

OPEN TRIBUNAL

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Recently, things have been very busy at the Tribunal. This tends to happen every few years. Tonight someone had to fetch Chacha, from the purple house. That task fell to Cereal Box; kids who were candidates for a hearing at the Tribunal couldn't be picked up by anyone scary. The one time that the members were so overwhelmed that they had to ask Kitchen Knife to do the job was during the Tribunal Riots of 1350. Since then, though, their numbers have grown and grown, and they never have personnel difficulties anymore. Only if things are extremely hectic do they release an armed group to do the fetching. They need to take care of all the preparation work to run the Tribunal: no matter how busy they are, the Tribunal has to proceed smoothly and fairly.

Chacha didn't cause a fuss when she was picked up, since Cereal Box reminded her of a cereal box. Cereal Box was rightly favoured for such work. She looked so silly with that big box head of hers, her red dress and skinny hands and feet. When she moved, it looked like the weight of her head would make her topple over. Far from being afraid, Chacha was delighted to receive a visit from a walking cereal box. She had all sorts of questions, of course. "What's the Tribunal like?" for example. "What's the Tribunal?" And "Hey, where's your head?" Cereal Box said Chacha would find out for herself at the Tribunal because that's where the truth was revealed.

On the banyan tree, the members of the Tribunal awaited. There were five of them, including Cereal Box. They sat in a circle atop the tree cross-legged, as if it was their bums holding them in place rather than the prickly twig tips and ticklish leaves. The Tribunal is a fun place, for sure. It's not like a tribunal for adults in a cramped, dimly lit room. Instead, the Tribunal takes place under the stars where there's a cool breeze and magnificent scenery. No long wooden benches to make your tailbone ache. Instead they have a magical cistern that gently cups your bum. That's what the Tribunal is like. They're there to make you feel loved.

Next to Chacha was Cereal Box. She'd been left to starve to death in a house full of cereal, milk and other food and drink. On the opposite side sat Hyena Teeth. He'd been abandoned in a forest, and hyenas devoured him one winter night ("Which is better, actually" said Hyena Teeth, "than freezing to death. I sure wouldn't want to be an ice cube like Ice Cube."). Then, there was Mother's Hand, strangled by his mother sixty years ago ("Well, technically speaking, 'asphyxiated' would be more accurate. But that's better than being like Breathless." As Breathless' head showed

a loss of breath, he had no head at all). On the other side, Pillow was chatting quietly to Sink (Pillow and Sink both had their own respiratory issues, so they couldn't talk too loudly or too often). A surrounding hubbub arose, from the direction of a row of trees. "Other Tribunals are in progress now," said Cereal Box. She'd already explained that every treetop had been reserved for Tribunals during the Trial Period, as they called it.

Presiding over Chacha's Tribunal was Mother's Hand, and he, bearing a head of five fingers with their nails painted, glanced about to signal an end to private conversations. Dutifully, the members of the Tribunal fell silent and sat up straight facing Mother's Hand. Mother's Hand cupped his (real) hands solemnly. The session was now called to order.

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Hyena Teeth's role was to explain the meaning of the Tribunal. No one remembers when Tribunals started, but everyone knows that they're opened by a boy who has a wolf head. "He doesn't attend, but he was the first to think they'd be worthwhile, 'cause dead children make him sad. His job is to question the children and figure out where they should go, you know? Kids get confused if they aren't told what they should do."

"Like Smashed Skull, who fell into a well because no one said that kids shouldn't jump into wells," commented Mother's Hand. He was fond of reminding others who had died and how.

"Well, since that's his job, he has to see why children die. It makes him sad a lot of the time. But if something stops children from dying in strange ways, he doesn't have to take care of them. Those who care for them are children who died in strange ways too, and their job is to keep it from happening. So, the Tribunal's purpose is to decide whether children should be spared strange deaths. If you die a strange death, though, you get promoted to the Tribunal Committee and your head shows how you died. If you're not considered a person when you're alive, you shouldn't look like one when you're dead. We hold the Tribunal so we know whether you're better off continuing to live or not. So you don't wind up like us, get it? Sorry to bring it up, but dead because of the person who should have cared for you. Just ask Cereal Box. She'd be happier for sure if she'd been able to go before starving for two weeks and dying in agony."

Cereal Box agreed.

"Go?" Chacha asked. "Go where?"

"Oh, it's not about being torn to shreds or anything like that," said Hyena Teeth, who liked learning deadly tips and tricks. So far the trick he liked most was

abandoning children deep in the forest so that they get gobbled up by hyenas. "Just invited to go. Above. The way Cereal Box invited you."

"If this had happened a while back, your picture would probably have shown up on milk cartons," recalled Cereal Box. She'd been alive when it was trendy to put notices for missing children on cartons. "But not all children, of course," she added hastily; the Tribunal had been reprimanded by the Missing Children Division.

"In a season like this lots of kids die," said Mother's Hand. "Everyone has to stay indoors, and it can make people a little crazy, you know? And after all, if the people you live with are dangerous, you're in even more danger if you can't leave the house."

Sink let out a low howl; he'd died *in a season like this*. No fun, indeed, to remember that you were the only one who'd been murdered. But what can you do? If your parents are grumpy because fear is their daily companion, and *you don't catch cholera after it's killed all your friends*, they could drag you into the sink and drown you. Mother's Hand patted Sink calmly, using his large hand-head. "Yes, but not everyone who comes to the Tribunal comes for strange, violent deaths. Pillow?"

"There are provisions limiting the meaning of 'strange deaths' in the Tribunal that we must comply with, of course," said Pillow, who'd been smothered with a pillow. His job was to explain details in accordance with the regulations. Each Tribunal he declares: "According to Article 1 point 5 of TAP MS NO. I/MS/0000, 'strange deaths' are defined as 'unnatural deaths in children caused by a caregiver, which occur intentionally or unintentionally on a limited basis, through direct or indirect involvement'. Unintentional on a limited basis includes but is not confined to oversight, neglect, intentional deprivation of consciousness, direct or indirect participation via application of pressure, and so on. For a more detailed definition, please refer to the document provided in the goodie bag for Tribunal Case Number 5454/Mgkn.Mt/2021/MS Phn. Brgn."

Mother's Hand then asked Chacha some crucial questions. Was she okay? Had she ever been beaten? "It's ridiculous to go Above and become a clot of blood like Blood Clot, who was beaten to a bloody mess and died from loss of blood," she said. Chacha had never been beaten, but she was keen to see Blood Clot, who apparently had a head shaped like a clot of blood.

But Chacha was fine. Oh, she'd be scolded if she didn't obey, but she was fed, and she hadn't been held in a strange way. The only thing that had changed was that no one from home went to work. This made Pillow burst into tears—he'd been smothered with a pillow on the day his father stopped going to the office. Children always cry at the Tribunal; that's why the Tribunal needs to make them loved.

After telling her story, Chacha was sure that she wouldn't die and said, "I'm not going to die from just being ignored. If I get punched, then, okay, I'll die."

Smashed Head *indeed* had died after being walloped by his father, a strapping man whose job was to punch walls until they caved in and then steal the television behind them. But children who are merely ignored—neither scolded nor invited to play—*could* avoid death. They could live to adulthood, then die. *Could*. But the Tribunal Committee had enough experience to understand that such a life was not at all pleasant, and their inability to do something about it gnawed at them. In any case, their tasks were *specific*. Poisoned Porridge had petitioned to have the Tribunal's authority expanded through a redefinition of duties, but the details were so messy and complex that he wound up feeling like he'd rather swallow another seventeen bowls of poisoned porridge than continue the initiative.

But the Tribunal Chamber for the case of neglect already knew that they could only surrender and be left unsatisfied. Mother's Hand had to say, "True, you won't die from being ignored," while scratching the orange nail polish on the thumb on her head nervously. "But never getting breakfast until two in the afternoon isn't pleasant. You'll suffer from stomach trouble when you grow up."

"Yeah, but you can put up with ulcers," said Cereal Box, peeking at her expired Growth Plan notes, which stated that she'd have had acid reflux for the rest of her life, if she hadn't died at age five.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, just because kids can put up with it, the point is, *they shouldn't necessarily have to*. Why not just feed them?" said Hyena Teeth, whose heart was as hard as a hyena's teeth. "I wound up a meal because the hyena's cub was hungry. My left hand became its food, you know? And then my hand turned into poo, and the poo became fertilizer for pine trees. The Committee said it was one of the funniest places for a Tribunal they'd ever had."

"Pine poo!"

Then they quarrelled, because, after all, the Tribunal was a place to quarrel. Other Tribunal members took the opportunity to rest and nap on the leaves. Pillow allowed Chacha to sleep on top of her head. Pillow's head was of excellent quality, stuffed with goose down. Very comfortable, although Chacha had to be careful because the feather tips tended to prick children who weren't paying attention. Mother's Hand rested beside her. Sink just sat down; if he were to lie down to sleep, the water in the sink would spill.

After some time, Mother's Hand made a fist of his head-hand with the index finger protruding. "Look," he said, his head-finger following a glow that shot up into the sky nearby. Chacha could make out a shape within the glow: a small figure with short legs in pyjama pants; a bloodied, sad-looking brain replaced the head. "It

looks like he was pushed and hit a wall or table, then had a haemorrhage. I've seen someone else who looks like him. His name is Busted Brain."

"His name is Mumu," said Chacha. "He lives on Salak Street." She pointed toward where the bloodied brain had gone. "Those were Mumu's pants."

The hand of Mother's Hand had stretched. He was sitting now. "Is either his mum or dad mean?"

Chacha nodded.

"Well," said Mother's Hand, already glancing in that direction again. "That's the way it is. Since this season started, thousands are going Above. That's why we're worried." He turned towards Chacha once more. "I hope that doesn't happen to you."

"They're not going to beat me, honest," said Chacha.

"You can't be sure."

"Uh-uh," she spoke again, stubbornly. "There's Nana and Grandpa. If I get hit, they can poke back with a spear."

"Oh!" Mother's Hand swung his hand-head enthusiastically. His fingers beckoned for the Tribunal to gather. "I see! There's someone else in the house? Do they take care of you? Feed you?"

Chacha nodded. "If my mum and dad haven't left work when it gets late, they fetch me and invite me to eat. Nana and Grandpa live downstairs. I'm upstairs."

"Then there's no problem," said Mother's Hand. "The preparatory documents for the Tribunal didn't mention secondary parental figures. If someone else is looking after you, you shouldn't die. With luck, you might not die until you've grown up, and not even have serious emotional issues! Great. Cereal Box will take you back home. Good luck! Next she has to fetch Kiki from the yellow house... Damn. Another case of neglect. Oh, Chacha?"

Cereal Box stopped, as did Chacha. Even though he hadn't been considered a person while alive and could not take the form of a person upon dying, with his head in the shape of a hand without a face, Mother's Hand smiled. He asked:

"Do you like being alive?"

Chacha nodded.

The Tribunal Chamber happily agreed to return her. Only children who really wanted to live nodded without hesitation. Cereal Box stretched out her bony arm and grasped Chacha's fingers. "Come on," she said. Chacha jumped down from the tree with her.

In the dark of night, the voices sounded like rustling leaves. But above the heads of those who slumber, Tribunals are in progress. Tonight, they have to fetch Kiki from the yellow house. The boy who'd been smothered by a pillow 90 years ago would do the job.

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