

Decision Mountain

by John Riley

For decades the land the village sat on had switched its allegiance between two countries. Although tolerant for many years of the unpredictable changes, and having developed strategies for dealing with the different monies, religions, and toilets, the village dwellers eventually grew weary of the chaos. Generation after generation of village dwellers had tolerated the fickle land, but finally a generation more determined than those that had come before decided to confront the issue head-on. A committee of leading citizens was formed to write a document stating their grievances. From this day forward, the document read, the land beneath the village and extending ten miles into the surrounding countryside must decide on a country and stay within its borders. The land had thirty days in which to make its final decision of which country it favored.

Of course, the new policy would have to be implemented and much debate ensued regarding enforcement mechanisms. What would be the punishment for failure to comply? Would the villagers need to form a permanent committee to train and maintain surveyors? In the end the committee wrote a firm, even rude, preamble to their declaration that left no wiggle room. It was an obviously appropriate first step and for the first time in months the committee members slept soundly.

When they met with the land's representatives inside a cave in a mountain they had voted beforehand to name Decision Mountain, in tribute to their forthrightness, the land, represented by a truly stunning array of stalactite, which at first intimidated the villagers, listened respectfully to their grievances. The lead villager's voice echoed down the dark tunnel. He was a proud man but his eyes tended to drift away from the stalactite toward the shadows beyond the fire they had built for warmth. When he finished reading the

document, ending with what may have been an unnecessary flourish, the stalactite, which had learned a fundamental language from echos left behind by visitors, calmly pointed out that responsibility for the country's changes resided with the shallow and restless river on the east side of Decision Mountain. The land and the village were both at the mercy of the river's fickle ways, which was itself in the grip of uncertainties, such as rainfall amounts and the erosion of soil and bedrock. The land understood the villagers despair but was not the source of the problem. The brave villagers would have to take their grievances to the river, which would inevitably pass them on to the clouds and air currents that were impossible to reach in order to present their demands to them. We are all helpless, the stalactite said, to a fickleness that lies beyond our grasp, and then fell once again into silence. That is how the meeting ended, abruptly but cordially, and the committee members, full of weary awe toward a world that had cruelly vanquished their innocence, walked back to their village, careful to avoid one another's eyes.

