

**THE THIRD OF JULY, SOME TIME AFTER TEA, 500,000 BC—
(another story about cavemen)**
By Paul Lambrecht

Belek had been gone for 8 moons now, Grok thought. The ground had thawed somewhat but it was still colder than most summers.

Grok had been sniffing around the other females, and they observed him favorably for his closeness to the massive, yet old and slowly crumbling Og.

He had carved out the finest fillies for his harem, yet of the remaining females, Grok had eyed out one or two which stirred him up in his loins.

There was Melek. There was Rosen.

Both had garlanded their matty oily hair with spring flowers and cast him encouraging looks. He smiled shyly at this attention.

Punko, Dago's little brother, noticed this attention and it bothered him. Hey big boy, he grunted at Grok but Grok didn't understand. He was twitterpated. Most days Belek was banished from his mind.

Melek had a large waist and a cub, who had been sired by Drako. Rosen was smaller and younger and finer to look at. This was Minik's daughter too, the Medicine Man. It was to Rosen which he naturally gravitated.

Unofrtunately for Grok, Punko liked Rosen as well, and unbeknownst to them all, Punko had the largest brain size of the whole tribe. Punko became dark and skulky as the romance blossomed between Rosen and Grok.

He brooded sullenly at the fire or snapped angrily at the others during meals. He became very possessive about food and his place to sleep in the cave.

Rosen didn't even look at him. His raging eyes and irritability scared her. Grok seemed strong and stable and kind to her.

She and Grok liked to take walks down to the river. Grok liked her to bathe in the frigid fast flowing waters but she usually refused.

It was widely though and narrowly grunted that Rosen was yet untaken. She was timid and jumpy around the larger males still. And no one had taken her because she was Minik's progeny, and the usual offenders feared his powders and coveted his potions and charms. Even Drako, the biggest and meanest male, and just smart enough to realize being head alpha was not worth the effort, gave Rosen a wide berth. Though he still leered at her.

Minik liked Grok and approved of him as a companion for Rosen.

He could teach Grok some things, like the mystical words which referred to things, but he was not as smart as his apprentice, Punko.

Punko knew everything which was going on in the tribe, and only he and Minik could make themselves understood, so they were often laughing and snickering, while Drako swatted flies, or Balko played with himself.

Grok only had eyes for Rosen now.

Melek and her cub wandered around frowning and unnoticed for a time. Punko hated the dejected look in their eyes so for a time he acted happy, as if to establish his superiority from their sorrow. But once she perked up a little, he redesignated himself the sullen brooder.

The elk were back to graze, so they were eating pretty well, after many long moons of subsisting on roots and berries.

They were all plumper and happier.

There was no mystical word for what Punko felt. Minik had no idea what the hell he was grunting about. But it was clearly the opposite of what the amiable Grok felt, and he hated himself and Grok for it.

What could Grok know of his pain, he wondered bitterly. But the proud Punko had no idea of what Grok had been feeling eight moons before, with the disappearance and death of Belek. Punko missed his stupid brother Dago not a whit.

Dago had finally emerged from the woods five moons ago, sick and skinny and heartbroken. Grok, out of half-formed sympathy and a desire to be connected to his Belek and what remained of her world, tried to nurse Dago back to health, but he failed. And the old alpha died, and was happy to go. A respite from the pain, the curse of a man who loses everything.

Grok wanted Rosen to be his mate but wondered how to let her know. He had seen Drako achieve several such arrangements, but he wanted his to be different. Just him and just her.

He brought her a pretty blue flower one day, which caused her to smile and she wove it into her matted oily hair. But that was it.

She wasn't getting it. He needed to know the mystical word for mating just one on one. He thought Punko or Minik might teach him and he could teach Rosen.

So he sought out the sullen Punko by the roaring fire. It was dusk out.

Punko told him that edelweiss grew in the upper reaches of the nearby crags.

If he could get one of these flowers, he could help Rosen to understand the word he was trying to express. Amongst the superstitious of the tribe, this flower meant that you were willing to die for your heart, and you might receive liberties which normally were only accorded to Bog himself.

Punko told him that the word was LOVE.

On a blind hope, Grok told Rosen the word LOVE but it meant nothing to her.

He would have to go after the flower.

He looked high into the sky where the old Alps hovered over them, their snowy peaks crowning and arguing with everyone. Those alpine meadows were where the wildflowers

grew. It had been a generation or two since some foolhardy romantic had scaled the towering heights.

One morning, Grok rustled from his bed of furs, and before the light broke and while all the other cavefolk were slumbering and snoring loudly, he emerged in the stark fresh air, and in the morning mist he felt alive and alert. He set off with some dried meat strips toward the hills. In a couple hours, the sun rose palely and he had made his way from the waterfall up to the stream which wound its way down through the ravines. In the high grasses he passed a couple of saber-tooth sows and wooly goats.

At this altitude, the barrows and nooks were filled with crusty snow and the wind whipped very cool. There was springy tundra peppered with berries, and a few forget-me-nots but the edelweiss was nowhere yet to be found. They grew a couple thousand feet higher up in elevation, but already the going was slow and strenuous. He paused often to rest, and this made him colder as the mountain air settled on his damp skin.

The sun moved in a large lazy loop around the sky and he had not made much progress, and felt stupid and miserable. What the hell was he trying to prove, he wondered.

No mate was worth this nonsense, his brain said, yet something deeper spurred him on.

Perhaps this was what Minik called FATE.

Well, FATE had a face, thought Grok. He marveled at the sheer dangerous beauty he saw. He realized his stupidity and peril, but he still felt safe, secure, even integrated with the wild landscape.

The mountain was darkening above him, and long shadows fell across the valley behind him. They would be missing him at camp, which he couldn't make out. Not that infrequently, cavefolk would go nuts and take long walks into the wilderness. Most emerged later. Minik had a word for it. BATSHIT.

Only Punko knew. He would probably let everyone go on believing Grok had gone BATSHIT. Grok didn't trust Punko but couldn't place why, though it was beginning to dawn on him.

No one liked Punko. No one liked being around him, not even Minik, who respected his intelligence. Drako and Balko would long ago have beat him to death if not for the fear and protection of Minik.

Grok would need a burrow to sleep in soon, before he got too cold. A couple hundred feet away he spotted a spruce tree with a low canopy and a nest of needles below

it. There in the hollow, he could escape the wind and maybe sleep a little. He had not really slept in two days now.

He tried to picture the sweet homely face of his Rosen, but couldn't place it. Instead he was visited by the visage of Belek. He tried to banish this ugly image, and it eventually dissipated. She had led a very sad and savage life.

Rosen would be a much better mate, and with this thought fresh in his mind, he drifted off to sleep, and it lasted a few hours until he was awake by just how cold he really was. He shivered uncontrollably. The sun was up a few hours before he could stir on his own.

Outside the tree, he quickly warmed up in the daylight, and the peak now seemed nearer as well, a manageable distance. He ripped off a hunk of meat with his mouth of square squat molars, and set out with fresh energy toward the peak.

It was midday when he encountered his first edelweiss, but it was small and did not look like it would last the long journey home. He could see a field of similar flowers a few hundred feet higher and across a ravine.

This flower would probably be fine for the purposes of Rosen, but he still felt energetic, and this higher field

beckoned to him. It was a couple of hours before he spanned the ravine, and he emerged bloody from thorns, gorse, nettles, craggy rocks, and several falls. But at least he had found a spring from which to drink.

He now stood alone in a vast field of the intricate flowers, as if in a heart-achingly beautiful dream. These edelweiss were all far superior specimens. He gathered up the two best. One for Melek in case his plan didn't work out, he thought to himself, with a laugh and a grunt.

He would have to overnight on the slope again. The wind was whipping up, the sun had disappeared and dense fog materialized everywhere around him. He was pelted in the face by thick heavy snowflakes. He hurriedly retreated down the hill. It was miserable in the low visibility to rescale the ravine, and seemed much longer and harsher this time. But finally when the moon was high and shining, he reached his tree-home again. That night he shared it with a great horned badger, who tolerated his presence out of necessity and perhaps, boredom.

As he flitted in and out of consciousness at one point he saw the great horned badger rising over him with slavering fangs; at another point a vague female form projected against the backdrop of black needles. In both cases he was frightened but paralyzed: helpless before

their will. However, in the morning both entities were gone. And he still had the two sprigs of edelweiss.

He had not slept much in four days now and was groggy though flush on the precipice of triumph. Not many cavefolk went BATSHIT and came back better, with a grail to salve the soul, Grok realized with satisfaction.

Grok eyed the larger and prettier of the edelweiss.

LOVE.

Rosen would be forced to acknowledge his power and pride and to recognize his value. Let Og and Drako do the raping and possess their harems. He would have LOVE.

Punko had not been idle. For three days Rosen was disconsolate that Grok had gone BATSHIT. Minik comforted her and rubbed the head and gnarls of his stick-cane nervously. Curses had been raining on their tribe of late.

Punko knew the dangers presented by the crags and had been praying to Bog night and day for Grok to fall or freeze or be attacked by a wolf.

Grok was fine, though. He was only a few miles from the cave, now, with two rather well-preserved edelweiss trophies.

Punko eyed Rosen with unadulterated lecherousness. Her frame was limp with grief, her eyes loopy and languid, when Punko approached her, sniffing hungrily at the air.

She mounted not much in the way of defense. He tried speaking to her, but could not bring her attention to a focus. The other males watched what was transpiring listlessly. LOVE, he said. He held out one of the local indigo blossoms. He crossed his other hand over his heart and looked into her eyes searchingly.

She made no movement in response so he thrust the flower toward her again, more vociferously, shame starting to burn at the backs of his ears. All eyes were on them. She batted his hand offering away. He reacted immediately by erupting into a volcanic rage. He set to her like a feral animal. Rosen started screaming.

Grok was the interruptus which flew in the face of the tribe's traditional passivity. He ripped Punko off Rosen and tossed him away like he was a goose feather, except Punko didn't float to earth: he skidded into a thicket of gorse and nettles.

The tribe hooted and slapped limbs in applause. They very much liked the look of justice. He showed them now the edelweiss which they passed around with awe and amazement. Then he turned aside to Rosen, who clung to his arm, eyes wet and sparkling, mouth stretched with joy.

He looked into her shining visage and saw gratitude, devotedness, tenderness. LOVE, he said, pressing the

delicate fragrant white flower into her brown earthy palm. Her expression was overcome by deference, and she sunk her cheek into Grok's chest, and wrapped her arms around him in a desperate attempt to absorb him. The rest of the tribe witnessed this with curiosity.

What in Bog's name was he talking about? LOVE, they wondered, scratching butts and heads, glad for Grok and Rosen and the appearance of the ephemeral white flowers.

End.