

# ***Tree Talks About Death***

an Imagine-Your-Own-Pictures, Interactive Story

for children **ages 6 – 11** or playful adults of any age

by Connie Barlow

revised 26 November 2009

[www.TheGreatStory.org/tree-talks-about-death.html](http://www.TheGreatStory.org/tree-talks-about-death.html)

This story is **highly interactive**. At a number of junctures (including deciding whether the main character is a boy or a girl) **the child gets to choose** how the tale will unfold. The premise of **no pictures** is to encourage the child to lie back in bed and visualize the scenes — scenes that he or she, in part, will determine. This story exercises the child's **imagination**, capacity to **visualize**, and ability to **retain information** from one day to the next — all the while stimulating **vocabulary** and helping the child **think and feel** his or her way through **comforting understandings**, based in mainstream science, of **why death — however sad — is not a mistake in this Universe**.

Crucially, all explanations given by the characters in the book for the roles that death serves in the Universe are (if only implicitly) widely accepted in **secular and liberal religious contexts**, as they are all grounded in a mainstream, **scientific, evidential worldview**. Yet the story makes clear that one's *subjective responses to those new understandings are very much open to individual temperament and life experience*.

Containing five chapters, the book is intended to be read (preferably at bedtime) over the course of **five days**. Because subsequent readings can include markedly different choices, this book is likely to become a child's favorite. **The science lessons and the comfort lessons are intended to grow in meaning through the years, as the child's ability to grasp complex subjects and vocabulary grows.**

*Note: The author attributes her own excellent capacity to visualize words and create imaginary scenes to the practice of her father who extemporaneously created a bedtime story every night for her and her sister — never using a picture book, and who often asked his daughters to participate in choosing characters and other elements as the story emerged.*

# ***Tree Talks About Death***

an Imagine-Your-Own-Pictures, Interactive Story

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Five chapters to be read at bedtime over the course of five days:

Chapter 1: **Tree Talks About Death**

Chapter 2: **Rock Talks About Death**

Chapter 3: **Spider Talks About Death**

Chapter 4: **Voice in the Sky Talks About Death**

Chapter 5: **Star Talks About Death**

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## NOTE ABOUT SYMBOLS:

All choices made by the listener that then build into the story are noted by the following list of red symbols. Two black-print choice points are "**s/he**" (for he or she) and "**h/h**" (for his/him or her).

Chapter 1: GIRL or BOY



NAME OF DOG



KIND OF TREE



GIRL'S EMOTION



TYPE OF INSECT



Chapter 3: FOREST or MEADOW?



TYPE OF VEGETABLE OR FRUIT



Chapter 4: WHAT SPIDER HID UNDER



CUTE ANIMAL BABY



Chapter 5: NAME OF ORANGE STAR



## NOTES TO THE READER:

***Begin each session of storytelling with the following verse.*** Create a sing-song melody for it, if you can, or choose a melody from these online possibilities: <http://thegreatstory.org/songs/tree-talks-song.html>

THIS . . . IS . . . a STOR-y for WHICH . . .  
YOU . . . CREATE . . . the PIC-TURES.

NOT . . . ON . . . PA-per but ON-ly  
JUST . . . with-IN YOUR MIND.

So LAY . . . BACK . . . and CLOSE your EYES  
And AN-swer THESE FEW QUESTIONS . . .

THEN . . . YOUR . . . JOUR-ney will START  
With YOU . . . right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU . . . right BY MY SIDE

(If the child has already experienced this story multiple times and sings along with you, you might try suggesting a 2-part, in which you sing alone the first part and the child sings this reply:)

THIS . . . IS . . . a STOR-y for WHICH . . .  
**I** . . . CREATE . . . the PIC-TURES.

NOT . . . ON . . . PA-per but ON-ly  
JUST . . . with-IN **MY** MIND.

**I** LAY . . . BACK . . . and CLOSE **my** EYES  
And AN-swer THESE FEW QUESTIONS . . .

THEN . . . **MY** . . . JOUR-ney will START  
With **YOU** . . . right BY MY SIDE.  
With **YOU** . . . right BY MY SIDE.

## Chapter 1. Tree Talks About Death

**FIRST QUESTION:** The main character in this story is a CHILD. Should that main character be a GIRL or a BOY? (🧑)

**SECOND QUESTION:** The child in this story talks about a DOG. What should be the DOG'S NAME (🐕) and WHAT COLOR is this dog?

*So the story begins . .*

\_\_\_\_\_

"🐕 died last week. I cried a lot then. I found one of 🐕's old tennis balls in the grass today, and that made me cry again. Why did 🐕 have to die? Why does anything have to die?"

The 🧑 was talking to h/h favorite tree. This was the tree that s/he liked to climb more than any other tree in the neighborhood.

**Q:** *What KIND OF TREE do you think it was?*

*So it was a \_\_\_\_\_ tree:* 🌳

Using both hands, the 🧑 grabbed onto the lowest branch of the 🌳 tree. Then s/he swung h/h legs up to the first spot on the trunk that had a foothold. Up and over a few more limbs, the 🧑 soon arrived at the spot where three sturdy branches come together to form a kind of nest. It was a nest big enough to hold a child — but not so big that anybody would have to worry about falling through. The 🧑 had even taken naps safely in these branches several times before. But never before had the 🧑 come to the tree feeling quite this sad and . . .

**Q:** *Was the 🧑 feeling sad and ANGRY, or sad and CONFUSED, or sad and TROUBLED, or sad and FORLORN?*

*Okay. So the 🧑 was feeling sad and \_\_\_\_\_:* 😞

The 🧑 was feeling sad and 😞 not just about h/h dog dying. The 🧑 also worried whether h/h parents would have to die, too — and how soon. The 🧑 then started wondering if s/he, h/hself, would have to die, too — and when that might happen.

The sad and 😞 🧑 grew sleepy. S/He was becoming drowsy . . . verrrrrrrry drowsy . . .

A gust of wind swept through the 🌳 tree. It grew stronger and stronger. Soon, all the leaves were moving every which way. Even the sturdy branches swayed, and the 🧑's tree nest began to sway, too. The tree nest began to rock back and forth—like a cradle: back and forth . . . back and forth . . . back and forth. . .

Just then, the 🧑 heard a great rumbling voice that felt like thunder in h/h chest. The 🧑 sat up with a start.

This is what the great rumbling voice said:

*"There would be no trees anywhere in the world were it not for death."*

The 🧑 listened with astonishment, holding tight to the nearby branches. S/He realized that the voice was coming up through the trunk of the tree. So it was the *tree* who was speaking! It was the 🌳 tree!

The tree continued speaking to the 🧑:

*"Inside my trunk and branches only a very thin green layer, just under the bark, is actually alive. The rest of me — all the brown-colored wood inside — is dead."*

"I learned that in school," the 🧑 said with excitement. Then h/h voice softened, "I guess I should be sorry for you that so much of you is actually dead."

*"Ah," said the tree. "It is true that only a thin green layer on the inside and all these beautiful leaves on the outside are what gives me life. But it is the dead part within my trunk and branches that gives me my strength. Think about it: How could I stand tall against the wind, were it not for the dead wood inside me?"*

The tree continued,

*"Each year, the thin green layer of tiny living cells dies and stiffens into brown wood, while a new green layer of tiny living cells is born on the outer side of it, just under the bark."*

The 🧑 asked, "Are you sad each year when the green layer dies?"

*"Oh, yes," the tree replied. "I am sad each time I have to say goodbye to something I love. Even so, I am grateful that none of my cells lives forever."*

"Grateful?" asked the 🌳, incredulously, and with anger in h/h voice. "How can you be grateful when you have to say goodbye to something you love?"

A gust of wind passed through the leaves and branches. The tree said nothing.

Worried that h/h outburst might have silenced h/h favorite tree, the 🌳 spoke again, "I am grateful that you told me the story of the thin green layer that keeps you alive. I am grateful to learn that the dead wood inside you keeps you strong. But, please, I want to know why my dog had to die. Can you tell me why I had to say goodbye to 🐕?"

*"That is a question I cannot answer," rumbled the 🌳 tree. "I know nothing of dogs. I know only about rain and thunder, sunlight and wind, and about birds and squirrels who like to make their nests among my branches and leaves."*

The tree continued,

*"I also know far too much about all the creatures that eat my leaves, especially . . ."*

**Q:** *Did the tree know far too much about CATERPILLARS, APHIDS, KATYDIDS, or LEAF-CUTTING ANTS?*

So, the tree said it knew far too much about \_\_\_\_\_: 🐛

Nevertheless, the tree did have a suggestion for the 🌳. The tree said,

*"I suggest you go talk to ROCK. Rock has been here a lot longer than I have. Rock may know the answer to your question."*

\_\_\_\_\_

. . . That's all for tonight . . . so . . .

NOW . . . WE . . . will TAKE a BREAK  
and LEAVE . . . FOR . . . to-MOR-RROW

The STO . . . RY . . . that ROCK will TELL  
With YOU . . . right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU . . . right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU . . . right BY MY SIDE

## Chapter 2. Rock Talks About Death

NOTE TO READER: *Begin by speaking or (preferably) singing the opening VERSE, alone or as a duet. (Locate the verse at the beginning of this book.) Then continue with the dialogue that follows. BYPASS these questions if you are reading Chapter 2 immediately after Chapter 1.*

**Q:** Help me remember whether the main character in this story is a GIRL or a BOY? . . .

**Q:** Help me remember the NAME of the DOG? . . . ( 🐕 )

**Q:** What kind of TREE was in the story? . . . ( 🌳 )

So the story we heard thus far was about a 🧑 who was sad that h/h dog named 🐕 had died, and so s/he climbed h/h favorite tree, which was a 🌳 tree. The 🧑 fell asleep up in the tree, but then a voice that sounded like thunder startled h/h awake.

**Q:** Whose voice sounded like thunder? . . .

**Q:** Was the 🧑 frightened by that voice? . . .

**Q:** So, did the 🌳 TREE think that death was a bad thing? . . .

**Q:** How come? . . .

**Q:** Was the 🧑 satisfied with the answer that the tree gave h/h, or did the 🧑 need to continue looking for an answer? . . .

**Q:** Okay, so the 🧑 needed to continue looking for an answer to h/h question, so s/he needed to continue on the quest. Who did the 🌳 TREE tell the 🧑 to speak to next? . . .

**Q:** Why did the 🌳 TREE think that **ROCK** might be able to answer the 🧑's question? . . . Hint: Remember that the TREE said: "I suggest you go talk to ROCK. Rock has been here a lot longer than I have. Rock may know the answer to your question."

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## So let us begin Chapter 2: Rock Talks About Death . . .

Branch by branch, the 🧑 climbed down from the 🌳 tree. Fortunately, s/he knew of an excellent place to look for rocks. The previous summer the 🧑 had discovered rocks of many different colors in one very special place. S/He had sometimes taken 🐕 along to explore the beautiful rocks. The 🧑 wished that 🐕 were with h/h now.

The 🧑 especially liked to visit this landscape of rocks after a rain. The rocks are more colorful when they are wet. And if the sun comes out, some of the rocks even sparkle in the sunlight.

It had rained the previous night, and it was sunny now.

As the 🧑 approached h/h destination, s/he saw the wet rocks gleaming in the bright sunlight. Even though the 🧑 was still very sad, the sparkles in the rocks made h/h smile. One rock immediately caught h/h attention. S/He bent down and picked it up.

**Q:** What kind of ROCK did the 🧑 pick up? Do you think it was a rough piece of SANDSTONE? Perhaps it was a speckled piece of GRANITE? Or maybe it was a chunk of LIMESTONE with fossils in it? So which was it: SANDSTONE, GRANITE, or LIMESTONE? . . . .

So the 🧑 picked up a piece of \_\_\_\_\_ that fit perfectly in the palm of h/h hand.

- **IF SANDSTONE:** Looking closely, the 🧑 could see the tiny grains of sand in it. Those sand grains were all glued together into a rock. Sandstones can be yellow or orange or pink or purple or red or brown.

**Q:** What COLOR do you think this sandstone was? . . . Okay, so the 🧑 admired the \_\_\_\_\_ sandstone in the palm of h/h hand.

- **IF GRANITE:** Looking closely, the 🧑 admired how the tiny light and dark crystals within it sparkled in the sunlight. S/He especially liked a particular kind of mineral crystal that sparkled a lot. **Q:** What crystal do you think the 🧑 liked the best? Was it the shiny black flakes of MICA [mike-uh] within the granite? Or did s/he prefer the clear crystals of QUARTZ? Or maybe the 🧑 preferred the gray and pink crystals of FELDSPAR? So which crystals did the 🧑 like the best: MICA, QUARTZ, or FELDSPAR? . . . Okay, so the 🧑 especially liked to look at the sparkling crystals of \_\_\_\_\_ within the piece of speckled granite that s/he held in the palm of h/h hand.

- **IF LIMESTONE:** The limestone wasn't particularly colorful, and it didn't sparkle at all. But it did have something amazing in it. Looking



closely, the 人 could see fossils of ancient sea creatures embedded in the rock. **Q:** Do you think those sea creatures were the broken-off rings of the stems of CRI-noids? Or do you think they were the shells of extinct brachiopods (BRACK-ee-oh-pods)? Or was there even a trilobite (TRI-low-bite) preserved in the rock? So what were those fossils: CRINOIDS, BRACHIOPODS, or TRILOBITE? . . . Okay, so the 人 admired the fossil \_\_\_\_\_ preserved in the limestone that s/he held in the palm of h/h hand.

Just then, the rock began to speak. The rock spoke softly, almost in a whisper, like thissssssssssss.

In order to hear what the whispering rock had to say, the 人 raised the rock to h/h ear and then listened very carefully.

● **IF SANDSTONE:** "I am Sandstone," said the rock. "I exist only because, after many millions of years, mountains die. Rain and snow falling on mountains over millions of years erode those mountains away. Little stones and particles break off from the solid rock and then wash into rivers and streams. Rocks that are swept into rivers and streams tumble in the current, breaking into even smaller pieces until some pieces becomes as small as a grain of sand. When a big flood happens, the sand particles flow into a valley or a lake or an ocean. Year after year, those sand particles are buried under more layers of sand that accumulate after each flood. The layers and layers of sand get very heavy, and the sand particles on the bottom are squished into solid rock. They become me. They become sandstone. So, you see, there would be no sandstone if mountains never eroded away. I am grateful that mountains do not last forever."

● **IF GRANITE:** "I am Granite," said the rock. "I exist only because, after many millions of years, the ocean floor is pushed under the edges of the continents. All the ocean rock and mud that is pushed and squeezed beneath the continents eventually is pushed so far down into the Earth that it melts into liquid rock. Then the liquid rock starts to rise up through the ground. Moving upward, the liquid rock bulges the land above it, and mountains are born. When the liquid rock stops moving upward, it cools and turns into me. It turns into granite. So, you see, there would be no granite if the rock and mud on the floor of the ocean never vanished beneath continents. I am grateful that the ocean floor does not last forever."

● **IF LIMESTONE:** "I am Limestone," said the rock. "I exist only because sea creatures build their shells and other hard parts from calcium atoms dissolved in seawater. When the sea creatures die, their bodies decompose, but their shells do not. Instead, the shells pile up on the sea floor. After many thousands and millions of years, those shells become me. They become limestone. So, you see, there would be no limestone if sea creatures never died. I am grateful that sea creatures do not live forever."

"Oh," the 🕷️ said thoughtfully.

The rock spoke again,

"You see, even those things that seem to you humans like they last forever: well, they die too — and they **MUST** die in order for Earth to thrive. Mountains die by eroding away, particle by particle. Lakes die by filling up with sand and mud washed down from the mountains. Even oceans die when they are squeezed under continents, and the shells of sea creatures fossilize into rock, too."

"Hmmmmmm," said the 🕷️. "I think I understand why death is important for you. I think I understand why death is important for a rock. But I am a human, and I loved my dog very much. So, please tell me: Why do pets have to die? Why did 🐕 have to die?"

"That is a question I cannot answer," admitted the rock. "It is true that I am very old. Alas, I know nothing of dogs. But I do know someone who has a lot of experience with death. Go talk to SPIDER. Spider may know the answer you seek."

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... That's all for tonight ... so ...

NOW ... WE ... will TAKE a BREAK  
and LEAVE ... FOR ... to-MOR-ROW

The STO ... RY ... that SPIDER will TELL  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE

## Chapter 3. Spider Talks About Death

NOTE TO READER: *Begin by speaking or (preferably) singing the opening VERSE, alone or as a duet. (Locate the verse at the beginning of this book.) Then continue with the dialogue that follows:*

As we remember, this story is about a 🧑 who is sad that h/h DOG named 🐕 died. So the 🧑 climbed h/h favorite TREE, which was WHAT KIND OF TREE? . . . So up in the 🌳 tree the 🧑 is startled when the tree begins to talk with a voice that sounds like . . . what? (thunder). The tree tells the 🧑 that it is sad each time it has to say goodbye to something it loves, but that even so it is grateful that none of its cells live forever. Because when the thin layer of living cells in its trunk and branches dies each year, what do those cells become? . . . (wood). Yes! Wood! And without wood, do you think a tree could grow big and tall and stand firm against fierce winds and storms? . . .

**Q:** Okay, so WHO did the TREE tell the 🧑 to visit next on h/h quest? . . . (rock). So the 🧑 visited a ROCK. What kind of ROCK was it? . . .

**Q:** Do you remember anything special about this ROCK? . . .

Okay, so later the ROCK said: “You see, even those things that seem to you humans like they last forever: well, they die too — and they **MUST** die in order for Earth to thrive. Mountains die by eroding away, particle by particle. Lakes die by filling up with sand and mud washed down from the mountains. Even oceans die when they are squeezed under continents, and the shells of sea creatures fossilize into rock, too.”

**Q:** Was the 🧑 satisfied with ROCK’s answer about why there is death in the world? . . .

**Q:** Who did the ROCK tell the 🧑 to talk to next? . . .

Yes! SPIDER!

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***So let us begin Chapter 3: SPIDER Talks About Death . . .***

The 人 set the ROCK down gently among the other colorful rocks. The 人 had asked the rock the same question s/he had asked h/h favorite tree. Even though the 人 now knew why rocks are grateful that mountains and lakes and oceans and sea creatures do not live forever, the 人 could not figure out how mountains and lakes and oceans and sea creatures might have anything to do with h/h dog. Thus, the answer that Rock had given h/h did not address h/h own particular concern about death. The answer that ROCK had given h/h did not make h/h feel any less sad and ☹️.

So the 人 put the rock down. Before turning to continue the quest, the 人 paused to admire all the colors and sparkles in the whole field of rocks. S/He was grateful that the sun was still shining brightly.

The 人 remembered a dirt trail not far from home where s/he sometimes saw spiders. So here is a question for you: Do you think the dirt trail goes through a FOREST of tall trees? Or does it pass through a MEADOW full of grasses and wildflowers that sway in the breeze? FOREST or MEADOW? (=)

When the 人 arrived at the edge of the =, s/he stopped to look for where the trail began. The trail was always a little difficult to find, but s/he spotted it, and walked over to where it entered the =.

The 人 knew s/he would have to walk very slowly in order to spot a spider. Actually, the 人 decided not to look for spiders, but to look for their webs instead. The webs would be much easier to spot. So the 人 began to walk slowly along the dirt trail through the =. The 人 walked first with h/h head turned to the right, searching for spider webs. Then s/he walked a few steps with head turned to the left — and then to the right, and then again to the left. Just as the 人 was beginning to turn h/h head once more to the right, s/he gasped and came to a standstill.

Oh no! There was a spider web that stretched right across the trail, exactly in front of h/h face! The spider looked gigantic because it was only . . .

**Q:** How many INCHES was the spider from the 人's nose? . . .

So the spider was just \_\_\_ inches in front of the 人's nose. The 人 took one step backward to where s/he felt safer. "Hey, Spider!" the 人 called out in a friendly voice. "Rock told me that you know a lot about death."

*"I do," said the spider. "None of my kind would be able to survive without death."*

"I know that," said the 人. "I have seen little moths and bugs caught in spider webs. And I know that you spiders eat them."

"That is not exactly correct," countered the spider. "When an insect flies into my web, I feel the web vibrate as the insect struggles to free itself. But my silk is very sticky, and only the largest insects can free themselves. Meanwhile, I rush out to the spot and quickly cast more strands of sticky silk over its wings to entangle the insect even more. Then I inject sleeping potion into it. The insect calms down, goes to sleep, and later I suck out all the juices from its body. Yum!"

The 🕷️ frowned and shook h/h head from side to side saying, "I have a better way of eating. I don't have to kill my food."

"Ah," said the spider. "Even if YOU don't kill your own food, somebody else does that for you. You depend on death just as much as I do."

"Well, maybe I'll become a vegetarian then!" snapped the 🕷️.

"Even vegetarians depend on death," said the spider. "How do you think plants feel when you or the farmers yank them out of the ground or lop off their stems and leaves? How do you think a pumpkin seed or a walnut feels when it is crunched between your teeth, or when potatoes are baked in the oven?"

"Okay, okay, I get it," admitted the 🕷️. "You can't have food without something dying — even if it is just a . . ."

**Q:** What kind of VEGETABLE or FRUIT did the 🕷️ name? . . . (**VF**)

"Precisely!" confirmed the spider. "**VFs** are part of the Web of Life, too. The Web of Life is, in fact, a gentle way to describe exactly who eats whom — how we are all connected to one another ecologically, based on what we eat. There would, after all, be no Web of Life without death — without somebody dying to become food for somebody else. And so I am grateful for each and every insect that crashes into my web."

"Do you tell that to the insect?" demanded the 🕷️, who was feeling a bit sassy now. "Do you say 'thank you' to the fly before you inject your poison into its struggling body?"

"Well, do you?" countered the Spider.

"Huh?" said the 🕷️, confused. The Spider elaborated:

"Do you give thanks before you crunch down on a poor, helpless VF?"

The spider chuckled and scurried over to an edge of its web, then said,

"Speaking of the Web of Life, my web is looking a little tattered right now. I need to do some repairs. Please excuse me as I attend to my mending."

"But, but . . ." stammered the 🕷️. "I still don't understand why 🐕 had to die. Nobody was trying to eat my dog. The veterinarian said that 🐕 died of old age. But 🐕 was only nine years old! My brother is nine years old and he is still just a boy! How could a dog die of old age at nine years old?"

"Ummmm," said the spider, creeping back slowly to the center of the web. "How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know," responded the 🕷️. "You look really sleek and shiny. I suppose other spiders would consider you very good looking."

"You can tell how old I am by knowing what time of year it is," encouraged the spider. "Is the time of cold approaching? Is the time approaching when drops of dew gleam in the sunlight on my web at dawn?"

"Well yes," responded the 🕷️. "Autumn has already begun. I can tell because . . ."

**Q:** Did the 🕷️ know it was autumn because the LEAVES on the 🌳 tree were beginning to turn color? Or because DEW was on the 🕷️'s lawn in the early morning? Or because the 🕷️ had to start wearing a JACKET even on sunny days? Which do you think: LEAVES TURNING COLOR, DEW, or JACKET? . . .

"Ah, then, I will soon be finished," sighed the spider. "No spider of my kind ever lives to be even one year old. We all die of 'old age' long before then. We die when the time of cold arrives and the insects stop flying. When the insects stop flying, there is no more food for us to eat, and one morning it is so cold that we spiders just don't wake up."

"Does that frighten you?" asked the 🕷️ with some hesitation.

"I actually look forward to joining the feast," said the spider, "but from the other side of the table, so to speak."

"I don't understand," said the 🧑.

*"We spiders have an old saying passed down through the generations. When autumn approaches we say, 'I have eaten so many tasty meals in my lifetime. It is only proper that I should return the favor!'"*

The 🧑 was now exasperated. S/He was frustrated because TREE could not answer h/h question. ROCK could not answer h/h question. And now s/he was pretty sure that SPIDER would not answer it either.

Angrily, the 🧑 lashed out, "I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Maybe it is a mistake. Maybe Earth could have been made in a way so that nobody had to die. Nobody would have to enter the feast from the other side of the table. Maybe Earth could have been the kind of planet where I would still be throwing tennis balls for 🐕 to fetch."

Just then, a dark cloud passed in front of the sun. The sunlight was blocked, and a gust of cold wind jostled the spider web so that it bounced back and forth. The 🧑 pulled up the collar of h/h jacket. Then s/he looked skyward to see what had happened to the sun.

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... That's all for tonight ... so ...

NOW ... WE ... will TAKE a BREAK  
and LEAVE ... FOR ... to-MOR-ROW

the STO ... RY ... to CON-tin-UE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE

## Chapter 4. A Voice in the Sky Talks About Death

NOTE TO READER: *Begin by speaking or (preferably) singing the opening VERSE, alone or as a duet. (Locate the verse at the beginning of this book.) Then continue with the dialogue that follows:*

As we remember, this story is about a 🧑 who is sad that h/h DOG named 🐕 died. So the 🧑 goes on a quest to find out why death is part of this world, why it has to happen. Thus far the 🧑 has talked with three characters. **Q:** Who are they? . . . (TREE, ROCK, and SPIDER)

SPIDER was the last character that the 🧑 talked with. SPIDER talked about death in the context of "the Web of Life." Spiders, of course, make *real* webs that insects crash into, and then the spider wraps up the insect in more silk threads and then sucks the juices out of it. **Q:** But what did SPIDER mean when it spoke of THE WEB OF LIFE, and what does that have to do with FOOD? . . .

**Q:** Do you think PETS are part of the WEB OF LIFE? . . .

**Q:** Do you think HUMANS are part of the WEB OF LIFE? . . .

**Q:** Is there anything alive that doesn't ultimately become FOOD for something else in the web of life? . . .

**Q:** Do you think the Web of Life is something to be grateful for? Is it a good thing for a planet like ours to have creatures eating other creatures? . . .

**Q:** So who is the 🧑 supposed to talk to next in this story? . . .


Let me read to you again the last three paragraphs of how the Spider chapter ended:

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The 🧑 was now exasperated. S/He was frustrated because TREE could not answer h/h question. ROCK could not answer h/h question. And now s/he was pretty sure that SPIDER could not answer it either.


Angrily, the 🧑 lashed out, "I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Maybe it is a mistake. Maybe Earth could have been made in a way so that nobody had to die. Nobody would have to enter the feast from the other side of the table. Maybe Earth could have been the kind of planet where I would still be throwing tennis balls for 🐕 to fetch."





Just then, a dark cloud passed in front of the sun. The sunlight was blocked, and a gust of cold wind jostled the spider web so that it bounced back and forth. The  pulled up the collar of h/h jacket. Then s/he looked skyward to see what had happened to the sun.


#### ***So let us begin Chapter 4: A VOICE IN THE SKY Talks About Death . . .***


*"I think I hear an Earthling down there," boomed the voice. "I think I hear an Earthling who is not especially happy with h/h planet at this moment."*


The  pulled back in fright from the powerful voice echoing down from the sky. Spider fled up a silk string and hid under a . . .

**Q:** What did Spider hide under? Was it a GREEN LEAF, a YELLOW FLOWER, or something else? . . . ()


So Spider hid under a \_\_\_\_\_: 

Meanwhile, the  caught h/h breath and stammered, "Is . . . is . . . is that the SUN speaking to me?"

*"I am," responded the voice in the sky. "I know you are sad and . I know you have a question, too. Many others before you have asked that same question. It is a question that does not seem to go away."*

"Is it a question that you can answer?" asked the  hopefully.


*"Let me tell you about sunlight," said the voice. "All of the vegetables and fruit that you eat — including **VF**s — depend on sunlight in order to grow. And all of the insects that Spider eats ultimately depend on sunlight, too, because those insects eat plants, or they eat smaller insects who eat plants. So you see, sunlight energizes the whole Web of Life."*

"What about my tears? Do my tears come from sunlight, too?" asked the .

*"Yes," responded the voice in the sky. "Your body uses the energy of sunlight to fashion tears from water and salt."*

"How about my words? Do my words come from sunlight?" asked the .

"Yes. The very thoughts in your mind, Young One, are, in truth, the energy of sunlight transformed into the energy of a human mind. This happens because of to all the sun-fed plants and animals that you have eaten throughout your entire life. Your brain uses the energy of sunlight to think thoughts. Then the muscles in your mouth and throat use the energy of sunlight to speak those thoughts into words."

"HMMMMMM," said the , tilting h/h head and squinting h/h eyes in a mischievous way. "If my voice comes from the energy of sunlight," s/he began, "then does this mean that you are listening to *yourself* ask this question right now?"

After a pause, the voice continued on a course of its own:

"I know that you are angry with this world," said the voice. "Like many of your kind, you have wondered why there must be death."

The  nodded.

"You have already learned all that TREE can teach you about death. You have already listened to ROCK. And you have heard from SPIDER, too. So what you are asking of me is simply to tell you about your dog. Is that correct?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the , h/h face brightening.

"To tell you about YOUR dog, however, I need to tell you about ALL dogs — that is, how dogs came to be."

The voice in the sky continued,

"I am very old, so I have seen it happen. Your Earth story is not a story that has been passed down to me through the generations, like Spider's story of the feast. Rather, it is a story that I have witnessed myself. I have watched the story of how rocks came to be on Earth and of how life came to be. I have watched Earth's story unfold ever since the first rays of sunlight began to bathe your planet. I was there when ocean floor squeezed under continents. I was there when the first generation of mountains all eroded away. I was there when complex molecules assembled into the very first forms of tiny life. I was there when the simple life forms began to wriggle and swim, and

then when some evolved into life forms that could breathe on land, and then when some of those land creatures became the great dinosaurs — some of whom ate the leaves off of tall trees that were made strong by many generations of dead cells.”

“Wow!” exclaimed the 🧑. “You saw all that?!”

The voice continued,

“I have watched as you humans became clever enough to study the rocks and to figure out that Earth is very, very old. I have watched as curiosity compelled you humans to look for fossils, to probe and compare DNA, and thus to figure out the family of relationships in the Tree of Life. Yes, I have watched humans just like you learn a great deal about your planet’s ecology and how Earth life evolved over billions of years. I commend your species for those talents — and for your persistence. Impressive! So tell me, Young One, what is your favorite dinosaur?”

The 🧑 said that h/h favorite dinosaur was . . .

**Q:** What was the 🧑’s favorite DINOSAUR? . . .

“Yes,” said the voice in the sky. “\_\_\_\_\_ was a very fine dinosaur, indeed! Now tell me: Do you think 🐶’s ancestors lived in the time of the great dinosaurs?”

“I suppose they must have,” replied the 🧑. “But 🐶’s ancestors probably didn’t look much like dogs back then.”

“Correct!” The voice continued, “Do you think *YOUR* ancestors were alive during the time of the dinosaurs, too?”

“Well, yes, but there were no apes back then, so human ancestors must have been something else . . . something smaller . . . maybe something like a ground squirrel or woodchuck or gopher that lived in a burrow under a tree and ate leaves and seeds and tried to keep safe from the dinosaurs.”

“Correct again!” declared the voice in the sky. “But there is something more you need to know.”

The voice paused, then continued,

"You see, Young One, your ancestor and 🐕's ancestor were the very same creature back then. You and your dog share the same great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents!"

"Uh, I think I like that idea . . . but I'm not quite sure," said the 🧑.  
"Actually, I think that's kind of cool, if a bit creepy, but still, it's cool. Yeah, I like that idea. I like being related to my dog. I like thinking about how we share a lot of the same DNA and stuff."

The 🧑 grew serious once again. "But what do ancestors and dinosaurs and DNA have to do with understanding why there is death?"

"Death, birth, death, birth, death, birth, death, birth," said the voice monotonously. "The Circle of Life is what made evolution happen. If nothing since the very beginning had ever died, do you think anything more complex than bacteria would be here today?"

Before the 🧑 had a chance to think, the voice in the sky answered its own question:

"Of course not!" came the voice. "All the animals and plants and mushrooms and amebas on your planet are here only because of the creative role that death plays in the evolution of life. Truly, in a world without death, there would be no life."

"Tell me, Young One," continued the voice in the sky. "Do you think there would be any room on this planet for YOU if nobody ever died? If your great-great grandparents were still alive, and if their great-great grandparents were still alive, and if everybody else's ancestors were all still alive, do you think there would be room on this planet for YOU? Do you think there would be room on this planet for any children at all?"

Just then the most adorable baby animal emerged from behind a bush and ran over to the 🧑, rubbing against h/h ankle. This darling baby animal with the cutest face looked up with big, friendly eyes. Immediately, the 🧑 bent down and picked up the creature and held it close. A gigantic smile spread across the 🧑's face.

**Q:** What was that BABY ANIMAL? . . .

So the baby animal was a \_\_\_\_\_. (❤️)

The voice in the sky spoke again:

"Contemplate this, Young One: Without the death of elders, there would be no room for children. There would be no room for human children. There would be no room for ♥ children — nor for VF children or 🌳 children or 🦋 children. There would be no more room for any other kind of children you can think of. So the fact that people and pets and everything else eventually have to die is surely very sad. But that same fact is also very important. Without the death of elders, there would be no room for any more children to ever be born. Without death, there could be no new life."

Just then, the baby ♥ wriggled out of the 🧑's hands, leaped to the ground, and vanished once again behind the bush. The 🧑 looked back up at the sky. The cloud was still obscuring the sun, but the cloud was beginning to thin. The 🧑 looked down at h/h feet, thoughts racing through h/h mind.

"Maybe planets are too small for life," the 🧑 thought to h/hself. "Maybe somewhere out in the Universe is a place so big that there is plenty of room for new babies to be born and for new life forms to evolve, but where the older generations and the older species don't have to die. Maybe there is a place where nobody has to die — ever."

The 🧑 looked over at the spider web, but Spider was still hiding beneath the 🕸. So the 🧑 kept thinking. S/He thought, "Yes, maybe there is a place out there where *nobody* needs to eat. Maybe those space aliens can all just eat the light from their own closest star, like the plants do down here! Yes! That's what they do! Everybody could be like a plant, eating only starlight — even if they don't all look like plants. So maybe there is a place with life somewhere in the Universe, but without death. Maybe there is a place like that somewhere up there!" The 🧑 looked back up into the sky again.


"I think you need to go into the darkness, Young One," said the voice. "I think you need to go into the dark."

The voice in the sky continued,

"So after your supper tonight, an hour after sunset, step out onto your porch all by yourself. Then look up into the night sky. Search for a star that is approaching death. Search for a star that is not white or blue, but that is orange or red: Search for a Red Giant or a Red Supergiant! There you will learn your final answer."

The 🧑 had to strain h/h ears to hear the last words, as the cloud was thinning and sunlight was beginning to break through. The 🧑 heard the

names "Red Giant" and "Red Supergiant." S/He heard that these stars are reddish or orange. And s/he thought s/he had heard the words, "final answer."

The  could hardly wait to return home and get on the Internet in order to learn what Red Giants and Red Supergiants are, and how to spot one in the night sky.

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... That's all for tonight ... so ...

NOW ... WE ... will TAKE a BREAK  
and LEAVE ... FOR ... to-MOR-ROW

the STO ... RY ... the STAR will TELL  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE  
With YOU ... right BY MY SIDE

## Chapter 5. Star Talks About Death

NOTE TO READER: *Begin by speaking or (preferably) singing the opening VERSE, alone or as a duet. (Locate the verse at the beginning of this book.) Then continue with the dialogue that follows:*

As we remember, this story is about a 🧑 who is sad that h/h DOG named 🐕 died. So the 🧑 goes on a quest to find out why death is part of this world, why it has to happen. Thus far the 🧑 has talked with four characters.  
**Q:** Who are they? . . . (TREE, ROCK, SPIDER, VOICE IN THE SKY)

**Q:** VOICE IN THE SKY was the last character that the 🧑 talked with. Who do you think the VOICE IN THE SKY is? . . .

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Recall that the Voice in the Sky told the 🧑:

Without the death of elders, there would be no room for children. There would be no room for human children. There would be no room for ❤️ children — nor for VF children or 🌳 children or 🐙 children. There would be no more room for any other kind of children you can think of. So the fact that people and pets and everything else eventually have to die is surely very sad. But that same fact is also very important. Without the death of elders, there would be no room for any more children to ever be born. Without death, there could be no new life.”

So this is how the voice in the sky explained why there is death in the world.

**Q:** Do you think the 🧑 found this answer helpful? That is, while s/he is probably still very sad about the death of h/h dog, do you think that maybe s/he is less angry about it, and less 😞? . . .

So the previous chapter ended with the VOICE IN THE SKY directing the 🧑 to go outside after supper that night and to look for a particular kind of star.

**Q:** What kind of star did the VOICE IN THE SKY tell the 🧑 to look for? . . .  
(Answer: a Red Giant Star or a Red Supergiant Star)

**Q:** Have you ever seen any of these kinds of stars outside at night? . . .

Remember that the 🧑 could hardly wait to return home and get on the Internet in order to learn how to learn about Red Giants and Red Supergiants and how to spot one in the night sky.

**Q:** Do you think that the 🧑 was successful in finding information on Red Giant stars and Red Supergiant stars on the Internet? . . .

Let's find out!

***So let us begin Chapter 5, the final chapter of this story: "Star Talks About Death" . . .***

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The dark cloud drifted away from where it had covered the face of the Sun, and the voice in the sky spoke no more. The 🧑 wasn't sure that s/he fully understood the voice in the sky's answer as to why h/h dog 🐕 had died, and why everything eventually has to die. But the 🧑's confusion didn't bother h/h quite so much anymore — because now s/he had something to do that s/he could accomplish all by h/hself!

The 🧑's quest for an answer was now taking h/h in a familiar direction. Got a science question? Use the Internet! The 🧑 was really good at using the Internet to find answers to science questions. For example, s/he had already used the Internet to discover why . . .

**Q:** What answer to a science question had the 🧑 already discovered by using the Internet? . . .

Okay, so the 🧑 was really good at using the Internet to get answers to h/h science questions.

The 🧑 was so excited about this new phase in h/h quest that s/he even invented a little SONG about Red Giant stars that s/he sang over and over all the way home. It was a simple little song, and the 🧑 got happier and happier each time s/he sang it. The people that the 🧑 passed along the way mostly heard h/h singing this line: "I love Red Giant Stars!"

**Q:** So tell me: What simple SONG do YOU think that the 🧑 was singing on h/h way home? . . .

. . . That's a fun song! I bet s/he enjoyed singing it!

The 🧑 rounded the last corner and there saw h/h home. But there were a few obstacles on the sidewalk that the 🧑 had to jump over or swerve around. First, s/he had to jump over a baseball bat, and then a skateboard. The 🧑



had to swerve around a garbage can that was blocking the sidewalk, and then a lawnmower. S/He had to speed up to get past the water sprinkler before it rotated over the sidewalk again. Finally, the 人 had one last obstacle to negotiate before reaching the door of h/h house.

**Q:** What was this final OBSTACLE? . . .

Whew! So the 人 finally got past the \_\_\_\_\_.

S/He threw open the door, raced into the room with the computer, and started to type some keywords into the search engine.

**Q:** What KEYWORDS did the 人 type in? . . .

The Internet search was a success. By dinnertime, the 人 felt fully prepared for the evening to come. S/He was proud of h/hself for learning all on h/h own about Red Giant stars and Red Supergiant stars. S/He could hardly wait for the sunset and nightfall. The 人 especially wanted to see one of the three brightest orange stars. S/He wanted to see the Red Giant star **Arcturus** [ark-TOUR-us], or either of the two Red Supergiants: **Antares** [an-TARE-ees] or **Betelgeuse** [BEE-tle-juice].

At dinner, the 人 got to eat h/h favorite food. But s/he was too excited to really enjoy it. Instead, s/he was thinking about stars.

**Q:** What food did the 人 eat for dinner? . . .

So, dinner that evening was \_\_\_\_\_. The sun set and the sky grew dark. The 人 who earlier that day had spoken with a tree, a rock, a spider, and a voice in the sky stepped outside onto the porch. Quietly, and with great anticipation, the 人 repeated to h/hself the instructions s/he had been given. The 人 remembered the sound of the VOICE IN THE SKY, too. The voice had said:

*"Search for a star that is approaching death. Search for a star that is not white or blue, but that is orange or red: Search for a Red Giant or a Red Supergiant!"*

The 人 stood on the porch waiting for h/h eyes to adjust to the darkness. When s/he could begin to see the porch steps and the shapes of the trees and shrubs, s/he decided to venture out onto the lawn. Even though being alone in the dark outdoors was a little scary, the 人 walked down the steps and out onto the grass. S/He wanted to see as much of the night sky as possible.

So the 人 walked out to the center of the lawn, then stopped and looked up.

One second passed. Two seconds passed. Three seconds passed. . .

"There it is! There it is!"

Shining brightly in the night sky was a beautiful orange-colored star.

The 🧑 could tell by the positions of the bright neighboring stars that the orange star was . . .

**Q:** What was the name of the ORANGE STAR: Was it the Red Giant **Arcturus**? (ark-TOUR-us)? . . . the Red Supergiant **Antares**? (an-TARE-ees)? . . . or the Red Supergiant **Betelgeuse**? (Beetle-juice)? . . .

So the orange star was \_\_\_\_\_: 🌟

"Oh!" exclaimed the 🧑. "There you are, 🌟! There you are!"

By now the 🧑 was becoming accustomed to the idea that humans are not the only things in the Universe who might occasionally talk to h/h. So the 🧑 was not at all surprised when 🌟 began to speak.

*"Well, well! Good evening, Earthling. I was told that you might have a question for me tonight. So, speak!"*

"I do have a question," the 🧑 replied with excitement. "Today the SUN — at least, I think it was the Sun — told me to find you. I was told that you would have the final answer to help me understand why death happens — why it *has* to happen, and why my dog 🐕 had to die."

*"That is indeed an important question," said 🌟, solemnly. "I suppose that ever since your ancestors of long ago began asking questions they wondered about death, too."*

"Hey! I wonder if my ancestors who lived during the time of the dinosaurs and who looked something like a squirrel asked this question, too?"

*"What's a squirrel?" asked 🌟. "What's a dinosaur?"*

The 🧑 shook h/h head, thinking to h/hself, "Okay, so this orange star way beyond our solar system doesn't know much about Earth history, but it probably does know a lot about the rest of the Universe."

The 🧑 looked up at the star and said eagerly, "🌟, maybe you know about a special place out there in our Milky Way Galaxy or maybe in some other galaxy. It would be a place much better than Earth. It would be a place

where creatures live and where creatures keep getting born, but nobody has to die — nobody ever has to die there, and so nobody ever has to be sad.”

“Not here,” said the star. “There is no place like that anywhere in our Milky Way Galaxy. I, of course, do not know much about any of the other galaxies out there in the universe. But of the 200 billion star systems in our own galaxy, I can tell you this: I can tell you that there is no such place as the one you describe.”

“That’s it?!” protested the 🧑. “That’s the answer? That’s the *final* answer?!”

The 🧑 was exceedingly frustrated now, so s/he forgot to be courteous and respectful when addressing the star. Instead, the 🧑 lashed out, saying, “Your answer doesn’t make me feel any better! It just makes me feel worse!”

When 🌟 spoke next, the 🧑 noticed a touch of sadness in the star’s voice.

🌟 said,

“That’s because the reason you were told to seek me out was not to help **YOU** feel better. It was to help **ME** feel better.”


“Whaaaat?” stammered the 🧑. “But you are a star! Why would you talk like that? How could *I*, a mere Earthling, a human, a kid even — how could I possibly help a star to feel better?”

“Well, unlike **YOUR** star, I have no planets orbiting me that have a chance to produce life. So I don’t know much about biology. I know I look good up here. But good looks are just on the surface. I want to **FEEL** good about myself. Before I die, I want to know that I have accomplished something important — something that will carry on after I am gone.”


“Oh,” the 🧑 said softly.

🌟 continued:

“You see, when stars get close to dying, we begin to squeeze helium atoms into a kind of atom that is absolutely essential for life: carbon. At that time, we turn from white or blue or yellow to orange or even red. I’ve known about Earth life for a long time, and I know that Earth life needs carbon.”


"How do you know about Earth life?" asked the .

"Hey, all of the stars in this sector of the Milky Way Galaxy know about Earth life," the star replied. "We'd all love to be able to bring forth what your own star, the Sun, has helped to create. We'd love to have creatures like moths and bats and owls flying in the starlight at night. We'd love to have creatures like humans gazing up at us and telling stories about why some of us look orange and some of us look blue and some of us look white or yellow."


The  smiled. S/He felt proud of h/h planet and all its creatures.

The orange star continued,


"So of course I know that Earthlings exist and that Earthlings require carbon. But no Earthling has ever told me WHY Life is important. No Earthling has ever told me why it is important that carbon flung out from dying stars helps make life possible. So I wonder why it is important for me, in my elder years, to be making carbon right now. Tell me, why is Life important?"

"Wait a minute," said the , thinking. "Do you mean that I have little particles of stars inside me?"

"Yes, you do," assured the star.

The  continued, "Do you mean that all the carbon atoms in my cells and in all the carbohydrate foods that I eat, and in the carbon dioxide that I exhale were all created inside stars that looked like you?"

"You got it, kid!"

"Wow!!!!!!!!!!!" exclaimed the , now running around in circles, arms waving crazily up toward the stars.

 laughed and said,

"In a way, Red Giant stars and Red Supergiant stars who lived and died before your solar system was born are YOUR ancestors. They are your most ancient ancestors. When those ancestor stars were dying, they recycled back to the galaxy much of the carbon they had made

during their lifetimes. That carbon — that stardust — is now right there inside of you!”

“I am made of stardust! I am made of stardust! Yippeeaaaa!” exclaimed the 🧑, who by now was spinning out of control.

The orange star watched the jubilant 🧑 with delight and then asked its own question one more time:

*“Why is Life important to you? Why is it important that there be Earthlings all connected through the web of Life and all sharing the same ancient ancestors from long, long ago? Why is it important that there be life in this universe?”*

The star continued,

*“Until I know that answer, I can’t be sure that this business of making carbon is really worth much over the long haul. I can’t be sure that something important will carry on after I am gone — something important that will use the carbon atoms that I am creating right now.”*

The 🧑 stopped twirling and looked directly at the star. The 🧑’s smile melted into a frown. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled a frustrated sigh, like this: [sigh]

Keeping h/h gaze on the star, the 🧑 said, “What a silly question! Of course LIFE is important! If life weren’t important I wouldn’t be asking questions about why DEATH has to happen. I wouldn’t really care. But I *do* care. So that means life is important — very important!”

“But what does life actually DO?” asked 🌟.

“I guess it’s not so much about what you *do*,” countered the 🧑. “Rather, it’s how you *feel* about what you do. And how others feel about it, too.”

The 🧑 continued, “For example, 🐕’s life was important because I loved 🐕 and 🐕 loved me. I will always remember this one very special dog. Right now, I can’t actually think of anything more important than the fact that 🐕 and I loved each other.”

“Oh,” said 🌟 quietly.

The 🧑 pressed on, "So, ✨, tell me this: How do you *feel* about your life as a star right now?"

"Uh, I guess I feel pretty good, talking with you," replied the orange star. "You may be young, but you seem to know a lot about what is important. You seem to **FEEL** what's important. And just talking with you helps me feel that my own work as a star is important, too. So I thank you."

Just then, someone whom the 🧑 loved very much opened the door and started calling for h/h to come in for the night.

**Q:** Who was calling for the 🧑 to come inside? . . .

So the 🧑's \_\_\_\_\_ was calling.

"Ooops, I hear my \_\_\_\_\_ calling for me now," said the 🧑. "I've got to go back inside. It's time for bed."

The 🧑 began walking toward the house, a peaceful smile on h/h face. As s/he stepped onto the porch, s/he stopped and swiveled to look back at the star.

"I love you, ✨," the 🧑 said softly.

"I love you, too," replied the star.

"And thank you for talking with me," said the 🧑. "You haven't answered my question, but for some reason that question doesn't feel quite so troubling anymore."

"Me too," said the star. "Me too."

\_\_\_\_\_

*NOTE TO STORY READER: Some listeners might prefer the ending above. Older children might want to have one more opportunity to make a choice. So, depending on your listener, either end as above (then skip to the SONG), or continue with what follows on the next page.*

How the story ends is up to you:

Do you think that the 🧑 WENT BACK INSIDE and got ready for bed and dreamed that night about ancestor stars and voices in the sky and about spiders and rocks and trees?

Or did the 🧑 instead WAKE UP IN THE NEST of branches in the 🌳 tree, with sunlight from h/h own star caressing h/h face? Which do you think it was?

---

THE END

NOW . . . THIS . . . STORY is DONE  
and YOU . . . drift OFF . . . to DREAM-LAND  
with TREE . . . ROCK, SPI-der, VOICE and Star  
right THERE . . . with-IN YOUR MIND  
right THERE . . . with-IN YOUR MIND  
right THERE . . . with-IN YOUR MIND