NEANDERTHALS

 Our story takes place around 130,000 years ago, in what would later be called the Neander Valley, in far western Germany -- specifically, in a series of caves in a limestone canyon near the Dussel River.

 It was mid-autumn, and the mornings and evenings were already getting colder as the nearby forest trees finished shedding their dying leaves. Before long, the hard trying time of winter would be coming. Preparations for sheer survival had to be made by the primitive humans who were living in the region. Flocks of migrating birds sensed the change too, and were already winging southward.

 The cavemen and women with their young offspring who lived here banded together in groups of ten to thirty members. The men were usually about five feet, five inches tall, while the women typically topped out at five feet. The men were barrel-chested and strong, with wide, squat hips and short limbs. They had sloping foreheads and flat, wide noses -- the latter to warm cold air when breathing. Both the men and women had evolved over thousands of years to having light skin from living in these northern climates. Their thick hair was dark brown with deep reddish highlights, and their eyes were likewise brown. They wore various animal skins for warmth. Their bodies were perpetually caked with dirt and their skin was very oily, for bathing was unknown. Eighty-percent of these Neanderthals would die before age forty, from the sheer stress of survival, or from physical trauma or disease.

 The cavemen were ambush hunters -- stalking red deer, wooly mammoths, wild boar, small mammals, and birds. Weapons such as stone-tipped spears and sharp flint knives were made. Primitive tools were also fashioned from stone to crack animal bones -- to access the fat-rich brains of hunted animals, or to get at their bone marrow. Certain other rocks were specially found and used to strike sparks, so as to help make hearth fires in every human-inhabited cave.

 The cavewomen did the usual basic food preparations, largely the roasting and smoking of meat. The stomach contents of hunted herbivores were also removed, cooked and consumed by the Neanderthals. The women gathered shellfish, and foraged for edible roots and tubers, as well as mushrooms, pine nuts, and mosses. Some food items were carefully stored by the cavewomen for use during deprived times as well.

 Because Neanderthals had large mouths but short necks, their vocal cords were somewhat stunted -- so their ability to develop and vocalize any kind of spoken language was rather hampered. As a result, short sounds could be grunted and repeated for the names of known people, and for common, everyday items (such as food, water, weapons, and tools) or for concepts such as danger, enemy, or death. Still, the bulk of prehistoric human communication simply relied upon crude but understandable pantomime and gesturing.

 *TUR* was a thirty-year-old male living with his twenty-year-old female *AW* in a large cave with a group of fifteen other Neanderthals. Their clan consisted of six men, five women, and four children. The pair had a healthy son named *ZU*, aged three.

 Like most cavewomen, *AW* made the clothing for her family, scraping animal hides with the stone tools her man had fashioned, then piecing the hides together with birch bark tar, which was rendered and used as a kind of water-proof adhesive. (Sewing with sinews, bone awls or needles was unknown at this time. Most clothing back then resembled today's modern ponchos, with a cloak-like central section and an attached hood.) In warmer weather, the Neanderthals simply moved around naked. Leather or fur booties were sometimes made too, but most of the time, the cave people merely roamed about barefoot.

 *AW* was also typical for a cavewoman in enjoying adorning her body and clothing with various bird claws, feathers, and small shells. She collected any colorful crystals she happened to come across, or traded for some new ones with the other clan women. Once, she also made a flute-like instrument out of a hollow bone. Through trial and error by carving some small holes in it, she was eventually able to coax a kind of music out of the object, much to the delight of her boy, *ZU*, and the other children in the extended group.

 Life went on in an unchanging pattern for the cave people, with the daily urgency of finding food and staying safe and alive. Daylight was the best and most productive time, of course, but each black night was a period of fear and wariness -- the inevitable confronting of the dark unknown. Nocturnal predators were a constant concern, especially cave bears aggressively searching for a new dwelling, or lurking packs of cave hyenas looking for something new to eat. *TUR* and *AW* would often wake at night whenever they heard a suspicious sound, and rise to cautiously investigate its source. Sometimes they would go together and stand at the clan's cave entrance, and gaze silently up at the stars or the moon, and perhaps wonder what their existence meant. But the realities of life and death were simply unfathomable mysteries, the pair probably concluded, and so they turned away from the heavens and went back to sleep under their fur blankets.

 One cloudy and brisk day, *WEG*, a male member of this particular cave clan, excitedly communicated to the others through gestures that a female wooly mammoth and her baby were spotted grazing near a steep cliff a few hours journey away. This stroke of good fortune meant much rich meat to help the cave people survive through the hard, upcoming winter. So, with their stone-tipped spears and flint knives, the clan's six cavemen quickly set out for the hunt.

 The hunters knew what to do once they arrived at the location of their prey. First, they ran and shouted to distract and separate the 400-pound infant mammoth (200 pounds at birth) from its 8000-pound mother, urging it toward the edge of a nearby thirty-foot cliff. Then, with their sharp spears, they forced the infant to move backwards until it tumbled over to its death. Next, the panicked mother was quickly surrounded by the six intent hunters and stabbed repeatedly with their spears, the cavemen being careful not to be gored by the tusks of the frantic female in the process. Lungs, throat and heart made the best targets, everyone had learned, so those areas were focused upon.

 But suddenly, another rival group of five unknown hunters appeared. A quick decision had to be made by *TUR*, *WEG*, and their other four companions to either fight off the intruders, or cooperate and coordinate with them, and finish off the mammoth kill. Through grunts and gestures, the two competing squads agreed to share the hunt. With eleven attackers now, the mammoth mother was doomed. She bled profusely from repeated spear thrusts. Her massive, wooly, ten-foot-high body was finally exhausted, so she collapsed. But in doing so, she partly fell on the leg of one of the rival hunters, who was unexpectedly standing too close with his spear and was lanced by one of her tusks. The hapless Neanderthal's leg was badly injured and bleeding when his fellows dragged him aside. The mammoth was finally speared deeply in both eyes, driving into her brain, which concluded her agony.

 The huge beast was rapidly skinned and butchered with the hunters' sharp flint knives, with the still-warm meat and hides then equally divided among the two hunting tribes. Being famished, the hunters first cut up and shared the large mammoth's liver, gorging on it raw. She had still been lactating for her young calf, so the men likewise took thirsty turns suckling lukewarm milk from the dead animal's breasts. The infant mammoth was then fairly awarded to *TUR*'s group, for they alone had killed it. It was soon skinned and butchered by *WEG* before any prowling wild scavengers could arrive. The fresh meat was soon carried, with help, up the thirty-foot cliff in regular shifts until only blood-splattered bones and the lowest portions of the feet were left below. A sizeable flock of greedy vultures were naturally the first to show up, and they fought each other fiercely for any carcass scraps.

 *TUR* was not surprised when the rival group departed without aiding their injured comrade. Bad luck -- such as someone no longer being able to walk -- only earned one the curse of being left behind to die. Thus, the rival four cavemen took as much of their share of the meat and hides as they could carry, and simply abandoned their fifth clan member.

 The injured caveman moaned in pain and despair. For some reason, hearing those anguished sounds, a possibly dormant -- or perhaps even innate -- emotion arose inside of *TUR*. It was the emerging human emotion of pity, or perhaps even of compassion. After a moment's consideration, he decided to help the crippled Neanderthal stranger.

 Gesturing and grunting to his clan's men, *TUR* indicated that they should return to their cave with their fresh mammoth meat and hides, and that he would slowly bring the wounded stranger back home with him to safety. *TUR*'s fellows were very surprised, even somewhat confused. They thought the rival man should be left behind to die, as expected. But they ultimately agreed with the clan's 'Alpha male' directive, and headed home with their bounty.

 *TUR* next examined the stranger's leg. It had a large, deep gash in it, but no bones seemed to be broken. *TUR* then dug into the dirt with his flint knife beside where the injured man lay, until sufficient moisture was struck. Using a cooling scoop of mud, he gently covered the rival hunter's gash to further help clot the bleeding. The stranger groaned, but then looked at *TUR* with gratitude and gestured toward himself, at last offering his name -- *KEK*.

 It took *TUR* about three hours, with rest stops and drinks of water from nearby streams, to both pull and carry *KEK* back to the home cave. The other fourteen clan members all came out to welcome him when he arrived with his surprise visitor.

 *AW* immediately went to *TUR* with some badly needed food, and *ZU* was naturally excited to see his father back home safe again. The warmth of the cave's roaring hearth fire was most welcomed, its flickering shadows dancing on the rocky walls. *TUR* pantomimed for the assembly all that had taken place. *AW* was frankly wary about her man's decision to aid a complete stranger -- and a potentially dangerous rival clan member at that -- in this unique manner, but she kept those thoughts to herself.

 Three days passed. *KEK* dozed and further rested, and was fed, and his wound -- a twelve-inch slash deep into his right calf muscle -- was regularly examined. Prompted by *TUR*, *AW* went outside and gathered some familiar medicinal plants, and then helped dress the man's leg wound with their healing leaves, after replacing *TUR*'s original mud packing. *KEK* was still recovering, however, and was not yet ready to stand or walk unaided.

 Meanwhile, the weather was getting still colder. It was time for the fifteen-member clan to seasonally move to their other cave which held fire-warmth better, and was more recessed from the bitter winter winds than was this more moderate-weather cave. This short migration to the south -- about a ten-hour walk -- was routinely done every year. Food stores, tools, weapons, and surplus furs were soon gathered for transport.

 But because *KEK*'s leg was not fully healed so that he could return to his own clan, *TUR* told his companions that he would stay behind with *AW* and *ZU* a while longer. He made it understood that he and his family would join up with them soon once *KEK* was gone. Again, *AW* was uncertain about this unusual decision, but she knew she needed to obey and stay with her man, especially for the sake of their son. After all, a man meant safety and protection for a woman in such a danger-filled world. The clan agreed to leave enough food to last the remaining family for about seven days.

 But *AW* was the first to realize a possible danger.

 It should be noted that the notion of privacy was unknown to Neanderthals. They fornicated, masturbated, and eliminated their bodily wastes in casual open view of others. Hence, whenever *TUR* and *AW* enjoyed any sexual activity, she noticed *KEK* lustily watching them. Moreover, whenever *TUR* left the cave for short necessary periods of time, *AW* felt *KEK*'s leering eyes staring at her. She grew fearful and disturbed, both for herself and for the safety of *ZU*, who likewise instinctively avoided the wounded stranger.

 A few more days passed. *KEK* was finally able to stand unaided and slowly walk around. He pantomimed that he would be able to leave their company soon.

 The terrible tragedy occurred the following night, under a bright full moon. *TUR* and *AW* had sex as usual, and, as usual, *TUR* went right to sleep shortly afterwards. After *AW* likewise fell asleep (having first bedded *ZU* down), *KEK* quietly rose in the cave's dim firelight, then selected and lifted a large twenty-five-pound limestone rock. Ever so carefully, he made his way over to the deeply snoring *TUR*. Standing high over *TUR*'s head, the jealous rival caveman crushed his good Samaritan's head by slamming the heavy rock brutally down on *TUR*'s peacefully sleeping face. The sinister blow instantly killed him.

 *AW* woke up with a start, hearing the noise. She saw the murdering glint in *KEK*'s wicked eyes. He moved slowly towards her, then grabbed and proceeded to savagely rape her. He gestured that he would kill little *ZU* if she resisted his sexual attacks anytime in the future, or if she tried to escape with her son.

 The captive cavewoman was horrified. She and her son had to flee and rejoin her clan, but how, exactly? She needed time to think and plan. The following two days, she was forced like a slave to first feed, then tend to *KEK*'s fiendish sexual needs. She was further sickened when *KEK* refused to move *TUR*'s battered corpse away to a respectful region in the back of the cave, which was reserved for the dead. But despite being in the throes of her sorrow, *AW* had an idea.

 She realized that her only hope was to kill *KEK*.

 She waited until he raped her again that night. Like TUR, most men usually fell asleep after vigorous sex, she knew. So while *KEK* was asleep, *AW* quietly found under a pile of furs the sharp flint knife that *TUR* had once made for her. She cautiously returned to her deeply snoring enemy and -- briefly pausing to gather her courage -- rammed the knife with all of her strength, first into *KEK*'s throat, then quickly into each of his startled open eye sockets. He gurgled in agony as he choked on his own blood, and died moments later.

 Disgusted by her own necessary actions, *AW* next dragged *KEK*'s foul, limp body far outside of the cave, for any wandering scavengers to happily feast upon. She wiped her bloodied hands afterwards in the grass to somewhat cleanse them, then returned back to the cave. *ZU*, meanwhile, had woken up in all the commotion. His mother patiently gestured what had happened to both the boy's father and the enemy stranger. Then she broke down and wept, holding *ZU* close to her heart. They eventually went back to sleep -- cuddled together -- until the dim, cold dawn came.

 After sharing some warm morning food, mother and child prepared *TUR*'s body for proper burial deep within the dark recesses of the cave. (For light, *AW* had grabbed some dried moss, and fashioned a torch from a piece wood with the moss wrapped on top, and set it aflame from the hearth fire.) She carefully covered *TUR*'s corpse with piles of thick, flat stones, to protect it from any hungry cave hyenas or other prowling predators. Neanderthals most likely had no concepts of a God or of any afterlife, yet the dead were always treated with hushed respect and remembrance. *ZU* had earlier included in his father's grave the special hollow bone flute with its four holes that his mother had made, while *AW* arranged some of her favorite colorful crystals in a circle around *TUR's* head, before gently touching her man's brutally crushed face for a final time. Both mother and son knew that they would never see *TUR* again.

 The pair then prepared to head out south, under thick, darkening skies, for the ten-hour trek to join their clan members at their winter cave, the urgent plan being to arrive before darkness fell. *AW* carried *ZU* snuggly on her hip, and had bundled up some fur clothing, a fur blanket, and a little extra food for the journey. Her only hope now -- alone, without the protection of her man -- was to avoid being attacked by any marauding beasts or rival Neanderthals. Wisely, she had also packed her flint knife. She would kill anything or anyone who tried to hurt either herself or her child.

 Some ravens cawed in the distance as the brave cavewoman and her son set out, with a biting wind soon shifting from the north, as the season's first snowflakes began to drift and swirl down...

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 In 1856, an unnamed limestone quarryman was examining a large cave in a canyon near the Dussel River, close to the current city of Dusseldorf. (This mostly unexplored cave had earlier been named the FeldHofer Cave.) During his exploration, the workman came upon a large pile of carefully-arranged stones in its deepest recesses. Maybe something of monetary value had been hidden underneath? he hopefully imagined. Moving the rocks carefully aside, he uncovered what he soon realized was a smallish human skeleton. Its skull had been crushed, yet next to the bones was a hollowed-out bone flute, and some colorful sparkling crystals had been arranged in a circle around the head.

 The workman had accidentally discovered the first complete remains of what would later be known by every archeologist around the world as "Neanderthal Man..."

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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