

Girl with a Sabretooth Tiger



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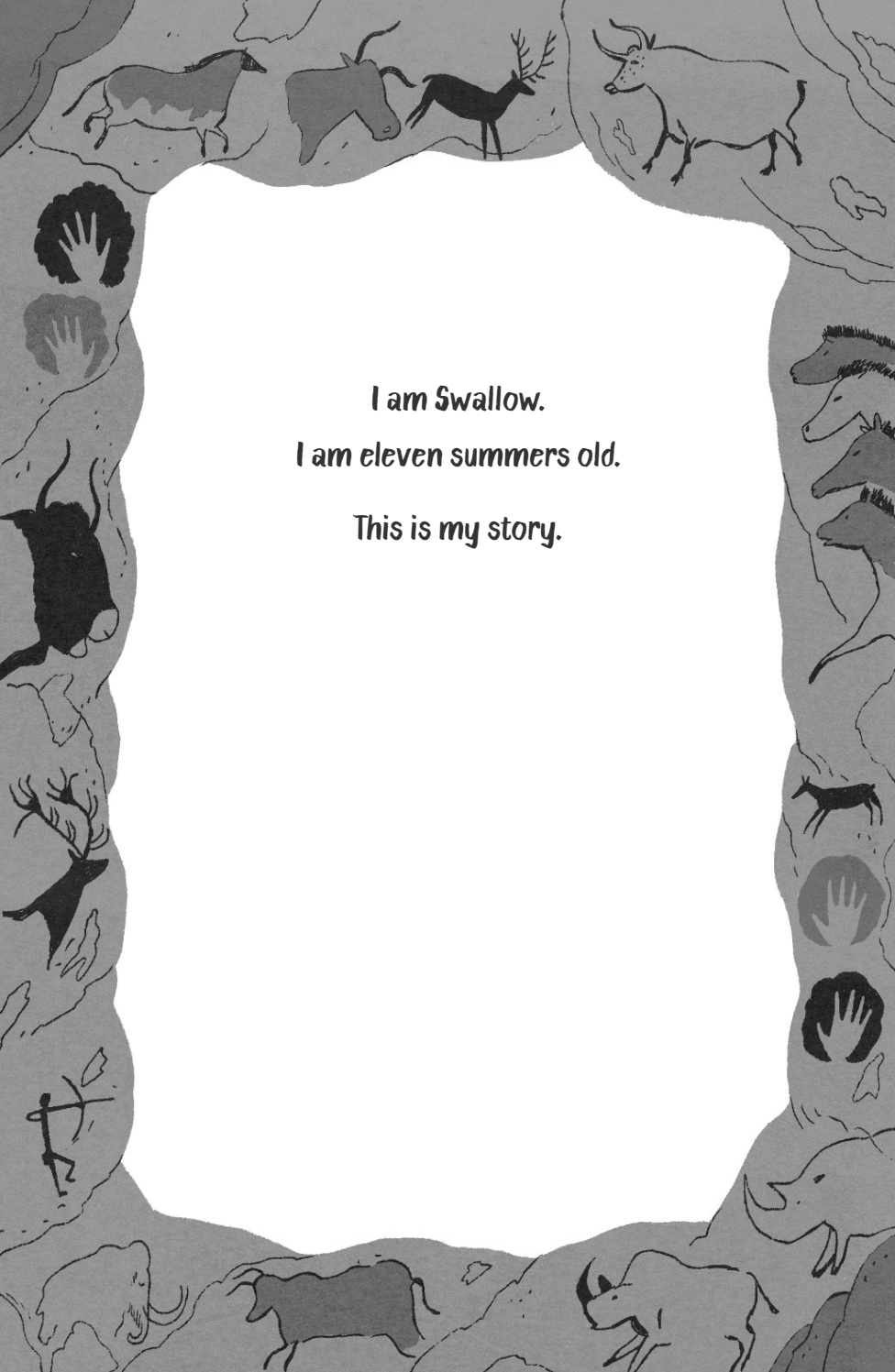


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*For Barry Cunningham – thank you
for writing in all my books!
Happy Retirement.*



I am Swallow.
I am eleven summers old.
This is my story.



ONE

Tonight, I go wandering down to the wide,
slow-moving river.

Tonight, I have things on my mind.

The full goddess moon winks back at me like a
silver speckled stone, and my brown skin shimmers
with ideas. Behind me in our camp the fire burns. It
crackles, shooting sparks into the sky.

Come closer . . .

Do you see my tribe, the Nadi, gathered around
the flames, listening to stories of our past?



The storyteller sings of long, long, *long* ago. Of a time when mammoth roamed these lands. A time of feared sabretooth tigers, and sharp-horned rhinos. And elk with antlers that spanned the skies.

She sings of the earth and how it was shaped. When the ground was frozen harder than yew, colder than ice on the goddess river's skin. Songs of the mighty stones which other tribes hauled and stood upright in circles so perfect they welcomed the goddess sun through their sacred spacing. Pa said one day we will go to see them.

She sings of our people and those that came before. Their ebony skin shone like polished night, and their eyes! Oh, their eyes. Brighter than the bluest sky, more dazzling than the goddess sun. They've been gone so long now, but still we sing their song. We will always sing their song and remember that they were here – once upon a time.

The storyteller knows it all. And now I know it all. And *you* know it all. It is in our blood and in our bones.

And when the storyteller sings of the sacred, green-as-moss jadeite stone, my ears always prickle and I shift closer.

It is a stone of legend, so precious and powerful, the storyteller says, that it will grant your wishes. It saved our people when many others perished, in the time when the goddess sun abandoned the land. It comes from inside the green god mountain circled by eagles, far, far away, she sings. Beyond the goddess river.

The starlight path will lead you there. All you must do is follow the animals in the sky – the mammoth, the rhino, the sabretooth tiger – then climb right inside the god’s belly and ask permission to take a single piece.



No one in our tribe has ever seen this jadeite, and the stories spin their magic until you are breathless with desire to see it for yourself.

But I can imagine it. Every night in my dreams, I go to the green god mountain and find the jadeite stone to save my baby sister, Bear.



*

I tread gentle to our shelter, heart tapping with worry. Ma must have stepped out, for Bear is alone, hidden inside the rush basket. I lift the soft-as-down fur and push my little finger close so she can grab it. She is too tiny, see?

I watch her as the full moon peeks in through a gap in the reed roof. It lights up her golden face. The fragile blue veins across her eyelids flit-flutter. Her grip is weak. She can hardly grasp my finger. Her breath beats slow as I count, '*Da, han, dio . . .*'

Ma and Pa have said because she is so small, she may not survive. A tear slips down my nose and I touch the bones and healing herbs strung above her bed by the storyteller. They smell strong and smoky.

The soft rattle wakes her and she makes a sound so quiet I have to lean closer to hear.

That's when I tell her my idea.



‘What if your big sister Swallow went to the green god mountain?’ I whisper. ‘To ask for a piece of jadeite to heal you, Baby Bear?’ I stroke her skin. ‘I could do it . . . Prise out my own small piece from inside the belly of the mountain. And carry it all the way back . . . It will heal you, little sister. For the stone is powerful.’

Bear wriggles like a small, weak worm. Tiniest of movements. I know she wants to open her eyes, but even that is too much. Her lashes fine as feathers rest on her fragile skin.

‘Sleep,’ I urge. ‘You must grow seed-strong . . . You must stay, don’t go.’

Voices from outside drift into the shelter. I kiss Bear and even though she hardly ever wakes I see her lashes quiver now. She knows me. I tuck in the warm fur and close my eyes a moment.

I see the green god mountain. The journey ahead

unfurls before me as I ask all the goddesses, all the gods, for protection. For Bear, for Ma and Pa, and for me.

I bow my head and feel for the sharp tooth of the sabretooth tiger threaded on the necklace that Grandma gave me in the last days before she died. It belonged to her and she gifted it to me.

It is the very tip of the tooth and as long as my thumb. It has four small cuts in a diamond shape. Grandma's marks. She said the tooth connected us forever.

Grandma was our storyteller. And even though the tiger is no more, its spirit is everlasting, like Grandma's. She could spin herself into the past and future, saw pictures of the first journeys we humans made.

I feel the spirit of the sabretooth tiger surround me. For a moment I am back in its iced land. I feel its



meaty breath as it roars fierce and strong, and its
fur is tough as I ripple my hand
across its patterned back.
It will guide me and
protect me.

