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In the Land of Souls

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Long ago there lived a young woman who was lovelier than any other girl in her village. Many young men wanted to marry her, but she would listen to only one: a handsome chief she had admired for years. They were to be married. There was great rejoicing, and the two looked forward to a long, happy life, when, the night before the wedding feast, a sudden illness took the girl, and without a word to the friends weeping around her, she died.

Her love filled his thoughts day and night. He put aside his bow, and he neither fought nor hunted. From sunrise to sunset he sat beside her grave, thinking of the happiness that lay buried there. At last, after many days, a light came to him out of the darkness. He remembered what the oldest people said: that there was a path to the Land of Souls, and if you searched carefully, you could find it.

The next morning he rose early, put food in his pouch, and slung an extra skin over his shoulders, for he didn't know how long the journey would take. He knew only that if the path existed, he would find it. At first he was puzzled; there seemed no reason to go in one direction rather than another. Then he remembered hearing an elder say that the Land of Souls lay to the south, and with new hope he set his face that way.

For many miles the country looked the same as it did at home: the same forests, hills and rivers. The only difference was the snow, which had lain thick on the hills when he set out but grew thinner and thinner as he went south, and finally vanished. Then the trees put out buds, and flowers sprang up under his feet. There was blue sky instead of heavy clouds, and birds sang everywhere. He knew he was on the right road.

The thought of seeing his lost love again made his heart beat fast, and he hurried on, light and swift. His way led through a dark wood and up some steep cliffs, and on top he found a lodge. An old man dressed in skins, holding a staff, stood in the doorway. Before the chief could tell his story, the old man said, "I was waiting for you. I know why you've come. She whom you're looking for was here only a short while ago. Rest in my lodge, as she did, and I will tell you where to go."

The young man went in, but his heart was too eager to let him rest. When he stood up, the old man stood with him at the door. "Look," he said, "at the water

out there, and the plains beyond. That is the Land of Souls. But no one enters it without leaving the body behind. So leave your body here, with your bow and arrows, your skin and your dog. They'll be kept safe for you."

The young man turned away, and he felt as light as air, hardly touching the ground. As he flew along, the scents grew sweeter and the flowers more beautiful. Animals came and rubbed their noses against him instead of hiding, and birds circled around him, and fish lifted their heads out of the water to watch him pass. He noticed, with wonder, that neither rocks nor trees blocked his path. He passed straight through them, for they weren't rocks and trees at all, only the souls of them. This was the Land of Shadows.

He went on, light-footed, until he reached the shore of a great lake with a lovely island in the middle. On the bank was a canoe of glittering stone, and in it two shining paddles. He leaped in, seized the paddles, and pushed off. To his joy he saw a second canoe, just like his own, following him, and in it was the girl he had traveled so far to find. But they couldn't touch. Great waves rolled between the canoes that looked as if they would swallow them but never did. The young man and the young woman shrank back in fear. Down in the deep water they could see the bones of those who had died before, and in the waves themselves men and women struggled, and few crossed safely. Only the children had no fear, and they crossed easily. The chief and the girl trembled at the horrible sights and sounds, but no harm came to them, for their lives had been free of evil, and the Master of Life had decreed that no evil should touch them.

So they reached the shore of the Happy Island unhurt. They wandered through flowering meadows and along rushing streams. They knew neither hunger nor thirst, nor cold nor heat. The air fed them and the sun warmed them. They forgot the dead, for they saw no graves, and the young man's thoughts turned neither to war nor to hunting. They would gladly have walked there forever.



But in the murmur of the wind, he heard the Master of Life say to him: "Go back to where you came from. I have work for you to do. Your people need you, and for many years you will rule over them. At the gate my messenger waits for you. You will take back the body you left behind, and he'll show you what to do. Listen to him and be patient. In time you'll join her whom you must now leave, for she is accepted and will remain forever young and beautiful, as she was when I called her away from the Land of Snows."

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