



They had the misfortune of living in unenlightened times. They were largely exposed to the elements, their village resting in the hollow beneath a large escarpment. Their buildings were of stone or carved out of the rock. Without calendars, written records, arithmetic, their past felt almost as uncertain as their future, their lore vulnerable to the muddling of any rascal. The leader, Chief, lived in the village's largest dwelling, and had won the title due to an auspicious birth – he'd arrived, long ago, beneath a full moon, and within his amniotic sac. He was benevolent, as an adult ruler, but demanded large amounts of food in exchange for his handling all of the settlement's judicial or bureaucratic affairs. He decided when seeds ought to be planted, for instance, and when their pigs were killed. The mark of his thumb-print in a square of soft clay may have denoted a thief would be given punishment or a sick person relieved of their misery – devoid of many symbols, the villagers could judge his loops and whorls as fast as with any modern insignias. He took more than an equal portion of food due to the energy requirements of all he needed to accomplish and decide, but also because he'd been encouraged to view himself as considerably talismanic, his state reflecting the success of the society at large.

They were a 'chiefdom' without rights, or shoes, or formal education. They believed the universe was the creation of a very old man who, on completion, had wandered into nearby, handmade hills and promptly died, leaving them without any instructions as to how they might prevent a collapse just as swift as the assembly. Thus, they always feared their world was at the brink of catastrophe. They rarely left the shelter made by the escarpment of an evening, afraid of predators they didn't realise their ancestors had done away with many generations before in a forgotten series of ursine confrontations – bears versus forebears. They slept around prodigiously, but thought their genital pustules were the products of incorrect speech. They lacked words for 'compromise', 'recreation', or 'ennui', and recognised only four core emotions, translating today as something like 'warmth', 'sadness', 'hunger', and, as a final catch-all, 'headache'. Without 'awe', they were largely immune to explosive sunsets over their plains. Without 'jealousy', they had the impetus for sleeping around, as well as collective aversion to fighting or boasting.

The villagers' lives were largely in the grip of two determinants: the weather's effect on food production, and Chief's associated thoughts about how best to marshal everybody. The most anticipated day of the full seasonal cycle was scheduled at Chief's discretion, although he usually took as his cue the fruiting of a certain citrus tree that was prolific beside a nearby creek. The event – 'Chief's Day' – was formally a pageant in the leader's honour, involving dances and songs for his amusement. They believed his link to their wider fate to be especially strong on this day, and so worked hard at fostering his approval for the benefits and protection they perceived were on offer. There was individualistic significance to the day, as well, which was often overlooked due to the wider community project. Amidst the slippery, corrosive drift of time, 'Chief's Days' were milestones by which ordinary villagers might anchor their personal narratives and watch trends within their own maturations. An earliest memory, for example, could be watching a 'Chief's Day' performance from the crook of a parent's hip-bone. Next time, maybe: giving tokenistic support to the preparation of the large, threaded 'banner' the leader would be presented with each edition, in gratitude. Next time:

spending part of the morning in tears in acknowledgement an animal with which you'd borne a connection had been sacrificed for the celebration's feast. Next time: joining the children's section of a dance troupe, thrilled to press right up to Chief's platform to brush his feet, like everyone else, as a mark of respect. Several editions hence: leading the troupe as a 'veteran', considering yourself 'adult', sitting beneath those orienting fruit trees in the evening and studying the whole pageant with a sense your own knowledge wasn't now far short of anyone else's in the village. Perhaps a few more carnivals down the line, for boys: partaking in dangerous 'sporting' competitions – wrestling, archery, holding one's breath longest in the creek – with no ardent wish to be 'champion', only that you might contribute to the display. And if a girl: spared from such 'sport', just a spectator, but carrying more responsibility when it came to arranging the feast. Soon enough: playing music, trading tools, and if the weather was warm and good, stealing away behind the curtains of creek-rushes to explore bodies and each of the four humours at depths you hadn't previously looked upon. Then, the Chief's Days of your fulsome self: hard at the banner-making, employed in killing animals, drinking the lightening, leaf-based brew that was a real adult's mark, perhaps swelling with child or reflecting upon a dome you were likeliest to have caused. Unless you were Chief himself, to live much past the earliest ledge of 'full' maturity, in these times, was a boon. And between the islands of such celebration days, commoners' lives were repetitive, exacting and well-defined, though not altogether unpleasant. Certainly, any poll – if such methods existed – would have affirmed 'Chief's Day' as the warmest event in their full retinue, its narrative importance notwithstanding. This isn't to imply, of course, that *all* reacted with warmth, each time. Say you were one of those children mourning a sacrificed animal, or a person who'd wished, later that evening, to be taken from behind by a certain man who'd instead become one of the drownings. 'Warmth' was merely the general mood, and there would always be pockets of exception.

It only really mattered, of course, that Chief was among those pleased by it all, and unfortunately the more he aged, the more he lost this exact propensity. At first, he was good at masking it, beneath a usual veneer of appreciation. He would look out upon the crowds and grin at their 'hunger' towards his enjoying the occasions – the clenched, instructed faces of the children in those dance troupes, for instance, and the anxious eyes of any person who served him food. If, with the weather turning warm, his brows showed an excess of sweat, attendants flapped tree fronds madly as a remedy. But the more iterations of the carnival he lived through, the more he felt 'headache' towards the definite pleading quality in the way all the villagers presented themselves – part of him appreciating their deep, metaphysical reasons, and the other, more selfish, not much liking being pushed towards any state on the thrust others' will. Once he'd found this discontent in himself, it wasn't possible to plug. He couldn't un-see the sadness, and stress, he'd begun to draw from the aggregate of all their expressions. By the time he'd acquired first grey hairs, and a ridiculous cluster of children via the women of his porous 'harem' – in short, once he'd come to an age that was almost unattainable for a person not of his privilege – he'd landed upon a deeply cynical view of the carnival, even though 'cynicism' was a state yet to be catalogued. There finally came an edition where, despite small effort at a chiefly bearing, he brooded towards an inner state much closer to 'headache' than 'warmth', and he obsessed upon the idea that, despite all the music and dance and sport he was the key witness to, truly *he*, in a sense, was the carnival's only performer of consequence. He could give his subjects the impression of good tidings by looking joyful, from his platform, but they would have all panicked to learn the sort of reactions really going on beneath his special skin. He said nothing to even his close confidantes, but was somewhat revealed when, not long after what the villagers had perceived as a successful festival, a young boy from his own inflated brood was abducted by an eagle, and some of the far-flung houses in the settlement, belonging to important citizens, were destroyed by fire. As villagers sought explanations as to what had caused these events from those who best knew the lore, only Chief understood a disruption in his humours had probably been responsible for both.

It tore at him – that boy being lifted by an eagle, most – and he made a tear-stricken, naked confession to a favourite among his lovers. She was known for her imaginative approach to the act, and blessedly wasn't the boy's mother. She weighed-up all he'd said, in her head, and at last proposed that the most important day in their settlement's history, time and again, would be better paired with *his* moods, rather than those of a bunch of fruit trees. He might prevent such terrors happening again – and simply enjoy himself more – if he deferred the event whenever it felt like a looming charade, and ordered its pieces into place only at times he already felt 'warm' enough to receive it. In fact, given it was *easier*, less labour-intensive, for a man to produce a good mood than for a tree to bear fruit, the idea seemed to promote not just more *successful* Chief's Days, but more Chief's Days period – and no-one could be so daft as to attack this outcome. It appeared a clever idea, and he contemplated it throughout the eventual harvests, the cooling, the darker months.

When good weather approached once more, Chief developed his plot and shared it with those people who were valued for listening to his suggestions and nodding back. By way of this group, it did gradually disseminate among the settlement – the echo of the rock walls making this process all the more swift – that their next festival would not be situated in the usual manner, despite the once-pivotal trees verging on their offerings. There was no panic, because of the prevailing dictum that Chief knew best, could do as he pleased, and the expectation there would be no great delay to the festivities, in any case. Yet indeed the trees fruited more reliably than their leader's spirits could brighten. He wasn't sure which of the recognised humours he was, in fact, nearest to, but knew by comparison with previous joyful experiences it was nothing akin to 'warmth', despite the sun's increasing influence, and the hurry-up he was receiving from the citrus bulbs. He wasn't 'sad', he knew. When he tried to describe his state – restricted to their society's limited vocabulary – he was at pains to emphasise that he felt in good health, but was simply disengaged by the idea of a festival. Were he to announce his carnival in such a mood, he would be hopelessly mismatched, it would quickly pass him by, and perhaps they'd all be facing collective punishment. His embarrassment about this failure in himself prompted him to hide away in the large rooms of his own dwelling, leaving those closest confidantes with the task of spreading the news and making apologies on his behalf. The lead banner-makers, who'd been working on their latest creation for a great portion of ordinary time, were nonplussed, and said they would continue their project in the hope it would amount to the most impressive piece yet. The dancers felt they might use the additional time for ironing-out inconsistencies in their choreography, and the musicians reported something similar. Certain animals didn't know it, but by Chief's reticence they were also being given a reprieve.

Awake to the inconvenience his 'mismatch' was causing everybody, and keenly aware that the fruit trees – turning bare, laying bare his delay – were nature's way of implicating him, he wasn't passive in his efforts to spark himself into a proper state. One of his more generous lovers, for example, heard of his disturbing situation, and offered her knotty hands for massaging and exploring his body to find the proper site of the problem. She tried each part of him – kneading his elbows, pressing his earlobes, grinding his well-fed trunk – but was unable to yield a clue. He left the cloister of his rock palace and would often walk along the taunting creek-line, as his great mind engaged itself in the regular administrative chores that were necessary for life in the village to go onwards. At times, he considered the 'ordinary' affairs he still had to preside over – a planning matter, or approval being granted to an expeditionary party that wished to explore their civilisation's frontier – as welcome distractions, and at others these seemed to merely be dragging him away from confronting and resolving a deeper challenge. When curious villagers asked for insight into what exactly he was feeling, he replied that he simply knew a carnival would have been wasted, or *risked*, upon him. He didn't wish to describe the headache he felt towards the pressure of showing excitement – or even basic enthusiasm – towards all the old rituals.

Chief was being reassured the full village wasn't tremulous towards his eventual acquiescence, but he would look out from the high vantage of his palace at occasional scenes of stilted activity and suspect otherwise. He felt cornered by dire outcomes. He feared they were all about to turn as rancorous from his having delayed the festival as they would if they'd seen him schedule it hastily to disastrous effect. It became obvious that solving his attitude was by far his most important task. Much as he was *more successful* at the other mundane roles, he got to the extraordinary stage of delegation, which, according to their shifting, untameable lore, had never been the recourse of any of the settlement's array of leaders. For example, Chief made it the responsibility of a wise, inquiring villager, almost as old as himself, to roster the guards who functioned as the meagre security apparatus to their entire world. Another man was invited to become the ombudsman for any noise complaints. Another was tasked with distilling exactly what agriculturalists reported about the condition of soils, and to issue general planting directives as a consequence. Another had to register the names and reasons attached to all the deaths in the small community, without the help of written language. Another had to monitor the food tithe that went Chief's way, sensitive to the slightest provocation that might have justified its rising. At the start, at least, Chief retained oversight, and any seismic decision about to be made by an assistant still needed to be explained to him and approved.

As he progressively lightened, shedding each of those responsibilities he'd erstwhile enjoyed, Chief won more glum time to devote to the 'problem' of his attitude. With spare afternoons, he received dancers and musicians for preview performances, with a view to shocking himself into excitement towards what was in his power to declare. Unfortunately, this shoved him further away from willingness – even though many of the small, hungry faces were tough to disappoint and belonged to children who hailed from his own loins. Similarly, he listened to short, descriptive previews about the magnificence of the ceremonial banner – its initial sections now gathering dust. This didn't pique anything either; he was plainly tired of the banners. He ate vast quantities of river-tree citrus, as if something about its *suniness* could have been digestible, but this ploy was partaken so desperately it only led to bowel troubles. The new bureaucracy made queues that snaked away from Chief's toilet block, as they waited to get his endorsements for measures they all anticipated would be fantastic. In time, Chief unburdened himself of such needs as inspecting animals for disease, imposing winter clothes, triaging the movements of the village 'doctor', and devising the words of his own soliloquies.

With ever more time to spare, Chief exercised vigorously – climbing rock walls, marching along the roof of their escarpment or through nearby woodland with parties of friends and guards (to protect against the bears). They understood, even then, that shaking one's head about for a while could have the after-effect of clarity – but Chief only ever found himself resettling into the familiar malaise. He commissioned vast, self-serving orgies with his supplest supporters, but the ecstasies of these events were ephemeral and couldn't have been preserved for long enough in his more dignified mode to justify, at last, a Chief's Day. He immersed himself in the creek, both when it was running warm and cool, like a hapless boy on carnival day, in the hope that by his emergence, after shaving death, he'd feel cause for celebration. But he only ever climbed out embarrassed and clogged in his chest. Chief knew, in himself, that he was trying much too hard, even before others – including the lover who'd given him the terrible idea in the first place, and those recently appointed as community 'health advisors' – began to provide this same advice. He settled into a phase of simply waiting for his outlook to become accommodating towards a carnival, like such a state ought to arrive inevitably, as a nice, natural surprise. He spent long, meditative days in the widest room of his rock palace, previously a favourite spot for his ordinary deliberations about what would be good for the settlement. The room still served such a purpose, in a way, but now it was common for Chief to be lying on the hard floor, eyes closed, trying to 'catch' any piece of lurking enthusiasm in himself that could have been wrangled and inflated into a worthy festival. Even such a simple routine, such a basic confrontation with mood, was never able to achieve its aims; he'd be deterred by some imaginary glimmer of

hungry, expectant faces. It was soon true that in a span of time which had yielded three phases of citrus coming and going, Chief's innards had declined to even once offer compatibility with his village's favourite day.

The settlement thickened around this new reality – mostly: a leader known for secluded phases, on his floor, while a veritable army of those who'd taken up a splinter of old authority waited patiently for their turn to get approval, as remained the procedure. Taught to believe in Chief's righteousness, the villagers seldom questioned the absence of the crucial festival day aloud, and certainly never would have accused the leader of a wish to spite them. As one package of determinants, the seasons, rollicked and had their unending way, again and again and once more, it became the case there were strolling, fresh, erudite children whose last Chief's Day had been spent in a parent's arms. There were those who'd never had a chance to present in its entirety a musical piece they'd practiced since a time when they'd been half their current height. There were fully grown adults who were holding off debuting in the intimacies glimpsed through those rush-curtains, long ago, because they preferred to wait for another such fitting, liberal occasion. And there were villagers *dying* and falling a considerable number of Chief's Days short of what should have been endowed to anyone who'd managed such lifespan. There'd been a litany of fantastic, occasion-worthy red meat which had withered and spoiled, or been served on lesser nights. There were boys who'd been spared from the demented sports so long that they'd be loath to ever compete in such a program again – thus, they'd become prejudiced against courage and manhood. The markers all villagers had derived from Chief's Days had been submerged by their leader's introspection, and as a result there were a great many desperate, unfortunate people, bobbing around without a shoring sense of what, in fact, they had grown to become, or how long they would likely remain. This, as Chief, by his now risk-averse lifestyle and heavy focus upon his own wellbeing, grew to be monstrously old – older than any villager had ever encountered, and yet few *did* encounter him because of his quiet habits, waiting inside dark caused by his own eyelids for spectacular, belated, impossible alignment. He might as well have been, after all, the old man who'd made the whole world, for all the youngest minds in the village – including many of his own children – knew about him, or could glean from chance sightings.

Because of the number of responsibilities which had been delegated, and the limited windows for garnering Chief's attention, a few of the underlings, out of necessity, began making decisions without his express consent and without his noticing. Perhaps it was surprising, given the length of time for which Chief had been *revered*, that this very quickly became common practice. The agricultural head, for instance, went several seasons without running by his leader any of the urgent measures he'd taken to combat inclement weather. There were great 'scientific' tool-making projects which had commenced at a frightful pace and long expeditions which had revealed promising country entirely without the knowledge of their patron, who'd simultaneously been exploring the dark. After some time in his job, the 'tithe man' actually *lowered* the food allocation that went the way of the royal palace, and Chief, though he was so much monitoring the fluctuations of places like his belly, did not realise. Although the villagers felt gratitude for the many ways in which Chief had sacrificed a 'normal' life, he became something of an absurd figure – certainly as absurd as any of those skewed, unmoored individuals his crisis was most to blame for creating. One gruff afternoon, he even ordered that all of the arrogant citrus trees by the creek be lopped down. Fortunately none of the assistants could quite agree whose jurisdiction this lay within to enact, and their Chief never remembered to follow up.

It was soon after this plot against the trees that a 'health advisor' came to wait outside the widest room of the rock palace for Chief's absent-minded thumbprint. The man did so with no express designs at power of his own. For one, another boy had been lately born in the caul, on a day of gale-force wind, and thus *he*, out of everyone, did appear the worthy successor. Chief emerged from his self-imposed chamber, shuffling like the casualty of time he'd become, unsuccessful as ever in his

attempts to earn everybody a holiday, and found himself once again needing to navigate a long queue of robust ‘staff’. He gave quick consent to plans to dig a new water well, and to attempt, with their collective, primitive grasp of husbandry, breeding a hardier type of pig, twice the girth of the ones at present. He was softened, perhaps, by his cultural attaché’s proposal to develop a new petroglyph that would detail many of the episodes from his own life – it would secretly prefer his birth and earlier, more exciting years. Amidst all this, Chief perhaps gave little thought to the health advisor, coming next, who’d been patiently wanting a thumbprint, and soon did receive it. There was no immediate shift in the reality of the village, no fog lifting, though this was truly what the soft mark decreed. It became a normal evening in the settlement, in fact, with yet another blazing, unappreciated sunset. It was a harsh, wintry time of year. The trees were skeletal and the many rocks cool.

The following morning, Chief was met by men from the security apparatus and dragged – as politely as this verb may be performed – to the central agora he’d absent-mindedly commissioned, months ago, for events such as this. In an egregious instance of underlings growing to supplant their own maker, it turned out Chief had yesterday approved his own execution, deferring to the village doctor’s assessment he was the owner of an intractable sickness. As he was given this news, standing on an unusual, humbling platform, Chief was made to appreciate the sprawling, emboldened system of governance that had sprung up quite without his properly realising, and which he was to soon fall victim to. Fantastically, he felt the full sadness and terror that was commensurate with this very situation – he was well-matched. Honourably, he made no disingenuous attempt to declare that, in fact, he suddenly felt capable of the kind of warmth that would have justified, after all this time, another Chief’s Day. This was how many of the assistants who’d been privy to the execution plot had predicted he would react, in an attempt to appease them – and they were left to pursue the grim, unseemly course when Chief did no such thing. He placed his head gamely on the block. He looked out to all the village witnesses who seemed to know, in their distorted selves, this was an action for the best, and he resented their attention one last time. Were his body not tucked behind the chopping stone, many would have rushed forward to stroke his feet, out of respect.

Their tool sharpening technology, in this period, was not so advanced. It took two and half swings to properly detach the body part they didn’t wholly appreciate had been locus of power in their land. Some of the villagers flitted their gaze around afterwards, half expecting, by the end of Chief, all of the fibres of the cosmos to unravel in turn. But this didn’t happen, and there were birds crooning in the bony trees which hardly seemed upset.

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The settlement was eventually overcome by a band of alien, very spirited vandals, but the period immediately succeeding Chief’s deposal was viewed as an era of intellectual blossoming. They developed a way of expressing that the village, by modern-day numerology, was home to something like five-hundred souls. The boy born beneath the gale was indeed the inheritor of the ‘royal’ palace, but the vast public service, assembled in the time of emergency, was to remain – with its power heightened, if anything. The atmosphere of irreverent curiosity motivated fresh research into poisons, and human anatomy, and the logic of ‘the wheel’. A small tower which had been the preserve of Chief was not included in the young boy’s endowment, and instead was requisitioned by a fledgling astronomical society. By the primitive mathematics, and the special alignment of perforated rocks, it was discovered, after the rotation of several quartets of seasons, it was possible to regard each full cycle as having a particular *amount* of days. They signified this figure with notches on a low section of the escarpment wall, and briefly there was a contest to allocate particular events to each one – people wanted commemorations of themselves, or their children, or their favourite pigs, for example. There was room to schedule another communal event, in the burgeoning spring-time, but most agreed

the title of 'Chief's Day' now had a regrettable aura. This name was re-allocated to mark the sad spectre of the execution, in the winter-time. In its 'warm' place, the proto-democrats in their midst campaigned for something equating to a 'People's Day', which was fixed around the approximate time their 'scholars' expected the favourite fruit trees would blossom. For those years of development and peace, this new event became the 'warmest' day in the village – it kept the music, and the dancing, and the pustule-inducing humping, and the sacrificial sports. The gale-boy presided over the scene, and yet, recalling the fate of his predecessor, there was no longer much belief his enjoyment affected the future. Among the swooning, carousing, still-primitive crowd, there was always a decent clump questioning if indeed they were personally attached to the rare *annual* celebration as they should have been, if they were meeting the moment, or whether, in fact, their spirits were unmatched. Maybe this was an effect of a new self-conscious ethos, or indeed a case of the old chief's stupor polluting those who remembered it – overall, they didn't quite possess the methods to be sure.