

THE GREAT CHANGE (by Guillermo Balmori Abella)

- If we don't find food soon, the weakest ones will die
- I know...

The tribe goes on advancing through the cold plains. They've been lost for several days, looking for the places where they used to hunt and gather at that time of the year. The wise man died during the hardest part of the winter and the chief feels lost in his absence. They have hardly survived by eating the few nuts they found in some lairs and the little meat provided by their inhabitants. They need to find something else soon.

Runa is just 10 and walks with tired steps next to the eldest of the tribe. She drags her feet staring at the horizon, with a lost look when something catches her attention.

At the top of the hill that rises before their eyes, two trees greet the small group. None of the members of the group seems to notice them, but they are familiar to Runa.

- Alubi, haven't we seen those trees before?
- I don't think so. These lands are new to me- replies to the elderly woman without paying much attention.

The little girl is not satisfied. She pulls from the skins that cover Alubi's body and insists:

- I have seen those trees before, Alubi.

The woman stops with indifference. She looks at the girl disapprovingly and then she looks up to the hill. When she sees the trees, her gaze doesn't seem to recognise anything. She turns her eyes to the girl and scolds her:

- They are trees like many others. We have never been here.

Runa is not satisfied

- Could I have seen them in my dreams, Alubi?

These words produce a greater effect on the old woman. Since the death of the wise man, some of his duties have fallen over her shoulders because she is the eldest of the group. And the interpretation of dreams has always been fundamental in the traditions of the tribe.

- When did you have that dream, Runa?

- I don't know. It could be long ago because my feeling is that I know these trees for a long time.
- Are you sure they are those trees?
- No, Alubi. They may only look alike - replies the girl, now scared with the elderly woman's interest.

The chat is interrupted by the chief's orders. He has decided that this is a good place and a good moment to rest, and quickly, the tribe starts lighting a fire for cooking the remains of the food they take and keeping warm.

Runa doesn't hesitate. She takes advantage of the moment not to go on answering questions. She doesn't feel comfortable because she doesn't really want to keep lying. She hasn't dreamt of those trees.

She is sure she has seen those trees before and decides to check it. She soon finds an excuse to get away from the group:

- I am looking for firewood- she says to her parents when they ask her.
- Don't go too far. We don't know these lands and we don't know which animals you can find, Runa - says her mum, always protective.

The girl doesn't answer. She thinks her mum is wrong, as Alubi and the chief are. But she can't explain them why she knows it.

It happened last summer. At the end of last summer. She remembers it perfectly because the trees were covered by a yellow and orange-colored cloak which is what caught her attention. She went up to the top of the hill although it was forbidden for her. A pack of wolves had been hanging around the campsite and hunters were worried. But Runa was always brave and curious and she wanted to see those weird trees closer.

She went up to the hill and stayed there for a long time, having a look at everything. The trees, the soil, the rocks, the great prairie extending under her feet...everything. There were also some big plants she had never seen before. She amused herself playing with them, crushing the grain till she obtained a whitish powder that seemed very soft. Later, she doesn't know why yet, she amused herself digging other grains. It seemed funny to think that they would be there, waiting for her, when she came back the following summer.

And so it was. That's right, those were the same trees. They don't look like them because they don't have any of their beautiful leaves, but they are. And so the landscape that can be seen from there. Runa understands now why her tribe has not recognised the place. She went up to the top of the hill from the other side, and the hillsides are really different. That's the first thing that surprises the girl. But what really amazes her, is finding lots of those weird plants, like the ones she played with last summer.

She tries to find the ones she dug, but she can only find in their place more of those plants. Many more. Runa doesn't understand it but she realises that it is just what they are looking for. There may be food for the whole tribe. So she starts running down the hill while she is thinking about how to explain to her parents the origin of her discovery.

When she arrives with the rest, she cannot express herself clearly due to the emotion, but little by little, the message is clear: she found food. The chief and two men go up to the hill. Meanwhile, Runa talks to Alubi calmly.

- What else did you see in that dream, Runa?
- I can't remember anything else - lies the girl once more.
- You'll have to do the effort. It is very important for the tribe to have one of its members with that power. You could be a wise woman in the future. And that is a great responsibility. You may have been chosen by Gods.

Those words weigh the girl down. She doesn't want to be the wise woman, let alone deceive her tribe. She doesn't want to go on deceiving the elderly woman either.

- Alubi, I must confess something
- Do you remember anything else? - asks the woman with interest.
- It's not that. In fact... in fact, I didn't dream anything.
- So...where have you seen those trees before? And why did they lead you to the food?

Runa tells the elderly woman the whole story. How she ran away last summer and how she found those plants. What she did with the grains and what she found in their place. While she is talking, she puts one of those grains in the woman's hand. Alubi doesn't reply for a while. She frowns, concentrated, looking carefully at the grain Runa left in her hand.

- You have to tell the chief. I think it is important.
- Alubi, I'm scared. The chief and my parents will get angry because I disobeyed them. Do you really think it will be different if they know where those plants come from?

Alubi looks at the girl fondly. She caresses her wild hair and looks at the fields extending before them as if it was the first time she sees them:

- Everything will change, honey. Everything.

VOCABULARY

To gather: to pick up piece by piece.

Wise: intelligent

Lair: resting place of a wild animal

To drag: to pull slowly and with effort

To greet: welcome

To gaze: to look with great interest

To scold: to find fault in an angry way

Cloak: mantle

Whitish powder: white coloured dust

To frown: to look disapprovingly