

All Ways

a story for young people
by Clayton Bess

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“Always,” they say, “the rock has looked over us in our valley.”

But it is not so. There was a time before always and will be a time after forever.

I know this because of the Ancient One.

When I was a little one, the Ancient One took me aside and commanded me to recite *THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING*. And I did.

“In the beginning,” I said, “our people came to this valley. They saw the great rock high above the mouth of the valley. The great rock stood upon the peak of the pinnacle of the last outcropping of stone atop the great gray cliff.”

“And what did the great rock resemble?” the Ancient One asked.

“The great rock resembled an eagle, its wings unfolding, ready to fly.”

“And what did Arr say to our people?”

“Arr said to our people, ‘This great eagle rock will guard us.’”

“And what did Em say to Arr?”

“Emm said to Arr, ‘This valley is good. This valley is safe.’ “

“And the people said?”

“The people said, ‘We will stay.’ “

“Until?”

“ ‘Until the great eagle rock flies. Only then will we leave because we will be safe no more.’ “

“And the end of *THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING*?” the Ancient One asked.

“ ‘FOREVER AND ALWAYS.’ That is the way our people always end *THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING*.”

“For Ever, child?” the Ancient One asked. “All Ways?”

“Forever and always,” I repeated.

“Very well told, child,” the Ancient One said. “That story is true. Our people stayed, and they prospered. The valley has been good to us. Arr and Emm had children. Their children had children. And their children’s children had children. Generations were born. Generations died.”

“Yes, Ancient One, I know.”

“But what about the great eagle rock?” the Ancient One asked.

“It still stands, still with its wings unfolding, still ready to fly. The eagle rock has not changed. Ever.”

“But no. You are wrong,” the Ancient One said with a smile, but there were no teeth in the smile. The Ancient One was so ancient that the Ancient One’s head held no teeth, bore no hair, was only wrinkles over bone, and two bright eyes. The Ancient

One was so ancient that no one even knew any longer if the Ancient One was man or woman. We all just said “Ancient One” when we spoke of or to the Ancient One.

“You are wrong,” the Ancient One said again. “The great eagle rock has changed. I have changed it. Listen.”

And the Ancient One told me a story I had never heard: *THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE END.*

“When I was small, small like you, but strong like you, and wise yet foolish like you, I climbed to the great eagle rock.”

“But Ancient One,” I said, “no one has climbed to the great eagle rock. It is too high. The great gray cliff is too steep.

“Listen to me, child,” the Ancient One said. “Listen or leave.”

I listened.

“I was with my mother and father and sisters and brothers at the foot of the great gray cliff. We were gathering seeds from the pinyon trees that grow there. You know the pinyon trees?”

“Yes, Ancient One. The pinyon trees still grow there. We still gather seeds there.”

“I looked up, child. I heard a wind, a call, a cry from an eagle. Above me hung the great eagle rock. It called me again. I moved to the great gray cliff and began to climb. I found a handhold, then a foothold, then a higher handhold, and a higher foothold. Hand by foot by hand I climbed, and the eagle cried to me to come, come.

“My mother and father and brother and sisters did not miss me for a long time because they were bent on gathering pinyon seeds and the seeds were few and hard to find. I was halfway up the great gray cliff before I heard them calling for me.

“I found a small cave and sat in it to rest. I looked down. So far below me were my family. They called. They looked for me. But they never thought to look up. How I laughed. Silently I laughed and enjoyed.

“Then the wind blew and the great eagle rock cried to me again to come, come.

“The sun was red and sinking as I climbed over the last outcroppings of stone atop the great gray cliff. There was no other living thing up there but me. No plants. No animals. Not even a bird or insect. Hard rock, hard wind, hard sun, the great eagle rock, and me.

“The great eagle rock watched the fiery sun. And I watched the fiery great eagle rock as the sun sank away. And the rock grew black.

“The wind blows hard about the great eagle rock, and shrieks. I climbed onto the eagle’s broad back between the unfolding wings and we flew together over the mouth of the valley, flew without flying into the wind. I stretched forward and whispered my laughter into the ear of the eagle.

“Darkness closed upon us. I grew tired. I grew cold. I grew afraid.

“I climbed off the eagle’s back and found a boulder in the outcroppings of stone and curled up out of the wind. The moon began to rise. I raised my head above the boulder to watch the great eagle rock turn from black to silver in the moonlight.

“The wind blew into my face. Tiny grains of sand blew off the eagle’s wings into my eyes. I wondered how many grains of sand there were in the great eagle rock. Sands of time. When would they run out?

“I lowered my head into the shelter of the boulder again. I slept.

“I woke when the first gray light of morning was gathering. I was stiff and sore and hungry. I had my sack of pinyon seeds hanging from my belt. I began eating them. I sat between the unfolding wings of the eagle and ate all but one of my pinyon seeds, that one which dropped out of my hands and rolled down the eagle’s back and into a little crack in the rock at the eagle’s foot. I tried to pick the pinyon seed out of the crack, but the crack was too narrow and the seed too deep for my fingers.

“It began to rain, only a spitting, but now the great gray cliff was too slippery to climb down. I sat and watched the rain.

Water collected in small hollows on the great eagle rock’s back. The hollows filled. Water from the eagle’s head and unfolding wings ran down the eagle’s back and into the hollows and cracks, carrying grains of sand and dust and dirt.

As quickly as the rain began, it ended. The sun rose, and as it grew warmer, the great gray cliff became dry. Finally I was able to climb back down and come home to my family.”

The eyes of the Ancient One glittered like granite in the sun.

I said, “What did your mother and father and brothers and sisters say?”

The Ancient One cackled. “They cried. They chided. But I never told them where I had spent the night. They would not have believed me. I climbed back up to

the great eagle rock many times after that. Many, many times. And do you know what happened there?"

I said, "A pinyon grew."

The Ancient One cackled again. "I knew this was the One!" Then to me, quietly, slowly, "You are the one, did you know? It is in your eyes. I could tell you by your eyes."

The Ancient One's eyes glittered among the wrinkles and folds of old skin. "Our people are good people, but they put their faith in a rock." The Ancient One bent close to me. "And you?"

"I don't know," I said.

The Ancient One cackled a third time.

"Yes, the pinyon seed grew. When I first noticed it, it was just a small spot of green in the narrow crack of rock. No real soil to live on, only a few grains of sand. No real water to live on, only a few drops of rain. But it lived. And do you know what I did?"

I said, "You carried soil up to it. You carried water."

"Yes!" the Ancient One cried. "Yes, this is the One! I took a knife and dug out my handholds and footholds in the cliff deeper, cleaner, safer. And I carried soil and water to the pinyon. Even so, the little tree grew badly and slowly. The crack was too narrow to hold much soil or water at a time. Still it grew."

“Years went by, and the pinyon twisted its trunk and reached for the sun and stuck out puny, gnarled branches, and it never grew taller than my knee. An ugly tree. A nothing tree. But it survived.

“Through the years, the pinyon’s tiny roots worked at the rock and broke bits of it and made the crack wider. More dirt and soil gathered into the crack as rainwater carried it down off the eagle’s back. And one day I climbed the cliff, and you know what I found?”

“What?”

“A blade of grass.”

“How?”

“A seed. Where had it come from? Blown so high by the wind?”

“Carried by a bird?” I asked.

“Perhaps. But I know nothing more about the blade of grass because when I climbed back down the cliff that day, I fell. When my family found me on the valley floor, my arms and legs were broken.”

“And so you could never climb again to the great eagle rock?”

I looked at the Ancient One’s crooked body. I had thought it was twisted from age, but now I saw it was from hardship.

“Never again. Years have turned to decades. Decades have turned to a century. And still I live, and still I watch the little ones, and still I wonder.” The Ancient One leaned close and whispered, “Climb for me, child. Tell me what you see.”

I was eager. The Ancient One led me to the spot at the bottom of the great gray cliff beneath the great eagle rock.

“I can show you only the first few handholds,” the Ancient One said. “You will have to find the rest. But do not doubt that they are there. Take this knife. Recut them if they have worn away.”

The climb was slow, but I felt in no danger. The handholds and footholds were all still there, perhaps somewhat worn away because of wind and rain, but they were there. And yes, I did need to dig some of them deeper. The cave was still there, about halfway up the cliff, and I rested in it as the Ancient One had done a century ago.

Above me, the great eagle rock stood looking down at me, calling to me when the wind blew, come, come.

When I got to the top, it was not at all what I expected. I looked over everything carefully to tell the Ancient One every last detail. I climbed between the unfolding wings and rode the eagle’s back into the fierce wind. I stretched forward to whisper my laughter into the ear of the eagle. But I could find no ear. There was only a slight knob of rock where the head of the eagle must once have been. But no ear.

I climbed back down the great gray cliff. The Ancient One was waiting for me.

“The pinyon?” the Ancient One cried.

“Still there,” I said.

“Yes?”

“But dead.”

“Oh,” the Ancient One said and sat down feebly on a stone. “The crack?”

“I found no crack.”

“Oh,” the Ancient One sighed.

“But the grass!” I said. “And the wildflowers! Ancient One, you did not tell me about the wildflowers, and the meadow.”

“Meadow?”

“And the scrub. All growing around the dead, dwarf pinyon.”

“Growing? In rock?”

“In soil.”

“Soil?” The Ancient One cackled again. “So then, as I imagined. The pinyon was only the beginning. Soil collected about the roots. The grass grew, went to seed. The new grass came, and soil blew in and collected about the blades of grass and among their roots. Other seeds blew in from the scrub. More roots to collect more soil.”

“But the crack, Ancient One?”

“You found no crack, child, because it has been buried under soil. But the crack is there, still there, at the foot of the eagle, wider, deeper than ever.”

The Ancient One cackled, and cackled, grew still, then cackled one last time and said to me, “You must watch for me, child. Tell me what happens next. Watch for me, child. Tell me what you see.”

That night the Ancient One died.

Our people honored the body, then buried it. I buried a pinyon seed with it. A new pinyon grew.

I too grew, and married, and had children, and my children had children, and their children, and theirs. Years have turned to decades have turned to a century, and now I am called the Ancient One, and no one knows if I am man or woman.

For many years, I climbed to visit the great eagle rock until my arms were no longer strong enough to pull myself up the great gray cliff. I saw great changes.

But from the valley floor, over so much time, the people cannot see these changes in the great eagle rock. “Always,” they still say, “the great eagle rock has looked over us in our valley.”

They still command the little ones to recite *THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING*. Some still say, like Emm and Arr, “We will stay in the valley until the great eagle rock flies.”

And still I live, and still I watch the little ones, and still I wonder what it is like up there now. Up between the unfolding wings of the great eagle rock, flying into the wind, with the crack at its foot growing ever wider, until ...

Climb for me, child. Tell me what you see.

THE END
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