

Anansi: Scene 4 - Crisis and Tiger's Fat

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<CharacterChips characters={"The Girl", "The Woman", "The Captain", "The Boy", "The Sailor", "Anansi", "Tiger", "Ratbat"} />

Summary

In the cabin, the Captain discovers the Boy's diary and destroys it. He strikes the Boy and tells him to throw it overboard. The Boy obeys, but says goodbye to the diary silently first: though you are not finished, I'll keep your story in my head.

In the hold, the Woman is coughing badly. She tells the Girl not to fear for her. When the Sailor and the Boy come through on inspection, the Sailor examines the Girl's teeth and eyes, then turns to assess the Woman. The Girl, unable to turn around, catches the Boy's eye. He understands. He fakes a sudden illness, collapsing and demanding the ship's doctor. The Sailor hauls him away. The Girl thanks the Woman for still being there. The Boy lingers a moment after the Sailor leaves. The Girl sees something in him: he has a kind of sickness, she says.

The Woman poses the question the Girl has been asking since the beginning: what do the pale men see when they look at us? The Girl cannot answer. The Woman says: when they see us, they see the thing they fear the most. She notes too that they treat each other no better. Then she tells the Girl to look for the answer in the web, setting it as the same riddle: Anansi's web. And the deeper answer: the soul. She says she will tell one more story, and tells the Girl to listen.

The Forest of Stories opens on Tiger and Anansi by a pool on a hot day. Anansi convinces Tiger that his fur coat will shrink if he swims in it, and that three-toed fat-eating bloogers in the pool will devour him unless he removes his fat first. Tiger, vain and trusting his size, removes everything and dives in. Anansi cooks and eats the fat while Tiger swims.

Ratbat emerges from behind a tree, having been hiding and watching. Anansi sees his opportunity. He tells Ratbat about a fictional Best Song About Tiger Fat Contest and offers him a song entry, knowing Ratbat's vanity about his singing cannot resist the challenge. Ratbat flies off to Song City to perform the song. Tiger climbs out of the pool to find both his fat and his coat gone.

Anansi leads Tiger to Song City, where Ratbat is mid-performance: "Yesterday this time me am yum Tiger fat." Tiger erupts. Ratbat insists Anansi gave him the song. Tiger, now thin and with a coat too large for his reduced frame, cannot even prove who he is. Anansi appears briefly,

hands Tiger his oversized coat, says "looking a bit silly, my friend," and vanishes. Tiger falls over his own coat trying to chase him.

Back in the hold, the Girl is laughing. The Woman says it is all one story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Girl says she cannot see an end. The Woman replies that young eyes are not supposed to. She tells the Girl to look for the spider's web, but it is gone: the big man brushed it away when he passed through. The Woman says that the Girl can see it still in her mind's eye, and that it will always be there. She has no more to say. The Sailor comes and takes her away.

The Boy stays back a moment after the Sailor leaves. He tells the Girl she must not cry. She turns her head away and sings to herself: "Yesterday this time me am yum Tiger fat." He does not understand the song. He leaves.

In the cabin, the Captain dictates the final log entry before Jamaica. He reports that only one hundred and fifty enslaved people and twelve crew have been lost on the seven-week passage. He states that the presence of maimed, diseased, or defective people at the auction would lower the price, and that he has no choice but to take the necessary measures. He starts coughing violently.

Analysis

The destruction of the Boy's diary is a precise image of how systems of oppression enforce their own logic. The Captain destroys his son's private record of what he has seen and felt, because feeling and seeing too clearly are threats to the order the Captain depends on. The Boy's quiet response, keeping the story in his head, echoes the oral tradition exactly: when you cannot write it down, you carry it inside you.

The Boy's decision to fake illness and divert the Sailor from the Woman is the closest he comes to active resistance in the play. He cannot free anyone, but he can delay one inspection by collapsing in the way. The Girl registers what he has done. Her observation that he has a kind of sickness is not an insult; it is a recognition that he sees things he cannot unsee, and that seeing them without being able to act is its own form of suffering.

The Tiger's Fat sequence is the play's broadest comedy, and Campbell places it precisely. It follows the destruction of the diary and comes just before the Woman's final illness and departure. The shift in register is not a change of subject; it is a shift in mode. Ratbat's self-importance, the ridiculous Fat Contest, Tiger's oversized coat trailing behind him as he tries to chase Anansi: these images of vanity being punctured by a sharper mind are the same argument the whole play is making. The comedy makes that argument feel light and joyful rather than heavy. Campbell knows that audiences carry weight better when they have been laughing.

The Woman's departure is handled with minimal speech and maximum stage direction. She is coughing. She is taken. The Girl sings the Tiger Fat song. The Boy does not understand it. This gap, between the Boy who cannot decode what he is hearing and the Girl who sings it as an act of inner resistance, is one of the play's most effective images of the divide between those inside the oral tradition and those outside it. The song is not entertainment; it is the Girl saying, silently, that she has already absorbed what she was given.

The Captain's final dictation is a bookend to his opening one. In Scene 1 he counted the dead as a loss against insurance. Now he is issuing the orders to throw the sick overboard before the auction to maintain the price. He coughs after giving the order: the fever that has been killing the enslaved people on the ship is now inside him. Campbell does not make this a heavy irony; he lets it happen quietly.

Exam Tip

The Tiger's Fat scene appears directly between two of the ship's darkest moments: the Woman's illness and the Captain's order to throw sick people overboard before auction. This placement is deliberate. Comic relief in drama does not erase weight; it makes the return to weight feel heavier. Ask yourself what the comedy adds to your experience of what comes before and after it.

Themes

- **Parent/Child:** The Captain destroys his son's private record and their relationship tightens into pure authority and fear. The bond between father and son is present in name only; what remains is a master training an apprentice in the logic of the trade.
- **Slave and Master:** The Sailor's inspection of the Woman is the slave-and-master dynamic at its most clinical: she is assessed for fitness and removed when she is no longer profitable. Her value is entirely conditional.
- **Anti-hero and the Duped:** Tiger and Ratbat are the duped in sequence, both led into humiliation by Anansi the anti-hero through different vanities. Tiger is too proud to question the bloogers story; Ratbat is too flattered by the song contest to notice he is being set up as the fall guy.
- **Resourcefulness:** Anansi's pool scheme is his most elaborate trick in the play, requiring him to manage Tiger's vanity, improvise the fat-eating bloogers, then immediately set up Ratbat as the fall guy before Tiger can emerge from the water. Each step requires reading the target clearly and moving faster than they can react.
- **Deception and Trickery:** The Tiger's Fat sequence layers deception inside deception: Anansi deceives Tiger, then deceives Ratbat into taking the consequences. Ratbat is not evil; he is simply too easily flattered to notice how he is being used. The lesson the scene adds is that ego makes everyone vulnerable, not just the obviously powerful.

- **Strength and Resilience vs Weakness:** The Boy keeping the story in his head after the diary is destroyed, and the Girl singing the Tiger Fat song after the Woman is taken, are the same act of resilience in different registers. Both are using internalized story as the thing that cannot be confiscated.
- **Captivity vs Freedom:** The Captain's cough at the end of his Jamaica dictation is Campbell's quiet image of the system destroying its own participants. The freedom the Captain exercises in ordering people thrown overboard comes with its own confinement: his whole world is the ledger, the profit margin, and a disease he has caught from the hold he owns.

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