

The Forgotten Songs Incident

Matthew Baker

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Afterward, climbing down from the summit, we stopped at the cave of forgotten songs. The entrance to the cave was on a rocky ledge just beyond the glacier. Not even moss could grow there. Squeezing into the cave, through that jagged gap, would be impossible carrying a backpack. Even our coats were too bulky, and would have to be left behind. There was some debate about whether we should enter—gesturing, heads shaking, beards being tugged—but eventually everybody agreed to enter the cave. This was my fault. The others were locals, had all been born in the valley below, so had seen the phenomenon before. I wasn't from here. I had never seen the forgotten songs. And, the phenomenon was dangerous, but the others really wanted me to see. They seemed proud to have something so unusual in their mountains. Like boys, eager to show off. Jon, our unofficial leader, kept slapping the others on their backs, rallying support. He was very short, with a flat face and buzzed sandy hair and rays of wrinkles at his eyes when he smiled, and was the one who from the beginning had insisted on entering the cave. He grinned, marching around the ledge with his hands at his hips, trying to put the others at ease. The one who from the beginning had been opposed to entering the cave, totally against, meanwhile, was Stefan. If Jon was our leader, Stefan was our packhorse. In his pack he carried twice the weight as

the rest of us—the stove, the spare crampons, all the emergency supplies—and had a load of firewood wrapped in a tarp strapped to the back with green and yellow bungees. Even now that he had agreed to enter the cave, he kept tugging at the graying snarls of his beard, distractedly, and pacing around the ledge with an anxious, unhappy, brooding look. Jon and Stefan fought about everything—which routes to take, whose compass to use, whether it was raining or hailing, how to pronounce moulin, how to pronounce moraine, whose sense of smell was better, whose mother made better sausage, whose father made better pudding, who better remembered certain events from their childhood, who had been supposed to pack the caramels, whose turn it was to hold the map, where the birds were flying, where the time had gone, whether science was a religion, whether religion was a science, whether morality was ethical, whether allergies were primarily physiological or primarily psychological, whose socks were warmer, whose breath was grosser, dogs versus cats—and the cave wasn't any exception, Jon was certain that things would be fine, Stefan was certain that things just would not be fine at all. They were the ends of the spectrum; the others, who now were pinning their folded coats to the ledge under the weight of their packs, all seemed to fall somewhere between them, on that spectrum from really quite excited to totally petrified. Jon threw a coil of rope over his back, gave everybody a thumbs up, told Stefan to quit pouting, and then wriggled sideways into the cave. Stefan had paled, visibly. Out of all of us, he was by far the biggest, and toughest—I had seen him push cattle around like somebody merely rearranging furniture, had seen him shrug off burns from steaming coffee, frostnip from soaking boots, a doorframe to the forehead, a fishhook in the lip, like the pain was nothing—so seeing how afraid he was to enter the cave was making me nervous. He squeezed through ahead of me; I watched the jagged gap swallow him.

Beyond the gap, the tunnel was actually quite large. Our headlamps switched on, illuminating volcanic rock, dripping icicles, shimmering pools of motionless water. I saw a

trampled cigarette pack, a torn scarf wadded against a boulder—evidence, artifacts, of previous visitors. Jon led the way, whistling at everybody to follow. We all were wearing thick wool sweaters, and polyester snowpants, which swished sometimes. Harnesses, for climbing, over our snowpants. Stefan's sweater had a pattern of snowflakes and geese, so that was my view, the backside, as we filed along the tunnel. The others were whispering, even chuckling, but Stefan was very quiet. Over the past few weeks, I had noticed that in any dispute between Jon and Stefan, the others always sided against Stefan, with Jon. Still, there was nobody the others loved as much as Stefan. Since arriving, I had been alternating between houses, bunking with pet cats and pet dogs on different couches, which had given me the opportunity to speak with each of the others individually. They were all “best friends,” but when pressed to name a “best friend,” they each had named Stefan. There was something about him that inspired utter devotion. He was clumsy, and somewhat dense. He broke things constantly: mugs, lamps, antennas, door handles, door hinges. He confused the names of celebrities. He forgot simple facts, like the year. But he was also curious. He had a collection of bird eggs on a shelf in his kitchen—creamy, spotted, dappled, plain—and kept a rubber-banded journal, for recording weather patterns, in the wooden drawer beneath his microwave. The journal had sketches, too, crosshatched portraits of various sheep. He was remarkably sensitive to the emotions of animals; he had demonstrated empathy for huddled reindeer, quivering rabbits, a beady-eyed rat caught in the jaws of a trap; he claimed that even ticks had feelings. He was a skilled cook—could prepare a savory feast from scant provisions—and ate with a ferocious enthusiasm that added as much flavor to a meal as herbs and spices. He was a slow, muddled, faltering reader, and loved reading regardless. When together, the others teased him, bullied him, would even mock him—Jon's lead was followed even there—but secretly, he was their unanimous favorite. Perhaps that was why Jon treated him like a rival. “Sometimes the

points he argues are actually true,” Jon had once admitted to me, tearing open a packet of dried marshmallows and powdered cocoa. “I take the opposite position anyway, just to spite him.” The tunnel was curving now. At the bend, Stefan stumbled over a rock, bumping into whoever was ahead of him, who grumbled, and scolded him. “We’re getting close,” a voice muttered. “Are you ready for this?” somebody hissed at me, from further back. The tunnel wound downhill, getting narrower, and rockier, and narrower, and rockier, and narrower, until we were hunching along crouched low with our heads bent sideways and our boots scuffing across the rubble, and then suddenly the tunnel emptied us one by one into an immense cavern—an expanse of scattered pools and craggy pillars, with a vaulted ceiling, like a ballroom or theater—which was where we found the forgotten songs.

“Usually nobody goes any closer than this,” Jon whispered, squinting up at my headlamp, grinning. “But let’s go a little further.”

The others hadn’t told me what to expect. I was surprised—the spirits were shaped like people—were like the shadows of people, torn free from the bodies. Hundreds were there in the cavern, huddled together in large flocks, drifting around solo, peering blankly from the entrances to still deeper tunnels. Some were hunched, others were gangly, but otherwise the appearance of every spirit was exactly the same.

As we stood there, at the edge of a vast pool, a spirit drifted toward us, above the water, giving us the chance to examine it closely. And what especially interested me was, it had clear skin. A transparent membrane, exposing its interior: cloudy black liquid, swirling with flecks of silver. Like ink, and bits of metal, stirred into water—that’s what the inside of the spirit was like. The flecks seemed to accumulate in the extremities of the body, so that the fingers and the feet of the spirit were almost totally silver, whereas the rest of the body was primarily black. All the spirits were like that. It made me think of frostbite. The spirit

was closer now—its arms slack, its toes pointed downward, floating very slowly above the surface of the pool. We kept staring. The other thing that definitely interested me was, it had no face. No eyes, no nose, no ears, no mouth. Not a single feature. Nothing. Inside the head, though, the situation was different. There was an orb there—a bright glowing sphere, with a pearly texture, in the place of the brain—the light had the quality of a lantern, and flickered occasionally. The orb was what lit the rest of the body, and made the flecks glitter, and the surface of the pool. I was mesmerized, and also getting worried, because now that the spirit was closer, I saw that it was very large, bigger than any of us, even Stefan.

Then, I suddenly realized, I could hear the forgotten song.

Some of the others looked afraid—cupping gloved hands over their ears, plugging their ears with gloved fingers, blocking out the music. But others were listening carefully. Even Stefan, who had been so afraid of coming here, was craning his gaunt face toward the spirit now, listening without blinking. Gravely, Jon nodded at me to listen too.

There weren't words, any voices whatsoever. Gongs, only gongs, different pitches, clanging softly. The volume fluctuated, rising and falling, making the gongs sometimes almost impossible to hear. But the music seemed to emanate from the spirit's whole body. And whenever a gong rang, the flecks within the spirit whirled, as if something invisible had passed through. A gong rang, a gong rang, somebody's headlamp switched off, the battery suddenly dead. The spirit, that forgotten song, had come to the edge of the pool now, was floating from the water onto the rocks, and we parted to make way for it, stepping backward, slowly, without looking away from it, like people under hypnosis who had been given a command. It was behemoth. It dwarfed us. Its presence crushed the pressure of the air around us, dropped the temperature to freezing, our breath was visible, suddenly, white puffs shooting from gaping mouths, as the spirit drifted through us, without

acknowledging us, looming quietly, its orb glowing, its gongs ringing, its flecks whirling, and there was this feeling that gripped me, then, standing below, gazing up at the song, that all of us there were still only children—that there were very big, very old things on this planet, which were the true adults.

How many were there?

“Here? In the cave? Every song the world has ever forgotten,” Jon murmured, adjusting the coil of rope slung over his back, watching the spirit drift off toward some others. “Supposedly. Although, obviously, nobody knows whether this cave contains every forgotten song, ever, or only many, or only some. Nobody knows how far the tunnels go. People have gone deeper, but then never came out. Every few years, there are disappearances. Kids come here on dares. Us, we’ve been here only two times before, and even then not this far.”

The songs didn’t have the quality of recordings. Their sound was full-bodied, alive. I could hear different melodies as the volume of the songs rose and fell, overshadowing each other. From a spirit hovering in the mouth of a tunnel, something like a twentieth-century opera score, with accordions warbling alongside the singers; from a spirit hidden beyond a cluster of rippled stalagmites, something like a thirteenth-century folk song, a woman crooning to wavering strains of koto and flute; from a spirit directly behind us suddenly, something like a nineteenth-century sea chantey, croaky men and reedy boys chanting in unison as mop buckets were struck and mop handles thumped against the deck. Then those songs would fade, and others would swell. In all that noise, though, picking out individual songs was almost impossible. And the songs never stopped. Throughout the cavern, the echoed melodies of hundreds of forgotten songs blended together, creating a single song with countless notes and a haunting intricate quiet melody that filled me up and hollowed me out and seemed somehow to express every feeling of loss and courage

and loneliness, simultaneously, that I had ever felt. I had stopped breathing. So had Stefan—our breath was still visible, and none was coming out of him.

Stefan started walking away from us, toward a field of stalagmites, and the mouths of the deeper tunnels beyond.

“Stefan, where are you going?” Jon said.

“I need to hear the other songs,” Stefan said.

Stefan’s headlamp was the one that had died. He yanked the headlamp down, so that it hung from his neck now, just beneath the tangled knots of his beard, resting on his sweater. Then he turned away again, and began lumbering across a rocky slope.

“Stefan, come back over here!” Jon hissed.

“I have to go deeper,” Stefan called.

We hurried after him. The others that were still covering their ears looked especially confused. “What’s he doing?” one whispered, urgently, without uncovering his ears, making it impossible to answer him. “That’s not the way out,” another frowned, explaining something that was obvious to everybody. Our snowpants were swishing. A spirit swooped directly in front of us, loosing the sound of wailing electric guitars, and we all bumped into each other, to avoid bumping into it.

We caught up to Stefan in the field of stalagmites, and gathered around. Stefan kept insisting he wanted, needed, to go deeper, to hear the other forgotten songs. He seemed to have totally reversed his earlier position—that the songs were dangerous—which perhaps only proved the songs were as dangerous as he had said. “Stefan, you’re being really stupid!” somebody scowled. “Jon, don’t let him go,” another begged. Jon looked flustered—his hands were at his hips again, but this time he wasn’t smiling. “This is how people disappear,” Jon said. “I’ll only go a little further,” Stefan said. “We’ve already gone further than we should have!” Jon hissed.

Beyond the stalagmites, a flock of songs was drifting into the mouth of a tunnel, headed deeper. Nobody wanted to let Stefan go any further. But, still, he looked so truthful, and sincere. “They’re, just, really beautiful,” Stefan murmured, as if apologizing. In the light of our headlamps, his cheekbones were shadowed. His hair was matted with sweat. Eventually the others agreed, but insisted he wear the rope, so he wouldn’t get lost.

Jon hitched the rope to Stefan’s harness, slipping an arch of rope through the belay loop and then yanking the ends through the arch. Once the rope was secure, Stefan hurried off into a tunnel, slipping and stumbling, without even a wave goodbye. In a tunnel that size, he looked extremely vulnerable, and very small. Spirits loomed above him, flitting across his path, sliding alongside him, gliding behind him, lined the tunnel like guardians. We all had the same view this time—those snowflakes and geese, the backside of that sweater—before he passed over the edge of the crest and disappeared.

After that, our only way of following his movements was the occasional twitch of the gray nylon as the rope dragged through the stones. Jon was acting as anchor, with the rope unspooling through his gloved fingers, as we stood and watched. Nobody was having fun anymore. The songs in the cavern seemed to have gotten much louder—our ears, in the same way that eyes will adjust to low light, perhaps having adjusted to the soft volume—or perhaps what we were hearing was coming from the tunnel. Flickering light streamed up from beyond the crest, as if the deeper tunnels, which may have led to deeper caverns, were absolutely teeming with forgotten songs. We waited, staring bleakly at the rope, as it jerked, and twitched, and jerked, and twitched.

“Alright, come back!” Jon shouted.

But the rope kept unspooling.

“Stefan?” Jon shouted, panicking.

Faster, faster, faster, the rope unspooled. The others were starting to realize, Stefan

wasn't coming back. Maybe he honestly had intended to, originally, but he no longer seemed to have any such intention.

"He wants to stay," somebody whispered.

And then the rope ran out.

The rope's ends popped through Jon's gloved fingers, landed on the rocks, began wriggling away toward the mouth of the tunnel, as if eager to disappear. For a moment, Jon watched the rope receding, and we all stared at Jon. This went on for another moment. Then, Jon yelped, ran skidding across the rubble, and crouched and grabbed the rope again. That didn't stop anything—now the rope was dragging Jon.

"Help!" Jon grunted.

Headlamps bobbing, snowpants swishing, we ran over, and all took hold of the rope.

The rope jerked, then went taut.

Jon was panting, sweat dribbling from the hairline of that buzzed hair. To me, the situation suddenly felt very serious. Jon adjusted his grip, then adjusted his footing. With our combined strength, we had brought Stefan to a standstill. But we could feel, from somewhere deep underground, the faint tremor of Stefan tugging at the rope.

"The songs have made him lose his senses," somebody whispered.

"He never even wanted to come here," another whimpered.

"Jon, what are we going to do?" a tense voice demanded.

Together, we turned toward our leader. Jon grimaced, still panting. A faint tremor passed through the rope again.

"We're going to drag him out," Jon growled.

Stefan was the one we needed—the strong one, with bulk, and weight—but instead of pulling with us, he was pulling against us. I would have thought dragging him out was impossible, if not for the others. As soon as the command was given, they adopted the

grim determined expressions of those prepared to die for a cause. Sleeves were shoved to the elbows; gloves were tossed to the rocks. Heave by heave, we hauled at the rope. Occasionally Stefan would throw a heave of his own, and the rope would rip through our fingers, tearing skin and prompting shouts, but we would only seize the rope again and throw back a series of heaves in response. Still, we seemed to be making hardly any progress whatsoever. Worse, the gray nylon was fraying, about ready to snap, at spots where jags had nicked the rope. Somebody collapsed, exhausted. Somebody's knees gave out. Until now, the spirits had seemed either oblivious or indifferent to our presence in the cavern, but now the forgotten songs were amassing, had drifted across the field of stalagmites and were encircling us at the mouth of the tunnel, sailing about. Forgotten conga beats, forgotten viola riffs, forgotten balafon melodies, forgotten anthems and roundelays and lullabies and serenades. That song, the allsong, was booming now, reverberating in our breastbones. The pressure was crushing; the temperature left our hands numb, our joints aching, even our lungs cold. One by one we gave up, dropped or slumped to the rocks, until only Jon remained standing. He was the smallest out of any of us. He was completely outweighed. He didn't seem to know that. Knees bent, shoulders hunched, nostrils flared, he kept heaving, frantically, at his lost rival.

"I tried to tell you," Jon gasped, "everything—everything—will be fine."

Jon threw another heave, and Stefan lurched over the crest of the slope, trailed by a radiant swarm of forgotten songs.

"Just let me go," Stefan was shouting, begging. He was fumbling at the harness—he'd managed to loosen the leg loops, but not yet the waist belt. He was a lone strap, a sole clasp, from slipping the harness altogether.

At the sight of him, the rest of us rallied, swaying to our feet, brushing the pebbles from our hands. We took the rope up, and helped drag him out that last stretch. As he hobbled

into our huddle—near enough that we could grab ahold of his sweater—spirits burst from the mouths of the deeper tunnels, surging into the cavern, converging on us. The sound was indescribable. In the presence of that many spirits, we all could feel, now, what he must have been feeling all along. I hadn't known emotions that potent even existed. I didn't ever want to leave that cave. I couldn't bear the thought of having to leave the forgotten songs. Watching emotions flashing across the faces of the others, I saw everybody was experiencing that same feeling. Stefan was weeping. His sweater, and his beard, were coated in a chalky dust. His boots had come untied. The tears left jagged streaks in the dust on his face.

“Please, please. I have to go back down there. Take the rope off,” Stefan pleaded.

Instead, the others tightened his harness. We probably would have been lured into the deeper tunnels ourselves, the same as he had been, if we hadn't been so focused on rescuing him. We were determined to get him out of that cave.

We ushered him back through the cavern—along the rocky pathways between pools—toward the tunnel that led aboveground. The spirits drifted behind us, a dazzling throng, flickering in our wake. Stefan was still crying some, tears occasionally dribbling down his cheeks into his beard. We kept hold of his sweater, his harness, but didn't need to. He had given up trying to fight us. Obediently, he followed us, his head bowed.

As we ducked the overhang and crawled into the tunnel, the spirits fell back, hovering in the cavern, too large to follow.

“I don't want it to end,” Stefan murmured.

Nobody spoke again after that. We hunched along crouched low, with our heads bent sideways and our boots scuffing across the rubble, until the tunnel widened and we could stand again, and did. We couldn't hear the music anymore. The pressure of the air was just normal pressure. The air, which was cold, felt like a heat wave. We walked a while, and

then got used to the air, and then the air felt cold. Somewhere along the way, Stefan's sniffing had stopped. Somebody was kicking rocks, as if to get back at the cave somehow. Somebody splashed through a puddle. There was nothing to look at, other than rocks, and puddles, and the backsides of sweaters. The feeling the songs had given me was already wearing off. Now that nobody was in any danger, I was bored, and hungry, and already taking everything for granted again. I found myself wondering about rugs. What was the point of rugs, anyway? I had never owned a rug. I probably never would. We passed a scuffed plastic lighter, and a crumpled wrapper—evidence, artifacts, of previous visitors. Not proof that other people had gotten out—just proof that other people had gotten in.

Outside, everything was exactly how we had left it. We zipped our coats—bright yellows, bright greens, bright indigo, bright violet—and built a fire on the ledge. We ate biscuits. We ate chocolate. We split a tin of sardines. Earlier, we had filled our canteens at a stream on the glacier, and drank the water now. Stefan really seemed to be feeling much better—had stopped glancing back at the cave altogether, was telling stories and making jokes. Jon helped him brush the dust from his face, and some crumbs from his coat.

Feelings confused me. In the cave, I had felt as if I had never experienced true happiness before I had heard those songs. And leaving the spirits had been awful—had made me feel painfully, hopelessly, desperately sad. Beyond devastated; heartbroken almost. Still, I could already feel myself forgetting that feeling the songs had given me. I couldn't even remember why I had been sad. But I had.

The wind was brisk. Clouds were misting the glacier. We strapped our crampons onto our boots, gathered our packs, stepped back out onto the ice. As we picked our way across the surface, Stefan began humming, quietly, then louder, a song everybody knew. We all sang along.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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