

TRAVELING BY PETROGLYPH

Ripley Patton

MY BEACH IS QUIET. It is just me and the eagle's screech, the limpet's sip, the suck of the ocean upon the rocks. Behind me sits a fisherman's boat on its side. There's a gash in the hull that curves up, like a smile. I am utterly alone. It is Friday afternoon and the locals are either preparing their restaurants, shops, and art galleries for the onslaught, or they are hiding. Around the south hump of Wrangell Island something large and white trundles. Even from this distance it is a behemoth, a hulking multi-storied monster sporting thousands of balconies, a swimming pool with artificial surf, three restaurants, a ballroom, and a casino. Predictable as the tide, it comes to devour my island every Friday. My granddaughters don't mind. Leila scoops ice cream at the museum snack shop. She flirts with the cruisers and sometimes gets invited back to one of the ship's bars for a drink or to someone's cabin. Seesi owns an Inuit jewelry store and hands out pamphlets with maps to my beach so the tourists can come and see the petroglyphs.

This is my beach. This is the beach of my people since the beginning of our time on this earth. My ancestors marked it, slowly, painstakingly, with whalebone chisels, with the cut of clam shells, with the ancient symbols of worlds beyond this one carved into stone. We were tourists ourselves once, but we did not travel by cruise ship. There is a display in the museum showing the kayak, the dogsled, the snowshoe. Old ways to travel, but not the oldest. I am the last of my people to hold the secret of traveling by petroglyph. It is unwanted treasure. My daughters and sons, their daughters and sons, are happy on this island. Even I, a wrinkled old woman, am happy. Except when the cruisers come.

The ship pulls up to the wharf, huge but still dwarfed by the hills rising out of the sea around it. After a few minutes the gangway lowers and people tumble out like crabs from the cooking pot. The stop on my island lasts exactly three hours.

Five years ago the government declared my beach a state park. Scientists came and took pictures of the forty-one rocks they had identified as having ancient symbols carved into them, including seven below the tide line. They built a wooden ramp for wheelchair access and a viewing deck that

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*My beach is quiet.
It is just me
and the eagle's screech,
the limpet's sip,
the suck of the ocean
upon the rocks.*

hangs over the beach. The display challenges people to walk the beach and find all forty-one petroglyphs. It has pictures of a few of them and lists theories on why my people carved so many symbols on one beach. The theories make me laugh.

It is time to wade in the water. I sink my old ankles into the cold liquid of the Inside Passage and head for a large greenish rock emerging from the ocean. The tide is the lowest it has been in fourteen years, but it is still not an easy journey. The big rock is surrounded by slippery, jagged offspring. My left foot gets wedged in a crack between two rocks. A wave hits, splashing high enough that I taste salt. It subsides and my foot comes free. I wallow onto the big rock like a fur seal and lay there, trying to catch my breath, my cheek pressed into a giant swirling petroglyph. There is no picture of this one in the scientist's files. It was deep in the sea when they came. If they ever find it they will call it Number Forty-two. My ancestors named it the Journey Stone.

I sit upon the rock, looking out to sea, splaying my palm in the middle of the carving but slightly off center. I am ready. Before long a noise comes to me from behind, like bees buzzing, and it grows. Voices become distinguishable, sandals slap, gravel crunches, a radio blares, all of it rising to a cacophony. I don't have to turn to see that my beach has just been invaded by a hundred tourists. I've seen it every Friday for years, the way they stumble over the sacred stones, not seeing, dropping candy wrappers and soda cans as they go. Traveling has become too easy for them. If they had to spend weeks, years, months, carving their itinerary out of rock with primitive tools, they would treat their destinations differently. Of that I am sure.

Someone calls, "Hey lady, what are you doing? Is there one way out there?" and I shift my hand, so that it rests perfectly in the center of the mark. The rock undulates under my skin. Stone ripples like water. I close my eyes, envisioning each of the symbols on the beach waking up, filling with power. The noise in my ears stops, like a door slammed shut. In front of me the waves still rush, but behind me there is sudden and beautiful silence. I turn slowly, knowing that all the tourists are gone, winked out of existence. My beach is empty again, except for the old boat, its cracked hull grinning.

The theories make me laugh.

I don't worry for them. They are travelers. They pay a lot of money for those cruises. The trip I gave them was free; each one's port-of-call determined by the petroglyph they stood closest to when I powered up the Journey Stone. There are forty-one wonderful, habitable worlds out there. And if they ever want to get back to my beach, all they have to do is start carving. 🌀

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RIPLEY PATTON



Ripley Patton is an ex-patriot American currently living on the South Island of New Zealand. She writes fantasy and science fiction because truth has always fascinated her more than fact. You can peek into a small window of her mind at rippatton.livejournal.com.