

# The Little Book of Listening



James Webb

# Welcome

Why does storytelling work?

Why did Jesus use parables when he told his followers about God's Kingdom?

James Webb's The Listening Book is a collection of parables, told in the style of Fred Craddock or Walter Wangerin Jr., that attempt to capture some of the mystery and excitement of the master storyteller.

This is a cut-down version of The Listening Book: The Soul Painting and Other Stories, available in Hardback, Softback, eBook and Audiobook online and via good bookshops. Visit the website below for James's Blog (weekly) and more details.

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"Show me your ways..."

Impex marla

## INTRODUCTION

Are you listening?

I hope so.

We can spend a lot of time concerned with whether or not God is paying any attention to us. It's probably better to spend that time being concerned about whether or not we're paying any attention to Him.

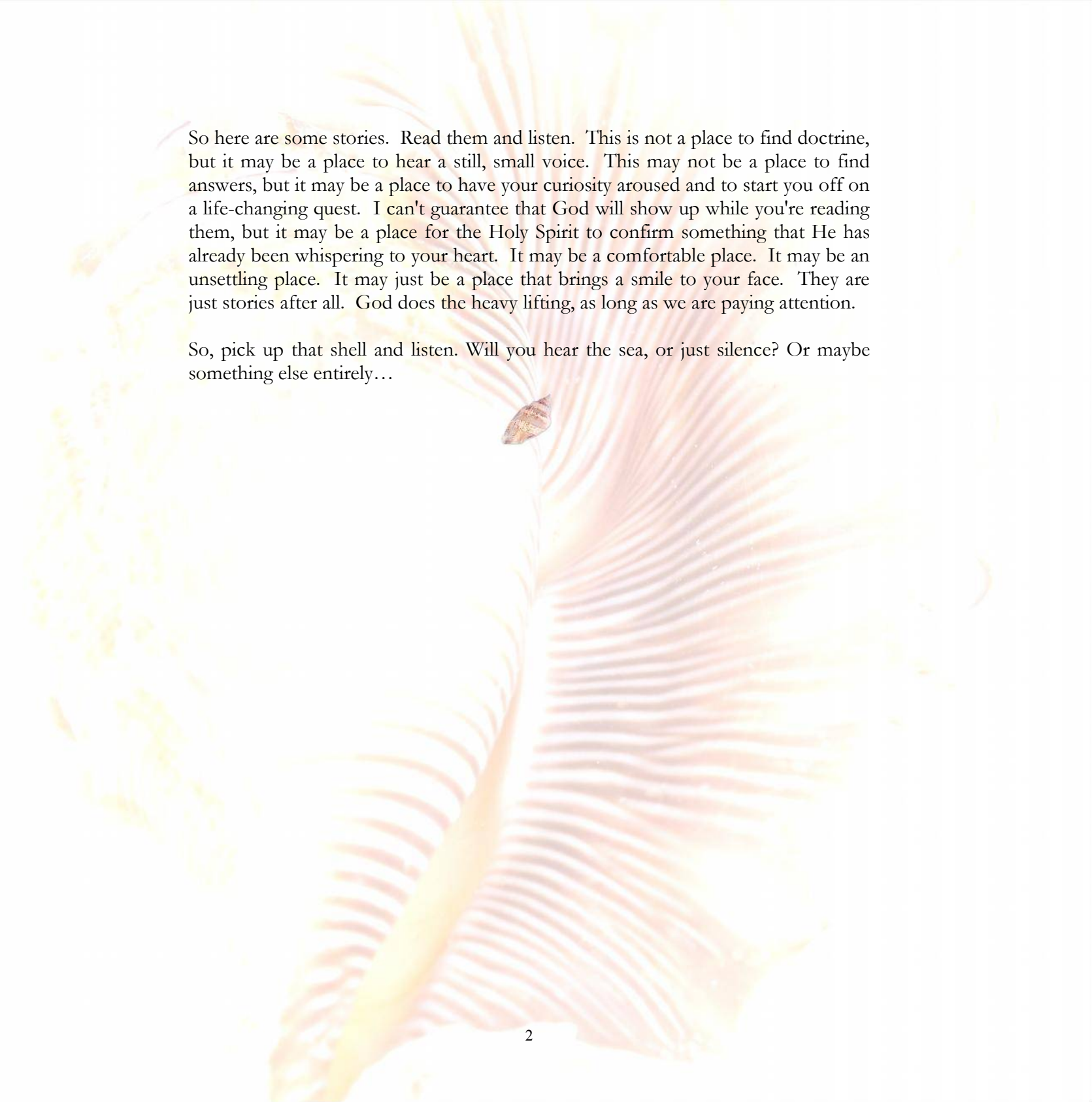
You see, God is speaking. He's always speaking. It was the first thing He did. What about us? Do we fill the silence with the sound of our own voice, or do we listen?

Do you know what God does when He has something really important that he wants to say to us? Do you know what miracle He performs; what amazing sign He uses? When God has something important to say to us, He tells us a story.

It works, doesn't it? Stories are a guaranteed way to get someone's attention. When you're talking to someone and their eyes are glazing over, looking this way and that for an escape route, try the line, "That reminds me of a story..." and see what happens.

The Bible itself is a story. An adventure story. A war story. A love story. Jesus never taught about the Kingdom of God without telling a story. Read the book of Acts and see how the early Church shared Jesus by using people's own stories. You see, stories aren't really about communicating facts. They're really about communicating a vision of how things could be. You just need to listen carefully. We shouldn't be surprised that such tiny things as stories can carry such a big vision. After all, when you put a shell no bigger than your hand to your ear, don't you hear the entirety of all the oceans?





So here are some stories. Read them and listen. This is not a place to find doctrine, but it may be a place to hear a still, small voice. This may not be a place to find answers, but it may be a place to have your curiosity aroused and to start you off on a life-changing quest. I can't guarantee that God will show up while you're reading them, but it may be a place for the Holy Spirit to confirm something that He has already been whispering to your heart. It may be a comfortable place. It may be an unsettling place. It may just be a place that brings a smile to your face. They are just stories after all. God does the heavy lifting, as long as we are paying attention.

So, pick up that shell and listen. Will you hear the sea, or just silence? Or maybe something else entirely...



## The Soul Painting





There was once an Artist who believed in people. He believed that every single person who had ever lived had within them one great masterpiece, a Soul Painting, and he devoted his life to this belief. As an in-demand artist of considerable talent he could have committed himself to his work and lived in comfort for the rest of his days, but he rejected such things to travel, to be with people and to pass on the message of the Soul Painting.

One day the Artist met a woman whom no-one had ever believed in. She was enchanted by the Artist and his message of the Soul Painting. Although her wounds were still too fresh and raw for her to believe in herself, she dared to believe in his belief and began to paint. It took her many years but eventually she had finished her Soul Painting. It was strikingly beautiful, tragic and unique; one of the most amazing works of art that anyone had ever seen. During this time the woman had learned to love the Artist and his message and devoted the rest of her life to spreading the story of the Soul Painting. Wherever she went, people clamoured to see her. Many were amazed by her story, and many more captivated by her beautiful Soul Painting.

One of the men who heard her speak wanted more than anything to possess his own Soul Painting. He had heard her talk about the Artist and the beliefs which had led to her painting, but he was too afraid and intimidated by her amazing Soul Painting to pick up a paintbrush himself. "I could never paint anything as good as her," he told himself, torn between his desire and his doubt.

One day he had an idea and, at a time when no-one was watching, he took out his camera and snapped a good photo of the woman's Soul Painting. He took the camera home, printed out the biggest, best quality copy of the Soul Painting that he could afford and had it framed. He told his friends of the Artist and invited them to come and see his own Soul Painting. His friends visited his home and were awestruck and touched by the beautiful masterpiece on his wall. They too wanted their own Soul Painting. The man only knew of one way to pass on the magic of the Soul Painting, so he invited his friends to take their own photo of his photo and then it could be their own Soul Painting. His friends readily agreed, as it seemed like an easy way to get a masterpiece.



The friends took their photos home and showed their friends, who in turn asked to take a photo of the photo of the photo. They in turn invited their friends to take a photo of the photo of the photo of the photo, and so on it went. With each layer of photos, the detail and beauty of the original painting was distorted further and further until there was a crowd of individuals, each clutching photos showing nothing more than an ugly splodge of random colours. The beauty had been lost a long time ago.

Over time the number of people wanting to take photos declined. Every now and then another person would be convinced to take a photo of one of the photos, but whatever their motivation, it was now never because of the beauty of the Soul Painting.

One day the Artist will travel from town to town crying out, "Bring me your Soul Paintings," and he will be crowded by a mob of people waving grubby, crumpled photographs shouting, "Master, Master, look at my Soul Painting, my beautiful Soul Painting!" The Artist will look at them and say, "Get away from me. I never knew you."





## Rufus and the Troll

No-one used the bridge any more. Instead they trekked the extra mile downstream to where the river was shallow enough to cross. People got wet, but at least they didn't get eaten. Everyone knew that the Troll who lived under the bridge was angry and mean and always hungry. Everyone would rather get wet.

Sometimes, in such times as this, everything changes because of someone who didn't know what everyone else knew. Or, perhaps, because of someone who knew what everyone else knew, but refused to accept it. One such person was the carpenter's young son, Rufus.

"Has anyone ever seen the Troll?" Rufus asked the townsfolk. They would look at one another, and no-one would speak.

"So how do you know there's a Troll under the bridge?" To Rufus, it seemed like the logical question to ask.

"I've heard him! I've been to the bridge and heard him, hollering and yelling and screaming. He told me that he was a Troll and he was going to eat me!" the baker spoke up, as the latest witness to the monster that lived under the bridge.

"But did you actually see him?" asked Rufus.

"Well...no," admitted the baker, "but if it screams that it's a Troll and that it's going to eat you, it's a Troll!"

"And it lives under a bridge," the butcher piped up, "which is where Trolls live. Everyone knows that."

"It's the plain facts," offered the baker.

"Hmmmmmm..."

Rufus was sceptical. The thing is, he had no real reason to be sceptical. The townsfolk were convinced, and he had to admit that if you took the evidence at face value then it seemed that they were right. Yet Rufus remained unsure. There was



only one way to find out for certain. So, Rufus resolved that the next morning he would head out to the bridge and see for himself.

The sun rose and Rufus packed. The bridge was not far, so he was confident that he would arrive by mid-morning. He packed some cake and an apple so that he could sit by the river and eat if it turned out that there was no Troll after all, and he set out with his faithful dog, Parakletos, at his heel.

The bridge was further than he'd thought, and the sun was nearly at midpoint in the sky when he finally arrived. Parakletos barked with delight as he splashed in the river by the bank, and Rufus looked for a suitable place to sit and eat. His eyes were drawn, of course, to the crumbling, ivy-covered stone arch that formed the bridge over the river. No time like the present.

Rufus wondered down to the bridge and cleared his throat. A booming voice responded:

“I am the Troll who lives under the bridge, and I will eat you!”

Rufus was certainly taken aback and more than a little frightened by this declaration. His thoughts about cakes and apples were pushed aside and the idea of running away presented itself.

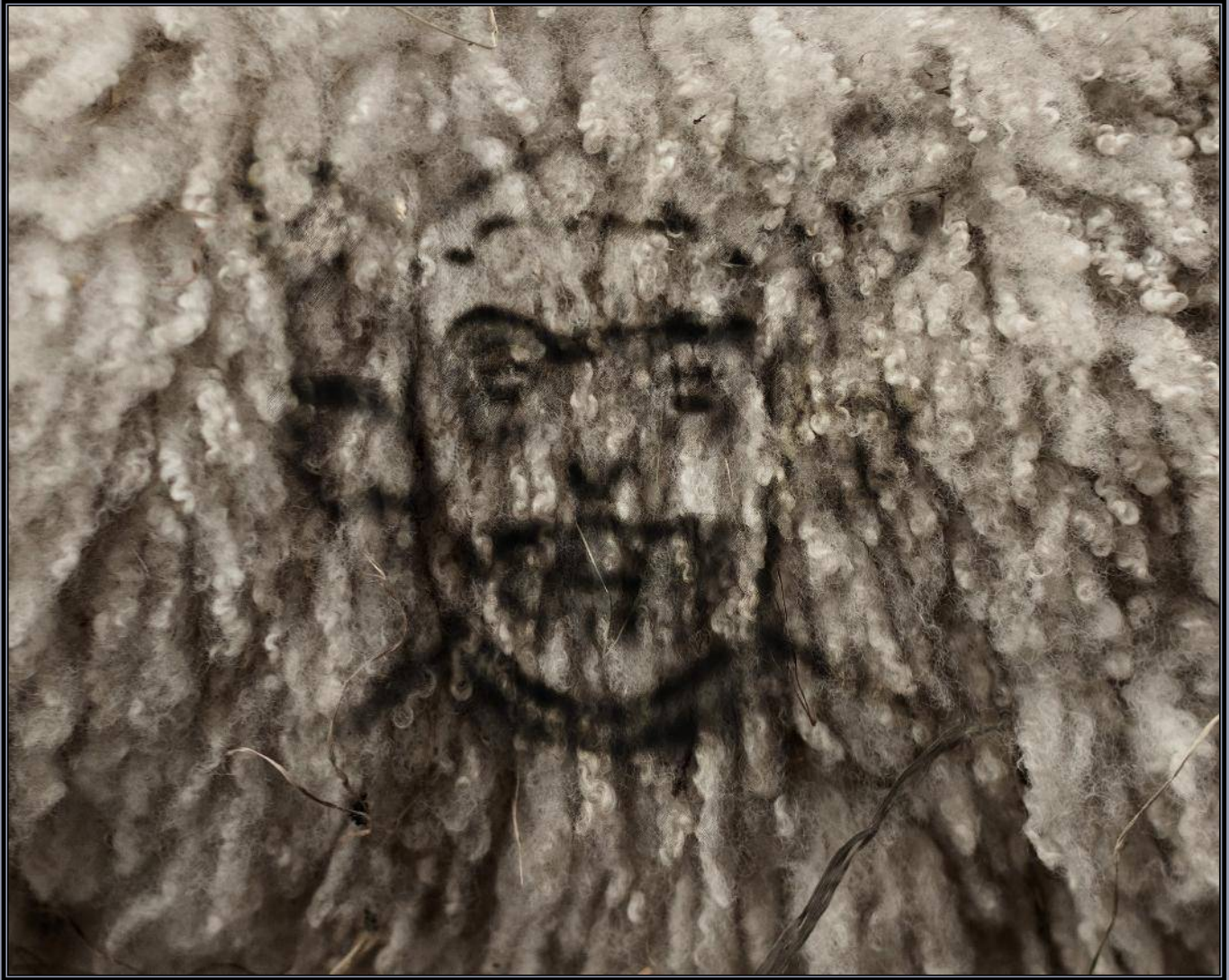
Thankfully, Rufus had not come alone. Parakletos was not dissuaded by the threat of being eaten. He scampered down to the bottom of the bridge and barked loudly.

“I am the Troll who lives under the bridge, and I will eat you!”

Parakletos barked louder.

“I SAID, I am the Troll who lives under the bridge, and I will eat you!”

Rufus knew something was up. Parakletos was by far the smartest dog in the village, and he was not one to hang around if there was even the slightest chance of being eaten. More likely, his fine nose had detected the smell of something other than Troll.





“Well,” said Rufus, his courage returning, “you're going to have to eat me then.” There was a prolonged silence, punctuated only by the sound of Parakletos barking.

“Really?” came the uncertain voice from under the bridge.

“Yes. Really.”

“Oh...OK...well...ummmm...right then. I'll eat you.”

“That's fine by me,” said Rufus, though it certainly wasn't fine by him. Sometimes courage makes you call a bluff so that a greater wrong can be righted.

“Ummm...it's just that...well, I've never eaten anyone before,” the Troll explained.

“Oh?”

“Yes. To be honest, this is the longest anyone's ever stayed around. I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do next.”

“Why don't you come out? That would be a fine place to start,” suggested Rufus, feeling a little sorry for the bridge-dweller.

The Troll crawled out from beneath the bridge, while Parakletos jumped up and down and barked. The Troll emerged, with white fluffy wool and a black, meek face.

“You're not a Troll!” exclaimed Rufus,

“Yes, I am! I'm a Troll! A mean, people-eating Troll! Baaaaaa!”

“No, you're not a Troll. Unless I'm very much mistaken, you are a sheep.”

“A sheep? Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because you are!” It seemed very clear to Rufus.



“Are you sure?” the 'Troll' asked.

“Very sure. I know the shepherd in our village. I play chess with him every Tuesday while he's watching the sheep. I have seen sheep at dawn and at dusk and from every conceivable angle. Well, almost every conceivable angle, and you are most certainly a sheep,” Rufus said with a firm voice.

“Huh!” the 'Troll' seemed thoughtful. “Well, that would explain a few things...”

“Such as?”

“The wool, for starters. And the fact that deep down, if pushed you understand, really pushed, I would much rather eat some lovely green grass than a person,” the 'Troll' admitted.

“So why are you telling everybody that you are a Troll?”

The 'Troll' seemed to be thinking hard.

“I remember one day coming to the river to get a drink, and I found a lovely place to drink in the shade under the bridge. Someone came along and I made a noise—”

“What kind of noise?”

“Well, now that you mention it, I suppose it was a kind of 'Baaaa'ing noise,” the 'Troll' explained.

“I see.” Rufus smirked, “Continue.”

“So then someone said, 'What made that noise?' and someone else said, 'It came from under the bridge,' and someone else said, 'It's a Troll!' and they ran away. A Troll! So I looked around in terror, and I couldn't see anything, so I realised that they must be talking about me.” The 'Troll' took a deep breath before continuing.

“Well, I was afraid to leave the bridge. If I was a Troll, then I should stay under the

bridge. That's where Trolls belong. When people came to the bridge, I called out to them, and they all said the same thing, 'The Troll! There is a Troll under the bridge! Run away!' and they ran away. So, I came to the only logical conclusion, namely that I was a Troll and I should live under the bridge and behave accordingly," the "Troll" concluded.

"I can definitely say that you are not a Troll. You are a sheep. If you don't believe me, have a look in the river. Look at your reflection. And Parakletos, you can stop barking now," Rufus said. Parakletos was not an obedient dog, but he was a clever one and that's nearly as good. He stopped barking.

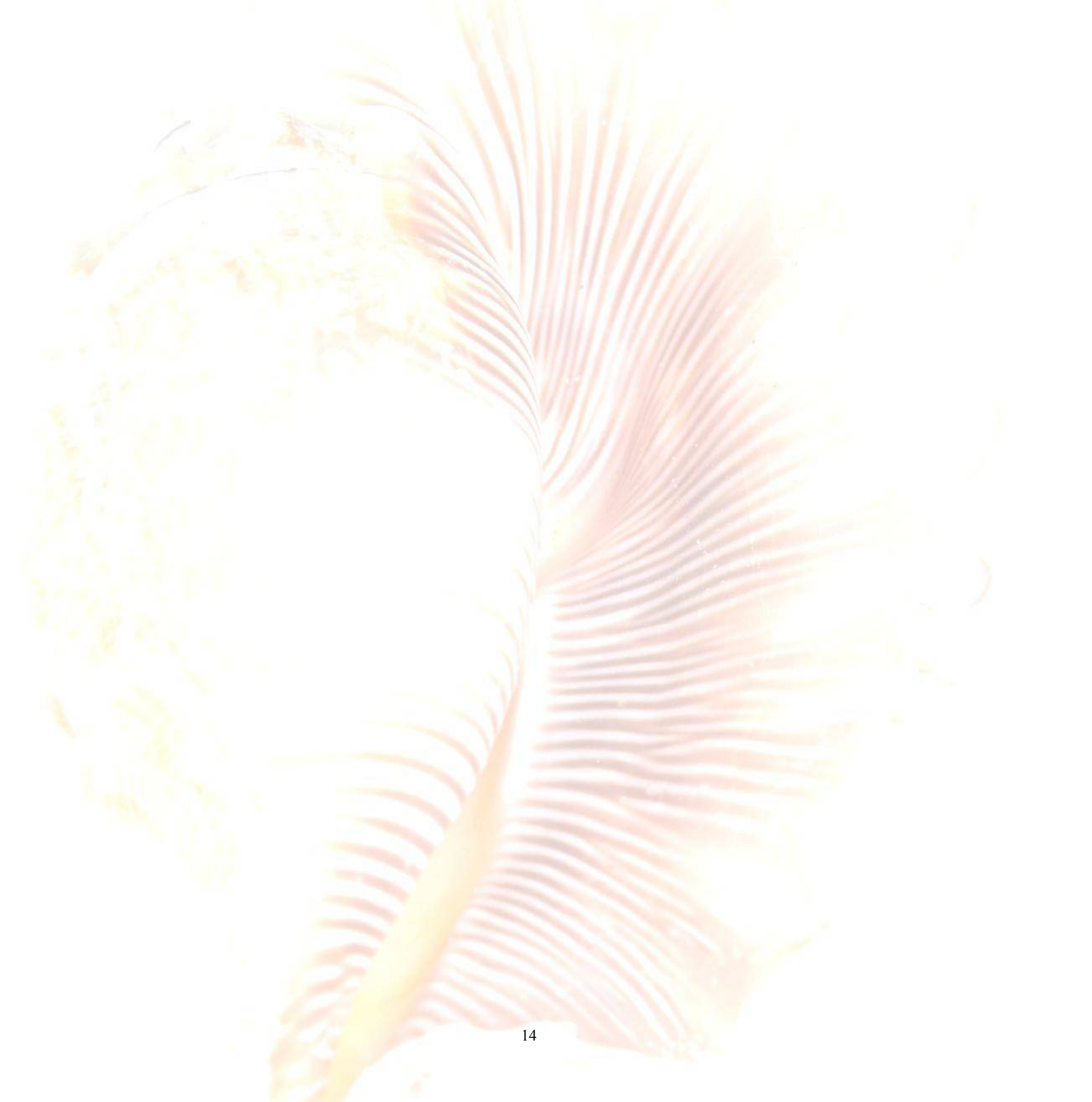
The "Troll" looked at his reflection in the crystal water and saw himself as Rufus saw him and as Parakletos had smelled him.

"Well I never..." the sheep said.

The villagers had said, 'If it lives under a bridge and threatens to eat people, it must be a Troll'.

Not always. Sometimes it's just a sheep who's been made to believe that he's a Troll.







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