



THE LAST RAIN

by

John Markestad
© Copyright 10/4/2014

The hammer blows fell in measured beats, bang-bang, bang-bang, driving lumps of sandstone into the air and down to the floor. Reverberations from the walls gave each hammer blow a just noticeable double resonance. Bang-bang. The chisel in Chonlekka's left lower hand reset first, then the upper left hand, the lower right hand came down, bang, followed a half-second later by the upper right, bang. With each strike a bit more of the gray wall was exposed; wall that living eyes had not seen for fifty million years. Bang, more history exposed.

Once every fifteen work-cycles she made the two hour trip to The Old City to bang away at the sandstone. Her friend Leont had accompanied her once, early on, and said she was bashing at the rock like it belonged to an old lover. In retrospect Chonlekka could only agree that she was working out some sort of emotion on the rock. Apparently she had not banged away sufficiently yet for she still did not know why she came out to The Old City. She liked the alone time, no thoughts of work, no spreadsheets, no responsibility. There was certainly no personal communicator coverage, no calls, no demands...work or otherwise. Therapy, that's what she told her friends. Everybody has something they use to cope. Banging away at the sandstone was hers. Just what pounding on the sandstone was helping her to cope with remained a mystery. She was in no hurry to uncover it. Bang-bang.

Chonlekka had been coming to The Old City for about a half a year, so this made for her seventeenth or eighteenth visit. She wasn't sure how much longer she would come out to chisel at the soft rock. It might go on for years, or she might call it quits after the next visit. That was the nice thing about banging away at rock with no set goal: every chunk knocked off could be the goal achieved; the conflict, whatever it was, resolved. There was no chance that she would complete the project, extract the entirety of The Old City from the sandstone, but she liked to think she was making a difference. Perhaps she should have a plaque made to honor herself – THIS PART OF THE OLD CITY BROUGHT TO YOU BY CHONLEKKA.

For now, the only visible difference was the size of the rubble pile outside where she dumped the wheelbarrow loads. A long, lumpy line of sandstone chunks, from grain size to fist size, meandered about a half a hundred meters from the doorway. She was currently working on an interior room; it was too hot to be working outside. Later she would go outside and work on the east facing wall where the visible difference was also minimal, unless you were Chonlekka.

From the outside The Old City was bizarre to look upon. Fifty million years ago a small city, made by, and inhabited by, beings unknown had somehow been completely inundated by sand. In time, in turn, that sand was covered over. Geology, ever diligent, working patiently with its partner, Time, had made that simple sand into sandstone. Work completed Geology then handed its handiwork over to Wind who worked just as diligently to return the city to the visible. Doorways, corners, and rooftops, poked or peeked out of the soft sandstone cliff that stood one hundred and fifty meters high. Dull grey, consistent and untouchable, the city was being birthed of the sandstone wall. Fifty million years of wind and sand, chisels and hammers, drills with diamond teeth, lasers, radars, acids, alkalis, and verbal requests, had all failed to impress the city's walls. The Old City did very well at what it was clearly made to do: withstand. The sandstone yielded to the wind and Chonlekka's chisels; the city yielded to nothing.

Taking a break from the hammering, Chonlekka began scooping the rubble pile into the wheelbarrow. When first she began her therapy sessions, she would take the wheelbarrow and

shovel back home, but after only a few trips she realized how ridiculous that was. Few people visited The Old City, mostly geology and history students on field trips. Since the scientists had exhausted every means they could think of to learn something new, they, too, had left. There was no furniture, no pictures or engravings, no graffiti; there was, as nearly as they could tell, only the streets, once empty, and the rooms, once empty, now filled with sandstone. Not much there to hold the interest of scientists. Other than what was encased in it, even the sandstone was unremarkable. The sandstone itself, at fifty million years, dated from before the drying of the world, so while there fossils to be found, even they were mundane. The Old City was old news, so to speak; interesting in a remote sort of way, but otherwise boring. Certainly not someplace that wheelbarrow thieves haunted.

Concentrating on keeping the wheelbarrow balanced, her gaze fixed on the floor just ahead of her, Chonlekka's dark-adapted eyes failed to note the wrongness of the light coming in the door-less opening. Her first notice of the new in her world was the wet area on the floor. Chonlekka stopped, lowered the handles of the wheelbarrow until it rested on its legs, then walked around to stand in the opening.

Shadow-less light filled the doorway and cool air filled with tiny droplets of water pressed gently on her skin; the wispy contact raised small bumps as it began plastering down the fine hairs on her forearms. Chonlekka had never seen a daytime sky without the sun; dull ruby red and three degrees wide. Chonlekka had never seen a cloud dark enough to cover and obscure the sun. She had certainly never felt the soft kiss of a gentle rain. As though staring into the eyes of God she walked into the rain, her front feet feeling their own way over the rock strewn ground, completely lost to all the universe but for the gentle wind and cool water falling from the sky. Face into the wind she opened her mouth to let the rain in but that was too little, and she soon cupped her hands before her mouth to capture more. The taste of rain was as unknown to her as the sight of rain. She drank in the droplets and let them delight her tongue, as her eyes darted about to capture other drops as they fell, drinking in the instant long sights. Refocusing, mouth open and hands cupped, Chonlekka watched the rain approaching across the ochre dunes. Streamers of slivered grey danced from right to left, twisted their edges, and curled wisps of white spray all while maintaining their stately march to the yellow-brown earth. Stretching her arms up to the falling rain Chonlekka began shouting wordless joy at the sky. Her feet moved and soon she was dancing, jumping left and right, throwing her rear legs up in high kicks, stomping both front feet into small puddles just to watch the muddy water spray out in streaks of yellowish brown. Having no experience with mud she soon found herself sprawled belly down and laughing so hard her legs and feet could not understand her commands to stand her up. She finally was able to get her front legs straightened, and from there heave her rear end up. The moment she was standing she threw off the now thoroughly wet and muddied wrap she had been wearing. Chonlekka then tore off in a sprint, skidding to a halt and reversing

direction after only a dozen steps. Down again she went, breathless, laughing and shouting all tangled together in her mouth.

Rain was unique in Chonlekka's life. In fact, it had not rained once in the more than one hundred years since the first colonists arrived on Svitte; and prior to that for at least one thousand years, or so it was said by climate experts. Svitte did have planetary water, vast quantities, locked up deep underground. High-capacity wells were claiming that water and pumping it to greenhouses where all the food for the colonists was grown. There was very little that was green growing on the surface of Svitte, and none of it suitable for Chonlekka's kind. Archeologists, paleontologists, and other 'ologists spoke and wrote constantly about the younger days of the planet when water was plentiful on the surface. She knew that water sometimes fell from the sky, just not on Svitte.

Above the sounds of her own joy Chonlekka did, finally, pick up on faint scratching sounds rising in volume to cracking and popping. The new sounds were followed by the familiar sound of sandstone rocks striking each other and the now sodden ground.

Rain she could understand: what Chonlekka witnessed when she turned to the source of the sounds was not a member of that previous category.

The Old City, immutable and absolute, was changing, reshaping, pushing parts of itself out into the rain. Panels horizontal and sloped alike were being extruded from the unyielding grey walls. Where the rain touched the city's walls there was movement. Unimpressed by the sandstone, breaking it away in solid cracks and bangs, the city was extending what could only be catch basins; gathering the rain as it fell, and as it ran down the walls. Shallow-sided boxes slipped out from the walls, quickly filled to their capacity, and allowed the water to spill down to a larger volume box. In moments there were dozens of tiny waterfalls cascading down to contribute to larger ones. As pieces of the sandstone that encased the city were broken away new portions of the city wall were exposed to the rain and new catchments extended.

In less than a minute the city had shattered away more of the sandstone than all the work by Chonlekka and the scientists combined. As the cracking and smashing of the sandstone continued more catch basins extended. The rate at which the sandstone was discarded by The Old City was slowing, either the extensions were unable to break away the thicker areas, or the rain was not penetrating to whatever sensors triggered the basins.

High above her head, as high as she could make out through the rain, perhaps thirty meters, the process of capturing the rain's water went on. Down from above the now several dozens of waterfalls collected and passed along their water. As the volumes increased so, too, did the size of the catchments. Now, at ground level the catchments were extending further out, holding four or five gallons each, gathering up the offerings from above. Chonlekka walked through the lessening rain, the first hint of shadows beginning to appear, to look more closely

at the lowest catchments. She could see clearly where small doors had opened and the water was flowing into the walls of The Old City: bound for some final reservoir below the city.

A city, encased in rock, wherein no one lived--no one could live-- collected rain water.

In the space of a single breath, or two, the rain stopped as the cloud passed on. The cloud that had delivered the rain continued on, returning the sun to its rightful place. Chonlekka watched as the warm, ruddy sunlight against the grey walls dried the surface and the catchments began retreating back into the walls. Cursing her distraction Chonlekka ran, carefully, to her soaked and soiled wrap and snatched it up. From a buttoned pocket she fumbled for her camera. Slippery fingers, still wet and muddy, threatened to toss the device to the ground but she managed to key on the video feature and point it towards the city's walls even as she ran towards them.

Clicking and snicking, the catchments were disappearing. Faint scraping sounds indicated where sand had made its way into the works. Panning the camera over the walls she captured the movement of the catchments, and the walls accepting them. Where the catchments had been, now fully retreated, there was only seamless gray city.

When all the movement had stopped she panned the camera around to show the mud-died desert ground, the standing puddles of water, and finally the retreating cloud and the diminishing rain falling from it. Chonlekka was about to turn the camera on herself to show how muddy and streaked she was herself until she recalled that she was naked. Perhaps she wouldn't show her own disheveled self. Now, the sun was shining as it always had, the air was warming but with it came yet another, though lesser, experience. Powerful odors came to her, released by the rain and carried by the humid air; she smelled the ochre earth. She knew the smell, had known it in the dust that blew through her life. This was so much stronger, deeper, richer, a more present smell. With the odor of wet earth in her nose she turned a slow circle to take in all that the rain had touched. Camera still running she captured the wisps of white vapor that were rising from the The Old City. The final droplets that were too small to capture were escaping back to the atmosphere; perhaps to rain down again, someday. Diaphanous veils drifting on a light breeze and the strong smell of the earth filled her senses, caught her up, and took her. Fearing to miss any slightest wonder occurring around her she turned now to the city, now to the desert, back to the city.

In all the moments of her life as she imagined what things she might experience; love, motherhood, grief, success and failure, joy and loss...the events of this day were not a part of that imagining. In something less than four minutes of time she had had two singular experiences. In the embrace of the elemental she had witnessed the intricate.

The staccato pounding of helicopter vanes, coming closer, broke the moment of self-indulgence she had just run off to. There would be no time to further revel in the two-part wondrous encounter with the unexpected she had just had. Company was coming.

The wrap was cold, damp and clammy, not to mention muddy, but she put it on quickly. First would be the news media. They were always first, it seemed. Meteorologists had probably been tracking the cloud, excited by the possibility that a unique event might happen in their lifetime; they would be not far behind. The meteorologists would want samples of the muddy water dripping from her wrap, and muddy ground would be scooped and very carefully stored and labeled. There would be endless photographs, and more video footage, and requests for interviews: hectic days lie ahead.

Following all that, at a time of Chonlekka's choosing, would be meetings with The Old City scholars and scientists. There was so much more to The Old City than anyone could have imagined.

Putting her camera safely away she walked towards the flat dune where they were landing. Behind her the city sat unimpressed by the increasing clamor. Beneath her feet the ground was already drying. With a glance at the wheelbarrow still standing in the open doorway she knew she would not be back to bang away at the sandstone. Change had come to her life and, so, she no longer needed to change the The Old City.