refused the rain, which flooded the houses, drowning babies where they slept. The people climbed to their roofs. A plan was suggested to build a boat and send some of the sons and daughters to the city to get help.

But there was no time.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Alexandra Keller.*