



Nisa

**The Life and
Words of a
!Kung Woman**

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Chapter 3

Life in the Bush

THE NORTHERN FRINGE of the Kalahari desert is a capricious and demanding environment. Total rainfall of the wet season can vary from as much as forty to as little as five inches from one year to the next. Forty inches fills depressions in the land and forms pools that often remain full for weeks or even months. Travel to distant places is easy, and people are able to disperse in small groups over the area in search of game and other food. Lesser-known plants, seen only once in several years, flourish, but some of the more basic foods may drown. Continuous rains may even cause the fruit of the staple food, the protein-rich mongongo nut, to rot; even worse, rare heavy downpours early in the season may damage the mongongo flowers before they bear fruit.

Five inches of rain, in contrast, is a drought condition, and many of the edible plants gathered by !Kung women may not be found. Severe drought occurs in the Dobe area on the average of one year in four. Knowing where permanent water springs are located, being able to see the shriveled vines that signal large water-storing roots hidden several feet under the ground, remembering the partially enclosed recesses of the thick mongongo and morula tree trunks that hide trapped water, can mean survival. All of this is compounded by the geographical variability of rainfall within one season; one area may receive twice as much as another just a few miles away.

An untrained visitor set down in this sand-and-thorn scrub brush on a typical spring day (September to November), would first look for some shade, and would be grateful to find some where the temperature was only 100°F. The visitor might not see water anywhere, and might find little if anything to eat. Even in the middle of the nut groves, with hundreds of thousands of mongongo nuts lying on the ground, the newcomer might go hungry; it would be necessary to find stones strong enough to crack the quarter-inch shell, then to determine how to hold the nut between the stones and, without smashing a finger, to hit it with just enough power in just the right spot to make it crack along the fault line, releasing the filbert-sized nut inside.

Suppose an animal were sighted and suppose further that the visitor had had the foresight to have fashioned arrowheads from bone remnants, shafts for the arrows from a tall, reed-like grass, poison from the larvae of a certain beetle, a bow from a partly dried green branch, and a string from fibrous plant threads rolled into twine. Even for such a well-prepared visitor, it would take the most extraordinary luck to make a hit without years of training and experience in tracking, stalking, and shooting. And even then, how long might it take for the animal to die? Hours? Days? Would the visitor be able to follow its tracks? To find enough plant food to survive in the meantime?

Even the !Kung average only one kill for every four days of hunting. The hunter must know how to read animal tracks—to know when they were made and what species of animal made them, as well as the animal's age, size, and condition of health. The quarry must not only be tracked but stalked, and the hunter must understand the vagaries of the wind in order to get close enough for a clear shot. If the arrow strikes, he must determine how far the poisoned shaft has entered, how long the animal will take to die, and where it is likely to travel as it dies. If the animal is large, the hunter may go back to the village for the night, and return the next day with others to help. They will pick up the tracks again, find the animal, and, if it is not yet dead, kill it with spears. If already dead, the animal may have attracted lions, leopards, hyenas, jackals, wild dogs, or vultures, separately or in combination, and these will have to be chased away, sometimes

at great risk. The carcass will then be butchered and the skin carefully removed to be tanned later and made into clothing or blankets. The liver will be roasted and eaten immediately and the rest of the meat prepared for carrying back. Nothing will be left behind or wasted.

A man's hunting skills and inclinations are fostered early in childhood, often beginning when he is only a toddler. Toy bows and arrows are typically given to small children, usually by children not much older than themselves. Stationary objects are their first targets. Soon moving ones, such as grasshoppers and beetles, are added. As boys get older, they improve their aim by throwing sticks and wooden spears. Their mastery of animal tracks, like their ability to identify the hundreds of plant and animal species in the environment, is a slow process, acquired through practice and observation. Much of the animal lore so necessary to success in the hunt is learned from discussions of present and past hunts. Around the age of twelve boys are given their first quivers—with small bows and arrows—by their fathers, and begin to shoot birds and rabbits. They may also be taught to set snares. The next step is to accompany their fathers, uncles, and older brothers when they go out to hunt.

Hunts are often dangerous. The !Kung face danger courageously, but they do not seek it out or take risks for the sake of proving their courage. Actively avoiding hazardous situations is considered prudent, not cowardly or unmasculine. Young boys, moreover, are not expected to conquer their fear and act like grown men. To unnecessary risks the !Kung say, "But a person could die!"

These attitudes became clear to me as I heard the description of a kill witnessed by Kashe, a boy about twelve years old, and his cousin. Prior to this, the two boys' experience with hunting had been only in play. This time they accompanied their fathers on a real hunt. When they returned, Kashe and his father came to our camp to give us a present of meat from a large gemsbok they had killed. As we celebrated their good fortune (and ours) and talked about the details of the hunt, a broad smile never left Kashe's face. His father reviewed the events—how, after they had struck it with an arrow and had run after it,

the gemsbok had finally stood and fought, and how fiercely it had warded off their spears with its long, razor-sharp antlers. Kashe, listening, seemed beside himself with excitement and pride. I asked, "Did you help?" "No," he replied, "I was up in a tree!" His smile became an easy laugh. Puzzled, I asked again, and he repeated that he and his cousin had climbed a tree as soon as the animal had stopped running and had stood its ground. I teased him, saying everyone would have gone hungry if the animal had been left to him and his cousin. He laughed again and said, "Yes, but we were so scared!" There was no hint of embarrassment or of a need to explain what might have been seen, in our culture, as behavior lacking in courage. Nor was there any suggestion that his fear in this situation reflected anything about how he would act when he was fully grown. There would be plenty of time for him to learn to face dangerous animals and to kill them, and there was no doubt in his mind (or his father's, to judge from the expression on *his* face), that he would, one day. When I questioned the father, he beamed, "Up in the tree? Of course. They're only children. They could have gotten hurt."

A boy is likely to kill his first large animal between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. The culture recognizes this event as a milestone and performs two separate ceremonies to celebrate the killing of the first male and the first female animal. Small ritual tattoos are administered and additional small cuts are made to ensure, symbolically, the strength and success of the boy's future as a hunter. Although now considered eligible for marriage, he may not actually marry for as long as ten years. These years will be spent refining his skills and knowledge of the hunt.

By the age of thirty a man enters the most productive period of his hunting career, which is likely to extend for at least fifteen years. During this time, he will walk between 1200 and 2100 miles a year in the pursuit of the fifty-five species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects considered edible. He will use various methods to capture animals living above and below the ground, including knocking them down with sticks, snaring them, chasing them with or without dogs, and hunting them in the classic style with poisoned arrows and spears. Relying on his own and

other people's knowledge of environmental conditions, he will decide in which direction the hunters should go on a particular day. He may also pay close attention to magical sources—dreams and divination discs—that are thought to provide information on the whereabouts of animals. These sources will also help give him confidence, suggesting as they do that powerful forces of the "otherworld" are behind him. He may hunt alone or with others. When he hunts with others, he will use secret names to refer to animals being pursued, and the hunters will communicate by hand signals and whistles so as not to disturb the game.

If the hunter is successful in killing a large animal, it will be carefully butchered and brought back to the village. There the meat will be distributed according to well-established rules of precedence. Everyone will receive a portion, directly or indirectly. Meat is highly valued—people may speak of "meat hunger" even when other food is abundant—and meat well-laced with fat is especially prized because most desert animals are lean. Since the availability of meat is so uncertain, distributions are emotionally charged events; the size of the portions depends not only on clear issues such as kinship, but on subtle ones such as contribution to the hunt. Matters are further complicated by the tradition that most hunters carry other people's arrows in their quivers alongside their own. The arrow that kills an animal may therefore not belong to the hunter who shot it. According to !Kung custom, the person who owns the arrow is considered the true "owner" of the meat, and the prestigious (and onerous) task of distributing the meat fairly is his (or hers—women sometimes own arrows, as well). Thus the distribution must be handled with great delicacy to insure against insults, real or imagined. Some of the meat may be dried for later consumption, but prodigious amounts will be enthusiastically consumed on the spot. If the hunter is not successful, he may collect some vegetable foods on his way home so as not to come back to the village empty-handed.

!Kung men vary widely in their skill at hunting, but different levels of success do not lead to differences in status. Self-deprecation and understatement are rigorously required of the hunter after a successful hunt. This modesty is in evidence from the

moment he enters the village to relay his news. Walking silently, he sits down by a fire—his own or someone else's. He greets people and waits. When they ask, he says, "No, I didn't see anything today. At least, nothing worth talking about." The others, well-versed in the rules, press for details: "That nothing you saw . . . did you get close enough to strike it?" Thus the conversation slowly reveals that an eland, a gemsbok, or even a giraffe has been shot. Excitement ripples through the camp as the news spreads; meanwhile, the hunter sits as before, quietly describing the events leading up to the kill. If his demeanor is interpreted as boastful or if his accomplishment is not presented as a mixture of skill and luck, pointed jokes and derision may be used to pressure him back into line. Later, dramatic accounts of the hunt will be given, and other important hunts will be recalled.

The problem for the truly accomplished hunter (or gatherer, musician, healer, and so on) is to perform as well as possible without provoking envy or anger in others. This strain may be decreased by the custom of sharing arrows, which helps to diffuse responsibility for the kill. In addition, a less successful hunter may feel imbued with power when using a more successful hunter's arrows, and this may give him the confidence he needs to succeed. Most hunters also alternate hunting with long periods of inactivity, thereby affording others the opportunity to bring in meat and to receive the praise and attention of the group—for a while.

As he grows older, a hunter starts accompanying younger men on the hunt, helping them to learn the skills and knowledge he has accumulated during his approximately forty years of active experience. By the time he ends his hunting career in his early sixties, he will have killed between 80 and 120 (or more) large game animals as well as hundreds of smaller animals. If he stays in good health, he will eventually shift to setting snares, teaching young boys how to interpret bird and small animal tracks in the bush, and foraging in areas close to the village.

WE LIVED IN THE BUSH and my father set traps and killed steenbok and duiker and gemsbok and we lived, eating the animals and foods of the bush. We collected food, ground it in a mortar, and ate it. We also ate sweet nin berries and tsin beans. When I was growing up, there were no cows or goats and I didn't know who the Hereros were. I had never seen other peoples and didn't know anything other than life in the bush. That's where we lived and where we grew up.¹

Whenever my father killed an animal and I saw him coming home with meat draped over a stick, balanced on one shoulder—that's what made me happy. I'd cry out, "Mommy! Daddy's coming and he's bringing meat!" My heart would be happy when I greeted him, "Ho, ho, Daddy! We're going to eat meat!"

Or honey. Sometimes he'd go out and come home with honey. I'd be sitting around with my mother and then see something coming from way out in the bush. I'd look hard. Then, "Oooh, Daddy found a beehive! Oh, I'm going to eat honey! Daddy's come back with honey for us to eat!" And I'd thank him and call him wonderful names.

Sometimes my mother would be the one to see the honey. The two of us would be walking around gathering food and she'd find a beehive deep inside a termite mound or in a tree. I remember one time when she found it. I jumped and ran all around and was so excited I couldn't stop moving. We went to the village to get some containers, then went back again to the termite mound. I watched as she took the honey out. Then, we went home.

Long ago, when we were living in the bush, our fathers brought us plenty of food! And, animals full of fat—that was especially prized. Whenever my father brought back meat, I'd greet him, "Ho, ho, Daddy's coming home with meat!" And felt thankful for everything and there was nothing that made my heart unhappy.

Except if it was someone else in the village who killed

something and came back carrying it. Then I'd look and think, "Uhn, uhn . . . that one, the people in his hut aren't giving-people. If they have something, they never give it to us. Even when they do, they don't give enough so all of us can eat. They are stingy people." My heart would not be happy at all, because that would mean we would have to ask. So, the next morning we would sit around their hut. If they gave us a large portion, my heart would be happy and I would think, "Yes, these people, their hearts are close to ours. They gave mother and father some of what they had." Then everyone would eat.

But, there is always one hut in the village where the people kill you when it comes to food. I remember when we were living with a group of Zhun/twasi and they were eating meat from an animal they had killed. My father asked for some, but they refused. I sat there, thinking, "I'll just sit here and wait. When Daddy kills an animal, then I'll eat meat." Because my father was a good hunter.

Whenever I saw others coming back to the village with meat, I'd ask, "Daddy, how come you didn't go out hunting and kill something so we would have meat? Those people over there are the only ones who will be eating today." My father would say, "Eh, but my arrows didn't have any fresh poison on them. If they did, then, just as these others went out hunting, I would also have gone hunting and killed something for you and your mother to eat." Then I'd say, "Mm, those others are the only ones who ever hunt."

When we were living in the bush, some people gave and others stinged. But there were always enough people around who shared, people who liked one another, who were happy living together, and who didn't fight. And even if one person did stinge, the other person would just get up and yell about it, whether it was meat or anything else, "What's doing this to you, making you not give us meat?"

When I was growing up, receiving food made my heart happy. There really wasn't anything, other than stingy people, that made me unhappy. I didn't like people who wouldn't give a little of what they had. Then my heart would feel bad

and I'd think, "This one, I don't like." Or sometimes I'd say, "As I am, you're a bad person and I'll never give you anything." But other times, I'd just cry. Sometimes I'd cry all night and into the morning. Once, I cried because someone had trapped a very small bird and I didn't get any of it. I wanted it and just sat there, crying and crying. Finally, people told me, "It's just a tiny bird, stop crying over it."

It's the same today. Here I am, long since an adult, yet even now, if a person doesn't give something to me, I won't give anything to that person. If I'm sitting eating, and someone like that comes by, I say, "Uhn, uhn. I'm not going to give any of this to you. When you have food, the things you do with it make me unhappy. If you even once in a while gave me something nice, I would surely give some of this to you." Because people like that are very bad. When they see food in front of them, they just eat it.

I used to watch my father when he left the village early in the morning, his quiver on his shoulder. He'd usually be gone all day. If he shot something, when he came back, he'd say, "Eh, I went out to the bush this morning and first I saw an animal, a giraffe. But I didn't track it well. Then I saw an eland and struck it with my arrow. Let's wait until tomorrow before we go find it." The next day we'd fill our ostrich eggshell containers with water and everyone would go to where the animal had died.

One time, my father went hunting with some other men and they took dogs with them. First they saw a baby wildebeest and killed it. Then, they went after the mother wildebeest, and killed that too. They also killed a warthog.

As they were coming back, I saw them and shouted out, "Ho, ho, Daddy's bringing home meat! Daddy's coming home with meat!" My mother said, "You're talking nonsense. Your father hasn't even come home yet." Then she turned to where I was looking and said, "Eh-hey, daughter! Your father certainly has killed something. He is coming with meat."

I remember another time when my father's younger brother traveled from far away to come and live with us. The

day before he arrived he killed an eland. He left it in the bush and continued on to our village. When he arrived, only mother and I were there. He greeted us and asked where his brother was. Mother said, "Eh, he went to look at some tracks he had seen near a porcupine hole. He'll be back when the sun sets." We sat together the rest of the day. When the sun was low in the sky, my father came back. My uncle said, "Yesterday, as I was coming here, there was an eland—perhaps it was just a small one—but I spent a long time tracking it and finally killed it in the thicket beyond the dry water pan. Why don't we get the meat and bring it back to the village?" We packed some things, left others hanging in the trees, and went to where the eland had died. It was a huge animal with plenty of fat. We lived there while they skinned the animal and cut the meat into strips to dry. A few days later we started home, the men carrying the meat on sticks² and the women carrying it in their karosses.

At first my mother carried me on her shoulder. After a long way, she set me down and I started to cry. She was angry, "You're a big girl. You know how to walk." It was true that I was fairly big by then, but I still wanted to be carried. My older brother said, "Stop yelling at her, she's already crying," and he picked me up and carried me. After a long time walking, he also put me down. Eventually, we arrived back at the village.

We lived, eating meat; lived and lived. Then, it was finished.

My older brother, Dau, was much older than I was. Even when I was born, he already had his own hut and no longer lived with us. Later, he married. But when I was still little, he would go hunting and come home with meat. And just as my father knew how to track and kill animals, my older brother also learned. The memories I have about him aren't unhappy ones—they are the times when my heart felt wonderful.

I used to follow him around wherever he went; I just loved him! Sometimes, when he wanted to go hunting, he'd say, "Why don't you just sit in the village? Why are you always following me?" I'd stay home and when he came back

with meat, I'd greet him, "Ho, ho . . . my big brother's home!"

Sometimes he took me with him, and although I was already fairly big, he'd put me up on his shoulders and carry me. That's part of the reason I followed him around all the time! When he'd see an animal, he'd put me down, track it, and shoot it. If he struck it, we'd return to the village and he would always let me be the first to tell, "My big brother killed a gemsbok!" The next morning, people would go out with him to track it. Sometimes, I was afraid I'd be thirsty and there wouldn't be enough water, so I'd just stay behind.

Sometimes, when I stayed in the village, he'd tell me to set the bird traps. He only told me, never my little brother, because Kumsa always ate the bait, tiny chon or gow bulbs. He loved those little bulbs and just took them away from the birds.

Once, mother went to set some traps not far from the village. After she came back, Kumsa followed her tracks and ate most of the bulbs. When mother went back late in the afternoon, she found a guinea fowl in one of the traps, but the others were empty of both bird and bait.

Another time, Kumsa got his finger caught in one of the traps (as he often did!) and started to cry. I went to him with my older brother. Dau hit him and said, "If you steal the food from the guinea fowl, it won't get caught! Now, stop eating the bulbs! Have you no sense, taking food out of the traps?"

I never did that. I just held the bulbs in my hand and went to the traps. I'd put the bulb in and leave it there for the birds. I'd check the traps later in the day. If a bird was caught, I'd bring it home and my older brother would take the feathers off.

I also set some of my father's traps. I, all by myself. I'd go alone and set them. But my little brother would stay behind, because he really liked those bulbs!

I used to love stewed mongongo fruit. If someone was eating some and didn't give any to me, I'd cry and cry until I got some. But once, I had all the fruit soup and mongongo nut meats I wanted, and I had nothing to cry over.

My older brother often went to the mongongo groves

and brought back sacks full of nuts. One time, when he came back, he told my mother, "Here are the nuts. Cook them so you and Nisa can eat. But don't cook so many that you give them away. I'm tired, so listen to what I have to say—I don't want these nuts given away, because I'm giving them all to Nisa. Others will help her cook them so she can drink the fruit soup whenever she wants it. Now, I'm just going to rest until this moon dies. Only then will I go out and collect more nuts." I had all those mongongo nuts to myself and I drank lots of fruit soup and ate lots of cracked nuts.

I also remember the time I got burned. My mother had just come back from digging klaru bulbs, and had put them into a pot to cook into soft porridge. I kept asking, "Mommy, give me some. Why don't you give some to me? Mommy, give me some klaru." Finally, to quiet me, she took some she thought was cool enough from the top of the pot and put it in my hand, but it was still too hot. I dropped it and it landed on my leg. Before I could push it off, it burned me, leaving a large wound. I cried and cried and even after it got dark, I kept on crying. My father said, "Chuko, I've told you again and again, you shouldn't do things that cause Nisa to cry and be full of tears. Why don't you understand? Are you without ears? You keep doing things that make her cry. You, the mother of these little children, can't you understand things?"

People say that salt heals burns, so after they washed it out thoroughly, they crushed some salt into very small pieces and put it on. I wasn't afraid and just let them put it on. Then, I cried and watched as the salt made little bubbles on the wound, "Oh, this salt is terrible ... eeeee ... eeeee ...!" The salt almost killed me. Really, it felt as though it was killing my leg. I almost died from the pain.

The burn lasted a long time and made walking difficult. I couldn't get up easily. When I had to go to the bush³ I would crawl on my hands. My father blamed my mother, "If you ever do something like that to Nisa again, I, an adult, and her father, will do the same thing to you! I'll take you and throw you into the fire. How could you have almost

killed a child? Now, she can't even walk! I'd like to throw you into the fire right now. I won't, people say I shouldn't. But if you ever burn her like that again, I will!" My mother said, "You're right. If you were to throw me into the fire, there wouldn't be any wrong done because I was responsible for your child's getting burned. But she really has no sense. There's nothing worth anything in her head yet. She has no sense at all, not even about asking for food to be given to her."

We lived and lived and after a while the burn healed.

I remember another time, when I was the first one to notice a dead wildebeest, one recently killed by lions, lying in the bush. Mother and I had gone gathering and were walking along, she in one direction and I a short distance away. That's when I saw the wildebeest. I went closer to look but got scared and ran away. I called, "Mommy! Mommy! Come look at this! Look at that big black thing lying there." As she came toward me, I pointed, "There by that tree!" She looked, "Eh! My daughter! My little Nisa! My little girl! My daughter has found a wildebeest!" Then she said, "Go back to the village and tell your father to come." She stayed with the animal while I ran back, but we had gone deep into the mongongo groves and soon I got tired. I stopped to rest. Then I got up and started to run again, following along our tracks, ran and then rested and then ran until I finally got back to the village.

It was hot and everyone was resting in the shade. My older brother was the first to see me. "What's the matter? Dad, look. Nisa's coming back alone. Do you think something bit mother?"⁴ I ran over to them, "No, Mommy hasn't been bitten ... but I, I found a wildebeest lying dead in the bush! We had just left the place where the ground dips down and where the trees are thick and when we came to the opening beside the groves, that's where I saw it."⁵ I told Mommy to come look. She stayed there while I ran back here." My father and my older brother and everyone in the village followed me. When we arrived, they skinned the animal, cut the meat into strips and carried it on branches back to the village.

After we came home with the meat, my parents started

to give presents of it to everyone. But I didn't want any of it given away. I cried, "I was the one who saw it!" Whenever I saw them give some away, I followed the person to his hut and took it back, saying, "Did you see the wildebeest? Mommy and I were together and I was the one who saw it!" I took the meat away and hung it again on the branch beside mother's hut. People said, "Oh! This child! Isn't she going to share what she has? Is she a child who sees something and doesn't give any of it to others?" But I said, "Did you see it? I myself saw it with my very own eyes, and this wildebeest is mine. I'm going to hang it up by my hut so I can eat it all."

Later, I went to play. While I was away, mother took the meat and shared it with everyone. When I came back, I asked where all the meat had gone because I couldn't see it anywhere.

Mother and I often went to the bush together. The two of us would walk until we arrived at a place where she collected food. She'd set me down in the shade of a tree and dig roots or gather nuts nearby.

One time I left the tree and played in the shade of another tree. Hidden in the grass and among the leaves, I saw a tiny steenbok, one that had just been born. It was lying there, its little eye staring out at me. I thought, "What should I do?" I shouted, "Mommy!" I just stood there and it just lay there, looking at me. Suddenly I knew what to do—I lunged at it and tried to grab it. But it jumped up and ran away, and I started to chase it. It was running and I was running and it was crying as it ran. Finally, I got close enough to put my foot in its way and it fell down. I grabbed its legs and started carrying it back. It was crying, "Ehn ... ehn ... ehn ..."

Its mother had been close by, and when she heard it call, she came running. As soon as I saw her, I started to run again, still carrying the baby steenbok. I wouldn't give it back to its mother! As I ran I called out, "Mommy! Come! Help me with this steenbok! Mommy! The steenbok's mother is coming for me! Run! Come! Take this steenbok from me." But then the mother steenbok was no longer following so I took the baby, held its feet together, and banged it hard against the

sand until I had killed it. Then it no longer was crying; it was dead. I was very happy. My mother came running and I gave it to her to carry.

The two of us spent the rest of the day walking in the bush. While my mother gathered, I sat in the shade of a tree, waiting, and played with the dead steenbok. I picked it up; I tried to make it sit up; I tried to open its eyes; I looked at them. When mother had dug enough sha roots, she came back. We left and returned home.

My father had been out hunting that day and had shot a large steenbok with his arrows. He had skinned it and brought it back hanging on a branch. "Ho, ho, Daddy killed a steenbok!" Then I said, "Mommy! Daddy! I'm not going to share my steenbok. Now don't give it to anyone this time. After you cook it, just my little brother and I will eat it, just the two of us."

I remember another time we were traveling. While still on our way, my father and older brother tracked a baby ant-bear, the animal with almost no hair, with skin like human skin and hands like human hands. After they killed it and we ate it, I started to feel sick and threw up. That's when a serious illness entered my body, and I became very sick. My father did a curing trance for me, laying on his hands, and worked with me until I started to feel better. I was still too young to understand that he was curing me, because I still had no sense about those things. All I knew was the feeling of being sick. All I thought was, "Am I going to die from this sickness?" My father worked on me, curing me with his medicinal powers. I started to feel better and soon I was sitting up; then, I was sitting around with other people. Once I was completely better, I started playing again and stopped having thoughts about death.

An older child understand things and knows when someone is curing her. She thinks, "This person is trying to cure me. Perhaps he will make me better because right now, this sickness hurts very badly. Maybe he'll cure me and take the pain out of my body. Then, I'll be better again." I liked when

my father cured us, liked when he did something good and helpful. I'd think about how he was making all of us better. If I was sick, I'd feel my body start becoming healthy again; if someone else was sick, I'd sit and sing for my father as he tranced and cured him. An older child understands and thinks about things like that. But a younger one doesn't have those thoughts.

I remember another time when I got sick after eating meat, the time my older brother killed a wildebeest with his poisoned arrows. I was so happy when I saw him coming back, carrying huge pieces of meat, "Ho, ho, my big brother's brought home meat!" I kept thanking him and praising him. And, fat! It was very fat! I was given a big piece and ate it all, especially the fatty parts. I ate and ate and ate, so much, that soon I was in pain. My stomach started to hurt and then I had diarrhea. My insides were too full from all that fat, and my diarrhea was full of fat as well.

Soon I got better, and we just continued to live.

Another time, I broke some ostrich eggshell water containers and my father hit me. I used to put them in my kaross and go to the water well to fill them. But once one fell down and broke, broke into lots of little pieces. When I came back, my father had a branch and said he was going to beat me to death. So . . . phfft! I ran away!

But, it happened again. I had taken some ostrich eggshell water containers to the well, and while I was filling one with water, another one fell and . . . *bamm!* I said, "Today I won't run. Even if my father kills me, this time I won't run."

My younger brother Kumsa ran off immediately, to tell, "Daddy! Nisa killed another ostrich eggshell!" My father was waiting for me when I returned. He said, "Tell me, what caused that eggshell to break? Aren't you a big girl already? Still, you broke it?" He hit me and I started to cry. Soon he stopped, "All right . . . it isn't that important, after all."

But after that, whenever someone said, "Nisa, take the ostrich eggshell containers and fill them with water," I'd refuse. I knew if I broke another one, they'd hit me again.

"Those eggshell containers don't help me at all. I'll just let them sit over there. Otherwise, you'll kill me." Whenever I was thirsty, I took a small can and went to the well to drink. I'd fill the little can with water, cover it with leaves and carry it back. But I wouldn't touch their ostrich eggshell containers. My mother was the only one who brought back water from the well.

A long time passed without my touching those eggshell containers. And we just lived on.

I remember another time when we were traveling from one place to another, and the sun was burning. It was the hot, dry season and there was no water anywhere. The sun was *burning!* Kumsa had already been born and I was still small. We had been walking a long time and then my older brother saw a beehive. We stopped while he and my father chopped open the tree. All of us helped collect the honey. I filled my own little container until it was completely full. We stayed there, eating the honey, and I started to get very thirsty. Carrying my honey and my digging stick, I got up and we continued to walk. The heat was killing us and we were all dying of thirst. I started to cry because I wanted water so badly.

After a while, we sat down again in the shade of a baobab tree. There was no water anywhere. We just sat in the shade like that. Finally, my father said, "Dau, the rest of the family will stay here under this baobab. But you, take the water containers and get us some water. There's a well not too far away." Dau collected the empty ostrich eggshell containers, took the large clay pot, and left. I lay there, dead from thirst. I thought, "If I stay here, I'll surely die of thirst. Why don't I follow my big brother and go drink water with him?" I jumped up and started to run after him. I ran and ran, crying out to him and following his tracks, but he didn't hear me. I kept running, crying and calling out. Finally, he heard something and turned to see what it was. "Oh, no! Nisa's followed me. What can I do with her now that she's here?" He stood, waiting for me to catch up. When I was be-

side him, he picked me up and carried me high up on his shoulder, and along we went.

The two of us went on together like that. We walked and walked and walked until finally we reached the well. I ran to the water and drank and soon my heart was happy again. We filled the containers and put them in a twine mesh sack that my brother carried on his back. He took me and put me once again on his shoulder.

We started to walk back, Dau carrying the water and carrying me. After a while, he set me down and I ran along beside him. Soon I began to cry. He said, "Nisa, I'm going to hit you! I'm carrying these water containers and they're very heavy. So, just run along beside me and we'll take back this water to our parents. Thirst must have killed them by now. What are you crying about? Have you no sense?" I cried, "No, carry me. Dau, pick me up and carry me on your shoulder." He refused and I ran along beside him, crying, running and crying. After a while he said, "All right, I'll carry you again," and he picked me up. We went a long way before he set me down again. We had gone very far! I ran along with him until I tired again and he carried me again. That's how we were when we arrived at the baobab, where our parents were waiting for us.

They drank the water, drank and drank, more and more. "How well our children have done, bringing us this water! We are alive once again!" We rested in the shade of the baobab. Then we left and traveled to another water hole, and even though it was a long walk, I didn't cry. I just carried my container full of honey and walked. When we finally arrived, we settled there for a while. My heart was happy, eating honey and just living.

Once we went to live near a water hole, but there was no water in it. That was another time we were all thirsty. The only water came from kwa, a large water root. My mother scraped the white pulp into mounds, squeezing out the water for me to drink. She'd say, "Nisa's only a little child, yet she's dying of thirst." Because, although the kwa roots were plentiful, they were also bitter. When I'd drink the juice, I'd cry.

We lived there and after some time passed we saw the rain clouds. One came near, but just hung in the sky. It stayed hanging, just like that. Then another day, more rain clouds came over and they, too, just stood. Then the rain started to spill itself and it came pouring down.

The rainy season had finally come. The sun rose and set and the rain spilled itself. It fell and kept falling. It fell tirelessly, without ceasing. Soon the water pans were full. And my heart! My heart within me was happy. We lived and ate meat and mongongo nuts and more meat and it was all delicious.

My heart was so happy I moved about like a little dog, wagging my tail and running around. Really! I was so happy, I shouted out what I saw: "The rainy season has come today! Yea! Yea!"

There were caterpillars to eat, those little things that crawl along going, "Mmm . . . mmmm . . . mmmm . . ." And people dug roots and collected food and brought home more and more food. There was plenty of meat and people kept bringing more back, hanging on sticks, and they hung it up in the trees where we were camped. My heart was bursting and I ate lots of food and my tail kept wagging, wagging about like a little dog. And I'd laugh with my little tail, laugh a little donkey's laugh, a tiny thing that is. I'd wag my tail one way and the other, shouting, "Today I'm going to eat caterpillars . . . cat—er—pillars!" Some people gave me meat broth to drink and others prepared the skins of caterpillars and roasted them for me to eat and I ate and ate and ate! Then I lay down to sleep.

But that night, after everyone was dead asleep, I urinated right in my sleeping place. In the morning, when the others got up, I just lay there, lay there in the same place where I had urinated. The sun rose and was already high in the sky, and I was still lying there. I was afraid of people shaming me. Mother said, "Why is Nisa acting like this, refusing to leave her blankets when the sun is sitting up in the sky? Oh . . . she probably wet herself!"

When I did get up, I stood looking at my little pubic apron. Wet! "Ooh! I peed on myself!" And my heart felt mis-

erable. I thought "I've peed on myself and now everyone's going to laugh at me." I asked one of my friends, "How come, after I ate all those caterpillars, when I went to sleep I peed in my bed?" Then I thought, "When this day finishes, I'm going to lie down separate from the others. If I wet my bed again, won't Mother and Father hit me?"

I remember one time, when my friends and I found a snapping turtle. We had been swimming and splashing around in a water pan. We started to play with the turtle—picking it up and throwing it back and forth to one another. But on my turn, the turtle bit my finger. I screamed, but it didn't let go. I shook my hand and cried, "Mommy! My hand! Do something about my finger! Keya! Noni! Come, help me! You're all without brains! Come here and help me! I've been bitten!"

I beat my hand against the sand, but the turtle wouldn't let go. I kept looking at it holding onto my hand and kept crying out for help. I pulled at it with my other hand and finally it dropped to the sand. My finger was throbbing, "Pow . . . pow . . . pow . . . pow." I sat down to rest while the others killed it. I sat there, staring at my finger. It hurt; it burned! The other children started a trance dance for me. They made believe they were curing me and laid on hands. They danced around, and tried to make my finger better. The boys went into trance and tried to pull the sickness and pain out of my hand. When the sun was late in the sky, we returned to the village, carrying the turtle to be cooked and eaten.

When we arrived, my mother asked, "What happened? What bit you?" I said, "A turtle. This turtle. We were playing with it and throwing it around. When I tried to grab it, it bit me, bit me very hard."

After that, I was afraid of turtles and wouldn't touch them. When the other children threw them around, I just stood and watched. I really had no sense when I was young! Even a bad thing like that, I had just touched. I hadn't been afraid and just picked up that turtle. Then it bit me. Even

today, my hand is ugly in that very spot. Do you think that when you are a child you have any sense?

I remember another time when I had been walking with my friends in the bush. Our families were moving from one camp to another and my friends and I were walking ahead of the adults, riding on top of each other, making believe we were donkeys. That's when my friend Besa saw a wildebeest lying dead on the ground; then he saw another and then another; they had all been recently killed by lions. We ran back on our tracks, crying out, "We saw three dead wildebeests, killed by lions!" The adults said, "Ho, ho, our children . . . our wonderful children . . . our wonderful, wonderful children!"

We went back to where the wildebeests were, set up camp, and lived there for a while. The first day, the animals were skinned, water was found, and meat was eaten. The next day, the women went for more water and returned. We ate meat and lay down to sleep. That was the night that the lions came back, came back to eat the animals they had killed—they had eaten only one of the three wildebeests.

The lions came near our camp and stayed just outside the circle of firelight. We could see their eyes shining out of the darkness of the surrounding bush. One pair of eyes were in one place, another pair of eyes were in another place, and there were others. They were many; they wanted to kill us.

My father entered a medicinal trance. While his body tranced, his spirit flew to the spirit world, to talk to the gods. Together, the spirits sent the lions away, because soon they left and went to another water hole far away. When my father came out of the trance, he returned to us. Then we all slept.

Another day, when I was already fairly big, I went with some of my friends and with my younger brother away from the village and into the bush. While we were walking I saw the tracks of a baby kudu in the sand. I called out, "Hey, Everyone! Come here! Come look at these kudu tracks." The others came over and we all looked at them.

We started to follow the tracks and walked and walked and after a while, we saw the little kudu lying quietly in the

grass, dead asleep. I jumped up and tried to grab it. It cried out, "Ehnnn ... ehnnn ..." I hadn't really caught it well and it freed itself and ran away. We all ran, chasing after it, and we ran and ran. But I ran so fast that they all dropped behind and then I was alone, chasing it, running as fast as I could. Finally, I was able to grab it. I jumped on it and killed it. Then I picked it up by the legs and carried it back on my shoulders. I was breathing very hard, "Whew ... whew ... whew!"

When I came to where the rest of them were, my older cousin said, "My cousin, my little cousin ... she killed a kudu! What have the rest of us been doing? We men here ... how come we didn't kill it but this young girl with so much 'run' in her killed it?"

I gave the animal to my cousin and he carried it. On the way back, one of the other girls spotted a small steenbok and she and her older brother ran after it. They chased it and finally her brother killed it. That day we brought a lot of meat back with us to the village and everyone had plenty to eat.

Was my childhood a happy one? By the time I had grown and was a young girl, I knew that my heart was usually happy. But when I was a small child, I wasn't aware enough of things to be able to think about whether I was happy or sad.