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#### TALKING TSANTSAS

We're here, together at least, and now with our family, if not exactly resting in peace. Sophie says we are resting in pieces and we laugh behind our stitched-up mouths. She says the family that laughs together, stays together, which is really too much. I wish that girl would grow up a bit, but then what can one expect from a child of arrested development at the age of twelve?

No one reproaches her now, although we know it was really her fault; she made such a fuss about not wanting to go Native, and refusing to be circumcised when the monthly bleeding started. I couldn't blame her, but her father should have done something about it. All he cared about was the work

he was doing with the tribe. He forgot about

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his own tribal rites and mores. We might have fared better had we been Christians, but perhaps not. We'd just be here anyway, but hanging beside a crucifix instead of on this uncluttered eggshell white wall.

It is nothing like the last wall we saw, in the crude palm hut set aside for the young girls when they reached the signs of maturity. There, signs of disorder were everywhere, on the crude wooden table covered with Sophie's menstrual blood, mixed with the blood from the bloodied nose of the Shaman of the tribe. He had stood by, enraged, screaming invective at Sophie who, to do her justice, gave as good as she got. She was shrieking defiance, and had picked up the stone-carved knife intended for her circumcision. She had nicked his nose in the scuffle, and was still brandishing the knife at the withered old man. She would give no quarter, and only after the chief came in with some of the young braves, could she be subdued.

We feared the worst, and sent young Brad to hide in the jungle, until the tribe calmed down after the perceived insult to them. My husband and I tried to defend Sophie, but the tribal mores would not allow for her to refuse

circumcision. The Shaman convinced the tribe that her defiance would result in their violent destruction by the

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Gods. It was an impasse, because she wouldn't let anybody touch her. I blamed myself; I should have understood the demands that would be made, and left with the children before it could come to this, but there is no point in discussion now. What's done is done!

We all saw the movie "The Mission" with Jeremy Irons and everybody knows that was a disaster, too, between the politicians and the Church and the poor Indians who never had a chance despite the beauty of the voices and the Sacraments. But we were the ones who didn't have a chance! Our Indians have done all right for themselves. Brad taught them the literacy they needed for survival. According to the Government, only the tribes who have a written alphabet can be counted—now, the Iburu Indians qualify for citizenship and are getting rich on government relief.

There is no relief for us, we remnants of human beings, souls (or spirits) alive in these tiny shrunken heads, a Tsantsa family adorning the bedroom wall of our oldest grandson, Brad III. Yes, another Jr. Our son Brad Jr. was the only one to escape the anger of the tribe. At nine, he was

considered too young to possess any kind of spirit, least of all an avenging spirit that could endanger the future of the Iburu tribe.

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It may sound silly, but I worry about him a bit, now that he is safely back in the U.S., married and with three children. I would consider his escape miraculous but my dear husband, still clinging to his Atheism despite this Afterlife, tut-tuts at my superstitious remarks about "miracles" and "transformations."

Sometimes I want to pray, and Sophie says she would join me, but Brad makes such a fuss and I don't want to cause dissension in the family. Anyway, I don't really know how to pray. Sophie tells me to put my hands together and close my eyes, but then says that first I have to find them and we all giggle a little bit.

I worry about Brad Jr. as I said. I don't think it is good for anyone to carry a secret, the way he has. When the soldiers came to the Iburu village and questioned him about our absence, he pointed out our graves and said we three had died of "jungle fever." He almost gave himself away when the soldiers offered to make headstones, and he said that he already had them! By then, the Chieftain of the Iburu, Xatsu,

had given us to him.

Our son certainly knew what we were. He had helped with our preparation; he had watched as we waited for the tribe to decide our ultimate fate. He had heard the arguments of

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the Shaman, who contended that we were scornful enemies with great evil spirits, who must be restrained. He had seen us die slowly in the Indian form of execution of the enemy. Our deaths were extremely painful, so that when the end came, we were relieved to be out of our suffering bodies.

The Shaman had presided; that nasty vengeful old man had actually poked out our eyes while we still lived. He had muttered his prayers and incantations over us for a full three days, and ordered the women to turn us over and over on the sharp shards of bones and poisonous thorns that constituted our deathbed.

He honored the chief by allowing him to cut off our heads. Our son had then watched the Shaman remove our skulls with the fat and replace them with round stones. In round-eyed shock, he had seen our mouths and berry eyes stitched with palm pins, and then was allowed to carry the water used to make the herb tea to cure the flesh and skin of our heads.

We simmered slowly in a large iron cooking pot for another three days. The children of the tribe took turns in vigilantly stirring the pot, including Brad Jr. We could

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see his grim and frightened face through the steam when we looked upward. I was horrified for him, but Sophie just said cool it Mom he just has to survive remember he's only a little boy. Brad Sr. was grimly quiet for a while but he did say that Sophie should have let the tribe do what they had to and none of this would have happened, making Sophie want to cry.

After the tea bath our heads were cooked some more with hot rocks, and molded into nice little shapes, then tied with knotted strings of leather. For a few weeks we dangled on the waist of Chief Xatsu, but when he heard the soldiers coming, he handed us to Brad Jr. with the admonition to keep quiet. He has kept quiet ever since.

Sometimes, I long to talk to him, when I see him stare at us on our wall with a kind of horror mingled with wistfulness. I know he misses us but don't know how to let him know how much we miss him, too. I'm grateful to know what is happening to him and his family, as I tell Brad and

Sophie, but Sophie just says Brad and his wife are lucky. She says we would have been a horror-show of domineering in-laws.

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I suppose that she is right. We all find it difficult not to criticize Iris, our daughter-in-law. For one thing, she is a terrible housekeeper. The room we share with Brad III is a mess, with unmade bed and dusty floor and furniture. Iris only comes in here when she is on one of her periodic drinking binges. Sometimes, she spends all day nursing a bottle of gin, cursing our son and what she describes as his coldness and uselessness. He doesn't make enough money to suit her. I see her expensive clothes and ostentatious jewelry and feel sorry for Brad Jr.

Sophie says she just feels sorry for her nephews and niece, who suffer the abuse of Iris' drunkenness and bad tempered hangovers. Sophie was nearly destroyed with grief when she heard Iris berating her daughter, Sara, when she started to menstruate. The little girl, only ten years old, had not noticed the blood on her clothing, and her mother had been furious with her, for making a mess. Sophie had not spoken for several days after that incident.

From our position on the wall, we often see Iris

staggering around, and hear her constant screaming and nagging at our poor son and grandchildren. We have conversations about Brad's lonely lifestyle, as well as the

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sanity of the children, and worry about the future of his family.

I worry too about our own future. What will happen to us if Brad III gets tired of looking at us here, and decides to paste up posters instead? What if Iris should set fire to the house in one of her drunken rages? We would be helpless to do anything to save ourselves.

Sophie reminds me that we have survived many difficulties, already. We almost rotted away in the knapsack Brad Jr. took with him from the tribe, when the soldiers insisted on taking him to the American Consulate in Belem. And then he had to hide us from the Customs officials when he returned to the U.S. by putting us in with his dirty socks and underwear. If he hadn't been our own son, I think I would have died right then of mortification.

The worst time for us may have been when we were stored in the attic of my sister's house. We were boxed away for several years, lonely and forgotten. Sophie was afraid of the



squirrels that would scurry around, fearful that they would nest in our box, where we were hidden away, wrapped in newspapers. But nothing bad happened to us then, and sometimes I think we are virtually indestructible.

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Our indestructibility is my husband's worse nightmare. Brad Sr. always says not to worry, that if we were to be destroyed in some way, our merciless immortality would go, and we would have the blessed relief of nothingness. Sophie, however, says she wants life at any price and I can't help but agree with her. But I sometimes wish she had taken that point of view when it really mattered!

Anyway, I'm not sure that Brad really means what he says. I think he wants to survive, too. One day, when the family cat came into this room and climbed the dresser to poke at us, Brad was as upset as Sophie and I were, and most relieved when our grandson came to the rescue.

That boy really likes having us around, and is the envy of the classmates he brings to visit. His friends stare at us with great interest, and ask all sorts of questions about us that he can't answer. He asks his father, but our son either will not answer from a sense of delicacy, or refuses to remember. We love it when we get attention from visitors and

wish that Brad Jr. would talk about us sometimes. If we could only speak to our grandchildren, what tales we could tell them!

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Last Halloween we enjoyed an excursion, when Brad III dressed as a Headhunter warrior and escorted us through the neighborhood hooked to his belt, Trick-or-Treating. Sophie was wildly excited, and said she hadn't had that much fun for years. Her father grumbled, saying that's a hell of a way to treat your grandparents and aunt, but I'm sure our grandson didn't mean anything by it.

We did have more adventures that night than we or Brad III had expected. Some high-spirited older boys kidnapped us and terrified their families and girl-friends, Trick-or-Treating with our faces, For some time, we were quite concerned about where we might end up, but eventually we were lobbed through the window, back into our grandson's room.

He was touchingly pleased to get us back. His eyes filled with tears when he carefully brushed us off, and hung us back on our wall. Sophie claimed there was real communication there. Perhaps, she said, the spells which keep us imprisoned

in our tightly sealed heads are wearing off, and we will eventually escape. She fantasizes that Brad III has identified with us, and that we will have a real future, honored by our family.

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But, unless his father tells him our story, I don't think that Brad III will ever know who we are. We don't bear any resemblance to the family photos of us on other walls of the house. Now our faces are deeply tanned instead of pale and freckled, and the dry black coco mats of hair are nothing like the soft brown curly locks, inherited by all the grandchildren, we used to display.

My husband says he likes that kind of familial immortality, and wishes for no other, but what can we do about it? We are doomed to swing in the breeze of fickle fate, and there is not much point in complaining about it.

Does anybody know anything about how long tsantsas can last, Sophie asks. We don't know, but we console her, telling her we used to hear that shrunken heads could be maintained in Museums indefinitely. We also heard tribal stories about the "enemies" eventually losing their spiritual power, at which point the tsantsas would be burned or buried. We have

seen the pathetic heads worn by warriors; we have seen them kept in collections in the Shaman's huts. We know that some years ago the Government outlawed the procedure, and that such collections are now always hidden. For all we know, however, we may be

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distinguished by being the only genuine tsantsas left in the world.

But does anybody really know how long a tsantsa can last? Could we possibly be as immortal as Sophie hopes? I hate to be trite, but I give her the best answer I can. Only time will tell.

END