

Siriusly Bent

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract pattern of swirling lines in various shades of green and white. The lines are dense and create a sense of motion and depth, resembling a stylized sunburst or a galaxy. The overall effect is a vibrant, textured composition.

Short Stories

Mark Crawford

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A collection of short stories,
which will be expanded over time
with new stories

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"ED-Gar"

It is said that our ancestors were the first sons of the gods and that our First Mother was the creator of our kind; this is the origins of our people according to the Old One's who lived in the far lands. No, I do not know if this is true or not, but what I do know is that I was a man who hated, who murdered and conquered, who ruled and persecuted, a man who did these things for the sake of doing them. No I am not proud of this fact, but in my defense I did these horrible things so that my people could be free from their life as slaves.

I was the first of our people in many generations to be something other than a slave.

The Others, the savages, came to our land ages ago and conquered it; as a result our people were divided. Those of my people who escaped that initial genocide fled into the mountains where their children fell ill in the harsh climate and died by the hundreds. So desolate was the rocky mountain terrain that the old folks starved so that their sons and daughters could eat, but we are a fierce people and we survived. The hatred however, it not only survived, it flowered into the very nature of my people, of me.

Every five years or so, the Others, would raid our mountain villages and carry our women and children off to be slaves. They murdered and plundered and raped my people without accountability; my people were herders and scholars, not warriors.

Long ago my people had learned from the sky gods the art of building serviceable shelter. They taught my people how to pack mud into blocks and then how to cook those blocks of clay until they could be stacked and fortified into walls for homes, and walls for fortification. We were the most advanced people of the planet. I am proud of that.

My blood is the blood of the gods who flew the skies above and beyond the Other gods; the savages of the surrounding lands worshipped the Sun and the Moon. My blood, is the blood of the Star Travelers. Yes, my people, the chosen ones, we are the children of the gods who once flew the heavens above us, it is for this reason the Other tribes hate us.

In the old cities of my ancestors, which the Others now occupy, it was common to see my people being brutalized, raped and beaten in public, especially our women. The Others envied us because our hair was the color of the sun, the same red-orange color of the gods; we are a beautiful people, forever reminding them of our divine lineage. More important than our beauty however was that fact my ancestors, had a written language; they hated us for this, also.

There was a time when my people were the most advanced and respected people on the planet, but in truth we were weak and as a result of this weakness we thought it humane to share our knowledge with the other cultures, this was the beginning of our downfall. Being an advanced people we brought their young into our cities and we gave them the secrets of our people, then we accepted their families, and then their kinfolk. We treated them as equals, even though they were not; they bred like rabbits and over time they came to outnumber us, then they forgot our

kindness and they overpowered us, and slew us and enslaved us. It was this way for many generations and during those generations my people forgot what the gods had taught them about agriculture, they forgot much of the knowledge that had made us great and we became like our oppressors; no written language, no mental skills, no knowledge of crop rotations, and in the end we were little more than savages ourselves, savages who thought only of eating, sleeping and procreating. That is when I was born.

I did not blame my ancestors for being subjugated any more than I blamed my mother for not knowing who my father was. I did not blame my sister because her father and my father were not the same. I blamed no one for my life or my circumstances for it is these very hardships that made me the man I am today.

As a child of half years I saw my mother and sister taken into an alley by a group of savages and raped; I learned anger. As a child of half years I watched my sister die giving birth. And as a child of half years I became the very embodiment of anger, and as a child of half years I watched my hands take the life of her child - their child.

Not long after the death of my sister's child, my mother, who was at the City Gates begging for work, resisted when one of them wanted her hair; our masters loved our hair especially when it was golden red like my mother's; they make wigs of our hair; it was considered very fashionable for them in those days. She died that day... I wept for her.

Even though it was forbidden I remembered the olden ways of my ancestors and in honor of my mother I dug a pit from the ground and inside it I put rocks and then timber, on top of the timber I put my mother's desecrated body. I said prayers for her, then I added dirt and began to cover her with it. I watched as the alabaster body of my mother disappeared with every handful of dirt that I myself threw, and my hatred for the desert people increased within me to such an extent that I drew a stone blade across my chest until the blood of my ancestors flowed freely from me. All of this happened when I was a boy of only ten.

Later that night I looked beyond the stars to the gods of my people and I asked "Why," why had such an evil people been given life? I asked a god I had never known what my people had done to deserve that which they were being forced to endure? I asked what it was that my mother and my sister had done to deserve the life and the death that had been theirs. And I vowed by the blood of my ancestors to bring as much vengeance as possible to my oppressors.

When I was twelve I saw one of them fall to the ground in a drunken stupor by the side of the main pathway leading to the center of the forest, he ordered me to help him. I took a stone and beat him with it until his body was lifeless, then I robbed him and left him for the wolves. The next day the Others murdered twenty of my people because of it. I was responsible, yet because I was afraid. That guilt consumed me until I vowed to never again be afraid, even unto death.

Two years after that, my first murder, three of them fell upon me and raped me, they were drunk, and there is a custom among their people which said that a boy and a woman are the same. This is why they have no civilization of their own, they are a people who believe it better to take than build, and they prefer sex over family, body over mind. They are like rodents in that they take whatever they can from the land and its people without putting anything back to replace it, and then when all is consumed, they move on. Like I said, they were drunk and that night I

laughingly killed them and bathed in their blood. Then I removed their heads and hid them in a cave that had been mine since I was a child.

The next day as I was returning to town one of them saw me, how they knew I was the murderer, I do not know; but they knew. Without provisions and in a panic I ran into the wilderness and there I hid. I had no regrets then as a boy, nor do I now as an old man.

Time in the wilderness was hard and I was near starvation for I had been forty days with little to eat. In my weakened state I fell to the ground and faded in and out of consciousness, and in that delirium I began to pray not to the Sun and the Moon but to the god who made the Sun and the Moon, the god of my ancestors. I wanted to tell my god that I did not want to die in the wilderness and be eaten by animals, but I was unable to say anything except that I wanted to die avenging my people, then I lost all consciousness before I could finish my supplication.

When I regained consciousness a manlike figure was standing over me dressed in white. He was tall and pale with hair the color of gold. "Your people are my people, I am their father," he said to me in a deep voice. I went to my knees and worshiped him there in the wilderness.

Together we were and he, my god, my father, nourished me and taught me how to survive in the wilderness, he taught me a new/old language which he instructed was to be our new language and that this, the language of the gods, would be a sign at the end of time that we were his people. He taught me that in the olden days, when the gods walked the earth, that the gods themselves became estranged, one from the other. That they, the gods, used humans as soldiers to war against each other and he taught me that the Others had been created by gods in a land far away from where we now were, that they had been created by another god to be workers. He taught me that my people had been created last of all the people and that our purpose had been to be the administrators of the new world, that we had been given an inventive spirit, that we had been designed by the gods to be the builders of civilization. He told me that my people had been created in the image of the gods themselves. He taught me that it was he and his sister that had created us, and he told me that when they had created us, the people who looked like the gods, that the other gods became angry because he had given us too much of his blood, and that as a result of violating their laws, he himself had been banished from that place in the sky where the gods in those days lived. It was then that I understood that my creator, like me, had been driven away from his people and into that very same wilderness.

My God told me that as a result of my people having been created in the image of the gods that we were identified for elimination, warred upon and driven from the fertile lands of our original homeland like sheep scattered by a pack of wolves. Even this however did not satisfy the anger of the other gods, they wanted us destroyed, we were considered a blasphemy, monkey's who looked like gods, so in an attempted holocaust they sewed an enmity into the minds of the first men against my people. However, it became apparent that my people could not be easily erased from this planet, so the Other gods decided that the best way to destroy our people was to breed the god gene out of us, to destroy the bloodlines of my people by breeding us with the Others and so it began, with the help of the Other gods, the first men enslaved my people and openly stole our women and bred with them. But my god taught me that our bloodline would survive if we acted together, he told me that my people had to rise up, that we had to move from the lands of our origins and move north past the big river and possess the land promised to us there. Over the next few years my god taught me the secrets of Warcraft. My god taught me to

smelter metal from the earth and with this metal he taught me to forge weapons the likes of which had never been seen and would never be duplicated; together we crafted a War Hammer, we named it "Deliverance".

Later it would become known as "The Hammer of My People," for never had the world seen anything like it.

When our time together ended my god blessed my people and commanded that I be the leader of them, then he turned and left me in that place of high stones with these words, "Take the Knowledge of metal that I have given you, use it to conquer your oppressors and then move your people to the land I have promised you. I have heard your prayers and I have dried your tears." I fell upon my face and wept heartily.

I found honor in the weapons we had made together, I found honor in my knowledge, I found honor in myself and I found pride in being created in the image of my god. No longer was I ashamed of whom my people were, my people had been the Builders and now they would become the Conquerors. A boy had fled into the wilderness, but a man would return from it.

As I approached the village of my childhood an old man sitting beneath a tree saw me coming; he looked at my long red hair and he looked at the warrior's weapon I carried in my hand, and he knew. Rising to his feet he stood and followed me, rock in hand. As the old man and I neared the village those of my people working the fields just outside the gates, and those herding the sheep, and those on errands for their masters stopped and looked upon me. The old man following me shouted "He has returned. The deliverer has returned!" The women fell to their knees, the children pointed and the men picked up their tools of labor and turned them into weapons.

Together my people destroyed the village of U-DEN and we slaughtered the Others. I, and my people with our metal weapons cut the enemy down by the tens and by the hundreds and the Sun was low in the sky when we finished. I gave no mercy and in anger we hung from the walls those of our people who had willingly whored themselves to our enemies and we spat on them and we hung signs around their necks upon which I wrote the words "Impure Mind, Impure Blood" in the language that my god had taught me.

When the slaughter was finished the hatred inside me was not. When my blood lust had been quenched I tried to leave U-DEN and return to the wilderness that I had known these past few years, but when I did so my people followed me, they kept shouting and chanting my name "ED-Gar! ED-Gar! ED-Gar!" I told them to return to their homes so that I could go into the wilderness and give thanks to the god of our people, but they had no homes of their own to go to, so, there, on that spot, I built an altar of stones and there we worshipped our god for the first time as a free people.

I taught my people the importance of our blood. I told them of the sacrifice that our god had made to give us his own blood, his own image. I told them that from that day forward none of my people were to mix with any others outside our tribe, that our hair was a sign to the gods that we were in their image. I told them that my god had told me that in the future the gods would return, and that when they did, they would look

amongst all the peoples of the earth to find among them those people who will rule the new heavens and the new civilization that they, the gods would create here on earth. I told them that my god had said that the keepers of the earth will be chosen by the godliness of our blood. I then slit the throat of a pure lamb and let its blood flow between the stones of the alter we had constructed. "This," I said, "shall be a sign to our god that we understand the importance of our bloodline."

Word spread fast that a Savior had come, and my people came from their hovels and their caves and their mountains; soon I had a great army of over two thousand men. Together we mass produced metal weapons and I taught my people to use them with a military efficiency, and driven by my anger I became a barbarian and a man bent on destroying, on conquering, and so I did.

I created the first army my people had ever known and I created its first war. I was the first warrior and I was the first Warlord of my people and I slaughtered the arrogance of my enemies. In my anger I became a great entity, a great hero who compounded the meaning of tyranny and in the end I became everything I despised.

I was driven to decimate any and all who had molested my people, my culture; I vowed to destroy any and all who had or would subjugate my people because of the color of our skin or our hair. I was a barbarian; I had forgotten the superior intellect that my god had given to my bloodline, an intellect above that of all Others. For four years I marched and made war upon the enemies of my people. I killed and burned my way across the land, from the jungle filled south to the hot lands where the sun sets, and then to the great water of the sun rising and then I made my home around the great stone lion and the giant stone alters of the original gods for this was the original land of my people before the Other gods and their dark armies drove my people away.

But in time I forgot my god. I had forgot that he had instructed me to move my people north and into a new and Promised Land; in my anger I had forgotten my promise to my god, my savior, and my creator. And then one day while climbing a tree I fell and had it not been for a skilled healing woman I would have died. In my transgressions, in my moment of suffering, I remembered my god.

In time I began to heal, but never again did I pass a day free of pain; I hurt all the time. In an effort to relieve my pain I found that if I sat with my back propped straight with my knees pulled to my chest that the never-ending pain of my injury subsided, so I spent hours each day sitting this way. I would sit at the edge of the great river which sustained my people and watch the Sun and the Moon and the Stars and I longed to be among them, to fly the great metal birds of the original gods. Yes I sat and I watched and I contemplated the meaning of life. I sat day after day. I felt the warmth of the morning wind as it blew through my hair and across my cheeks drying the tears of guilt I bore concerning my failure to take my people to the Promised Land.

I continued to sit and watch and I was awed by the great power of the Sun on our land and on my people. I was awed by the power of Light. I contemplated my god, the god who had come to me in the wilderness, the god who had taught me the secrets of war so that I could deliver my people.... and I wondered if I had done right by him.

As my health returned so did my hatred, but this time it was not the vengeful hatred of my youth, this time it was a hatred for ignorance. With this new hatred firmly implanted within me I went to my people and began to teach them about the original gods and about how they had put a part of their own blood into the blood of the old ones to create the first man. I told them about how our god had defied the Other gods by giving us more god blood than any before us had possessed, and that as a result of this we came to look like the gods themselves. I told them the story of my life, about our god coming to me in the wilderness, these things I needed to teach because many years had passed since we began our conquest and many new children had been born to my people, children who did not know our history. And from that day on I became a teacher instead of a conqueror and I required that all my people learn the language that my god had taught me, and it, became our language.

One day an old healer asked me if our god was more powerful than the Sun whom, in the absence of true knowledge, many of our people had come to worship, I knew not the answer. Because I did not know the answer I did not know what to say, but after some thought I told him that I did not think so, I told him that since my god ate and drank the fruits of the earth, I had to assume that he, like the other things here in our land lived and died by the light of the Sun and therefore could not be superior to the Sun itself. But I was troubled by my answer.

I contemplated what the old healer and I had discussed. I listened as the wind blew among the things around me. I watched children play. I watched young people mate. I watched children being born, and I heard birds sing. I saw the movement of the flowers as they tracked the Sun across the sky. I touched rocks and trees, water and fire; all of these experiences, all of this contemplation took a long time to bring about the gift of reason, but as all trees produce seeds, so too does the tree of contemplation produced answers. Finally with my old age came understanding.

I was awed at the power of the Sun, but I also understood that the power of the Sun was limited and that the awesome power which beckoned the flowers to turn and to follow its warmth across the sky was powerless when it came to healing the wounded, teaching a history or delivering a child from the tyranny of its oppressors. I also understood that my god was very different from the Sun, the Moon and the Stars. I understood that the power, the purpose of the Sun, was to give life to the earth, I also understood that the only power it had over my people was our need for the sustenance of this earth. Therefore, I knew that the Sun had no power over how I chose to live my life nor how any other man chose to live his life, that the power which directed the lives of men came from other men, the leaders of the people, men and women like me. The Sun, I

surmised, ruled the growth of food, and that the Leaders among us ruled the growth of men, but who ruled the Sun? And who ruled the Leaders of the people? To this I concluded there must be some ONE thing controlling the heavens and all other things as well. I understood that there had to be a single point of all control, an undisputed leader, a single God who was able to become the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the birds and who could even become a man, if need be. I understood that my God, the God that had taught me the history of my people, the secrets of war and who had delivered my people from tyranny, had left his place so the he might come the earth as a man to bring justice to his chosen people. I then understood that my God ruled all, that my God was All.

With this firmly embedded in my beliefs I stood at the edge of the great river where the old gods had built their colossal stone edifices, and I took a breath of satisfaction into me. In that satisfaction I looked behind me at the great stone lion and I saw the army of my people spread out before me and I looked to the north and I knew what I had to do.

We left the land of the first gods, the land we had fought and died to recover and we walked around the water in search of the land that had been promised us by the One God.

The land we had left was fertile and green, but the land we now walked was barren. Many of my people died along the way, but after many months we came to an opulent land with rolling hills of grass, an oasis of good land and good water. Surely this must be the land promised to us by our God, but I was unsure so on we continued.

After several moons of walking in this new land we came upon the remnants of an ancient stone wall. This wall had been constructed of cut stones that were so big that no man could have possibly made them and we camped beside the remnants of them. Surely I concluded, this wall, had been built by the same gods who had built the giant stone edifices of our homeland; there we rested.

That night off in the distance my people saw a light in the wilderness and they had great fear, but I understood. I gathered my people and chose two men and two women and told them to come with me as witnesses to the event that I suspected was going to take place.

The five of us walked towards the light in the wilderness and there we saw a beam of light, a pillar of light, and standing in it was the God of my people and we fell upon our faces in fear and in supplication.

My God told us to rise and then he gave us the history of this land that he had promised us. He told us that one day he would return to earth and rule it completely. He told us that the land upon which we now stood was a scared spot of the old gods, the spot where they came and left earth, and he told us that one day the gods would return and that he wanted his people, the people with the god-blood to be here to welcome them. He told us that others would come and try to take this land for their gods, but that we were to

destroy them and to hold this land until the day that he and the Star Gods returned from the heavens. This we have done.

At this telling I am an old man upon his death bed. I have lived a bloody life but one that I am not ashamed of, for I was a man who found his God and worshiped his people. My blood is pure and my hammer remains unbroken. I am the first of the Builders and I am the last of the slaves. I am T-Gar.

At sunrise on the winter solstice I died and when I died my spirit floated above my body and I saw the tears of my sister as surely as I saw the smile of my mother. She started to speak, and I longed to hear her words, but I did not hear them because I was once again inside of the body of another and my heart bled. I looked at my hands and they were the hands of a man shackled.

It is dark here, this is a dark place.

"Joe"

There was rain among the leaves that morning and a sorrow on me; there was as fury on me too. I don't know why they couldn't just leave my family alone. Why did they keep hounding me till something terrible had to happen? And now they left me no choice in the matter but to be a man of extreme violence, although the Lord knows I didn't do much to avoid it. Yeah, I suppose you could make the case that when they came out to start it all that I went out and met 'em at least halfway. Yeah, I know deep down that this is of my own making, I know it, you ain't gotta say it, believe me I know it.

As best I know I'm a man of twenty years, half somethin', half somethin' else, and that somethin' else won't buy ya much of anything out here if your money ain't silver. Out here is the flat land just north of Corpus Christi, Texas, the year is 1874.

I wish I could say otherwise but my life has been one of hard livin' and harsh judgment, one of long bitter lonely years, yep I'm sorry to say, but that has been my plight in this here life up to this point. MY name is Joe and I'm a man with some very long years behind him; a man with little but a gun for a companion.

It would be fair to say that life has made me cruel, and in truth, in me, there's love for only two things in this life, my woman and my child, and I have lived these last for years for nothin' 'cept them. And recently I found out that they was dead, dead by the hands of my own flesh and blood. Yeah, I know that I said that I caused it all, but whether I caused it or not don't much matter now, 'cause my woman and my kid are both gone. Maybe it as a thing unintentional, that doesn't much matter neither, 'cause soon enough my father and probably myself will be dead because of it.

This whole nightmare thing started a few years back when my father and I robbed and killed a family of settlers from somewhere's up north. They was Christian folk of some kind or other and my daddy kilt 'em and robbed 'em for reasons that to this day I cain't tell ya. I was sixteen and I was there and I took part in it, all of it, but I didn't do it on my own, nor did I think it up. I ain't sure anyone actually thought it up, it just happened. One minute we was askin' 'em questions and the next we was blastin' away like we had no God in us, and I suppose by what we done, that maybe we don't.

It was a terrible thing we done, but I can't change none of that now, what's done is done. I cain't fix it with prayers and I cain't fix it with regret, I cain't fix it no matter how hard I might want too. Damn it all!

Believe me, I know that it ain't right what we done, but it wasn't right for me to take all the blame neither. He started it, I just followed his lead, but it was me they hunted. It was me who had to leave his farmhouse, his wife, his baby. It was me who slept on the ground between here and San Antonio. It was me who was forced to live out these last four years as a road bandit; it was me who suffered all that. But it was him what brought the law down on me. It was him who set my cabin afire and it was him what kilt my wife and child. No he didn't shoot 'em like he did that settler woman, but it was him that put 'em out, and him what is responsible for the fever that took 'em. And now it's him what's gonna pay.

After that day we kilt them folks things changed, and all them changes has brought me to this day of reckoning. I guess you could say that one day of killin' four years ago, has finally come 'round for payment. Yep I suppose it's time for a reckoning.

I guess my daddy had his reasons for what he did, hell he's just a dirt farmer tryin' ta feed his family like our kinfolk did before us, but things was a changin' in Texas. Folks with money had power, and folks with power took pretty much whatever it was they wanted, no matter who you was, so he decided to fight back, but none of that matters much now does it. Yep that past didn't mean nothin' then and it don't mean nothin' now, 'cause change is a comin' and I'm headed home to live by it or die by it.

All the way home from San Antonio that fateful night I'd seen a vast array of unusual activity, lots of folks I just couldn't abide by, you know the type, poor folks who would accept bad things happenin' around 'em as long as it only affected someone else and didn't bother them personally. Poor men who'd give up their beliefs as men, to jump on any band wagon willing to play a tune they could accept, without a fight. Weak folks? Without a doubt, but hungry folks for certain.

Everybody was hungry in them days, so hungry in fact that it no longer mattered much about local rights and wrongs, most folks just wanted to be left alone. The fight was gone from most folks, Texas had finally been whupped by Yankee money. The rich settlers from up north had stole or bought up all the good land 'tween here and San Antonio, folks like me, we either lived with it, or died with it; the Rangers saw to that. Yeah I know what them ol' boy's will say, that the Rangers is hero's and all, but it ain't so, the Rangers and them they hired to help 'em was thieves who hunted and hanged any man who resisted them that put money in their pockets. They was the real bandits; but folks don't wanna hear that, even though it's the truth. Hell, it's always been that'a way ain't it, simple folks got nothin' and ain't meant ta have nothin'.

The campfire was goin' and the last of my coffee smelled mighty good and the sound of the rain was a pleasant peace I had not felt in a long time. Maybe that peace I was feeling was the acceptance of my own guilt, or maybe an acceptance of a forth coming death I knew was probably in my near future. Maybe it was that I just quit carin'.

Maybe it was somethin' else all together, heck, I don't know, but like I said, none of that matters much now.

Sitting there, huddled near that small fire, I yearned the hours away wondering how I would show up and present myself to the graves of a woman and a child I had left with nothin' four years back. Yeah, I'd come when I could ta see 'em and all, but it was always dangerous to do so... and I know in my soul that it wasn't often enough; I know it. Then I came ta hear that my Pa was bein' pressured by the Law to give me up. Then I come ta find out that he did, and all that happened after that had to do with the pals of that Ranger fella raping my wife and my Pa turning her out cause of it. And, now this. Now I gotta kill my own Pa and that Ranger fella too. I know what you're thinkin' but don't even go there 'cause if you do, then you yourself ain't a man anymore than them folks what lets other people take their land from 'em without a fight. So don't even go there 'cause I ain't tryin' ta hear it.

Four years and I can still see it plain as if it were happening right this moment. That wagon on the horizon, right over there near those pecan tree's, those Christian folks cookin' supper, not a half mile from where I now sit. Yep, one bad decision, one bad lifetime afterwards, no doubt about it; it was then and there that I became the man I am today, a killin' man, a man of vengeance, a man returned to his most primal instinct. A man come to avenge his family. Yes sir, it was right over there that my whole world changed, and from that point on I been nothin' 'cept a menace to most men, grudge or no grudge and now this, now I'm gonna willingly kill my own daddy.

Yeah, I know that I ain't a righteous man by any stretch of the imagination, but even a bad man has somethin' what caused 'em to be that-a-away. No sir, that ain't an excuse, it's a fact. Some men are just harder than others, and some weaker I suppose, it's just like that, how ever it happened. No I ain't a righteous man, but I wasn't born a rabid dog neither. Truth is, I don't know what I am, 'cept I'm a man and all men have a point beyond which they cain't be pushed, and with me, that point is my family. With what happened to my family my blood went dark, dangerously dark in fact, and what I been thinkin' ever since would freeze the balls on ol' Satan himself. Yep, once that happened with my wife and kid, I became what all men are deep down inside; I became cold and dangerous... haunted and hunted.

That night when it got real dark I went to where I'd sat my Possibles and got my ol' Spencer rifle. I loved that ol' rifle, my granddady gave it to me, anyways, with it I strolled off into the woods and headed towards my ol' place to do what needed to be done.

My plan was to go first and visit the graves of my wife and child, then ta go to my daddy's place and kill him for what he done. Then I was gonna cause a menace to folks all around these parts till that Ranger fella showed up, then I was gonna shoot him down with my granddady's rifle. Then I was gonna cut out that Ranger's liver and eat it, right

after I left his carcass next to the graves of my family. Yep, I had it all planned out and I ain't shamed about it either.

As I neared the place where my ol' house had been I stopped at the clearing and waited to see if I could see any movement, I didn't. I then eased across some rain puddles and made my way up to the shadowed edge of what was left of the south wall; a man had to be cautious in unfamiliar places until he got the feel of it, but even a place you're familiar with, even your own place feels uncomfortable in the dark 'cause everything feels uncomfortable when you're a hunted man like me. And if you was a hunted man, like me, then you had to be extra careful around your own place; most especially your own place.

The smell in the air that night seemed almost normal, almost, standin' there I could smell that smell of burnt wood, but other than that I could find nothin' else out-a-place.

I poked some things with the tip of my boot and once I got more comfortable I walked that spot what used to be mine. I thought about my wife and our times together, lord she was a gooden'... a tear came to my eye, but I knew it was too late for all that, so I smiled at the memory of the last time I saw her and my only child.

They was sittin' right over there near that stump, and I gave her what I had taken from them government settlers over the last three month's and she kissed me, like only the best of 'em can do. I smelled her long hair and I touched her face and looked into her almond eyes, and right then and there I vowed that one day I'd strike it rich and take her away to someplace on the Mississippi river where we would, the three of us, get us a place and catch fish that were so big it's take a week just to eat one. Yeah, I remember it all so clear. Yeah, I loved my ol' gal and I took it hard when I found out what happened to her.

After I got comfortable I walked south about a hunnert paces or so to the spot that my neighbor Jaime had said was the spot where they had buried her and my child. As I walked towards that big oak where they were supposed to be laid I was looking so intently for the two graves of my family members that I was completely caught off guard when I heard a voice from some nearby hedge tellin' me ta drop my rifle, then in the moonlight I saw that I was surrounded by three men with guns, one of them was Jaime Garza.

Now Jaime and I was close, we had grown up together as kids, we weren't the best of friends but we was friends and I had trusted him to bring me messages and to take money to my wife when the law was around. But it was all clear now, he had set me up.

"Where's my wife's grave?" I asked.

"There ain't no graves you idiot. Your wife ain't dead. I made all that up to get you here. I burned your house, and I, not your pa brought the law down on ya..." Jaime kept talkin' but I didn't hear a word of it 'cept the last word, "hangin'".

I guess you could say that I was happy about my family bein' alive, 'cause I was, but I was also distraught at lettin' myself be fooled and trapped by the likes of a scoundrel like him.

My mind was tryin' to work a way out this here mess, and as he continued to talk I thought it all out but in the end I saw the truth of it and reached down and grabbed my rifle, when I did they blasted me and I flopped back on the ground like somethin' blown over in a wind storm. I just lay there with a half-moon as the last thing I seen in that life.

I, as a man named Joe, died on that spot just north of Corpus Christi, Texas,
in the summer of '74.

"Ummah"

I find myself in a cold and dark place. I am wearing the skin of animals as clothing and I know that my name is Atak. I do not know how old I am but I consider myself a man, with a wife heavy with child. I know that I am a loner, that I prefer solitude, and so it was that I took my new bride and left the safety of my village to move off and into the far plains where the tall grass grows. Here Ummah, my wife, and I established our shelter; with her at my side I hunted and together we skinned and cut the meat of my kill for our sustenance. Everything we did together, just her and I.

Ummah was tall and lithe and had the reddest hair imaginable; in my eyes no other woman I had ever seen could match her. To me she was a goddess and when I suggested that we leave our people and live alone in the land of the lost people she never complained and she never looked back, nor did she seem to miss her family, she was with me and I was with her, we were one in life; and even though thousands of years stand between her and I, convict #76603-079, I must confess that I am in love with her still.

I am waist deep in the cold wet earth, I am digging a hole. My hands and feet are near frozen and I can see my breath as it leaps from my mouth like the falling waters of a mountain stream. Drizzling rain has accumulated inside of the hole I am digging. Though the water at my feet is cold, it has not yet turned to ice, but it is deathly cold around the soles of my feet.

An old witch is standing at the rim of the hole, she is screaming at me, "Dig! Dig! You must dig! Hurry we must finish before the rise of the sun or all is lost!" I put aside the pain in my hands, the discomfort of the cold wet skins on my feet and I dig as the old witch has instructed; finally, satisfied that I understand her urgency, she moves away from the edge of the pit to continue building a large pyre.

Finishing the first hole, I climb out and begin the second. I am tired and sore, but I cannot stop. The life of my own child depends on it, so I put aside my personal discomforts and dig. Again, and again, I plunge my bone tool into the surface of the ground, but it is almost frozen and the digging is slow. I hear the old woman chanting and rattling her bones as she circles the first hole and then the second where I am steadily at work. Around and around she goes chanting and throwing powders into the flames of her pyre each time she passes by it, causing the flames to flare up and then briefly turn a greenish yellow color. In the light of the flames I see her face and it is horrid and evil looking. Her hair is matted with blood and half of her teeth are rotted out, she has no skins upon her feet and her body is clad only in the skin of an animal, one I do not recognize, yet she is not withered, nor does she appear to be cold, and I know that I fear her, but I trust her.

The second hole is finished and I now begin to dig a tunnel between the two holes that my labor has produced. When the tunnel connecting the two holes has been completed I am covered from head to toe in ice cold mud, but what was done had to be done, a labor of love and I do not complain.

Careful not to put my weight atop the ground over the tunnel, lest my weight collapse it, I circle the two holes. While I am circling the holes from right to left and chanting, the old witch is chanting and circling me in the opposite direction leaving two distinct foot paths, hers outside of mine. When I am dizzy with exhaustion she halts her dance and falls to her knees. I do likewise. We chant a prayer to the Sun god who will soon appear to chase away the darkness that the lesser god of fire has protected us from.

With the fire blazing, with the two holes dug, with the chanting completed, and with the Sun soon to light the sky, the old witch gives me the sign that it is time to begin our ritual.

I step from our circle and enter the witches hut and bring out my woman and my sick child. We three enter the circle and then lower ourselves into the first hole in the ground, the one nearest the fire. My child has become so weak from the fever that he can no longer even cry as my woman unwraps him and exposes him to what has now become incessant rain.

I hear the voice of the witch who has by now entered the second hole, she is telling me that I must remove all of my clothing and crawl to her through the tunnel I had dug connecting the two holes in the earth. This I do. Then as prearranged, my woman Ummah gets onto her hands and knees and slides the sick body of my first child through the tunnel of mud after me. The healer woman, herself naked and on her knees, reaches into the tunnel and pulls my son through, simulating what I guess is to be a rebirth. When she has the mud covered body of my child fully in her arms she chants the magic words, makes a sign of the stars over his body, and passes him to me. I take him in my hands and lift him skyward where I hold him till the first rays of the new Sun break the top of the distant mountains revealing the power of the Sun god. "It is done," says the old woman and I lower my son into my arms and kiss his wet, muddy face.

My woman, now standing on the edge above me beckons and I pass the child up to her, she wraps him and pulls him to her chest in an effort to warm him, and in spite of the rain I can see tears running down her face.

"The fever will not kill him, but you will die seven times," says the witch to my woman.

"I would die a thousand times to give just one life to my child," I interjected and meant what I had said.

The old woman leaned over and took a handful of the mud at her feet and then looked me in the eyes and says, "Not a thousand deaths and not an eternal life." She then turned towards the darkness, made a sign to ward off evil and went to her hut leaving my woman and I alone with the child and her mysterious prophecy.

By mid afternoon that very day my child began to show signs of improvement and by the following day when we had returned to our land, all was well, and he was up and running around as if nothing had ever happened, as if he had never been sick at all.

Over the next few weeks my first born not only regained his strength, but his vigor as well. As a sign of gratitude, every full moon thereafter I walked the great distance and left a gift of the hunt at the fire pit of the old witch who's magic had saved the life of my child.

The year after that my woman gave birth to another child and a year after that another. All in all, we had four sons and one daughter with green eyes like her mother and in our isolation we grew into a family and prospered. All seemed to be well and the words of the witch were forgotten.

The winter after my last child was born was the worst that any of us had ever seen. Long about the third moon of that winter came a snow storm so fierce that my whole shelter was buried up to the top of the roofing beams. Now this was not all that unusual, but what was unusual was that unlike past storms, which were always followed by a warm spell, this storm brought only colder air as its companion, air that whipped this way and that, bringing with it a chill to my earth mound homestead like none ever felt before.

It had been many days upon days and the storm continued, then after a week or so the storm stopped as abruptly as it had started and I left my shelter in search of food. All day I searched, but so fierce was the cold that I searched without success.

That night we finished the last of our stored provisions and later that night without dry wood our fire died. That night Ummah and my children huddled together beneath our hides and to the warmth of one another, in the morning I was relieved to find them still with breath. I vowed to find dry wood to warm our fires first thing that day. Food would have to wait.

After long hours of work I procured enough wood and cut it into manageable pieces and took it to my shelter where the lesser god of fire blessed us with his warmth; I thanked him and asked him to keep us warm until the great father in the sky chose to once again bring his warm light to this land of my choosing.

After the fire was burning well I went in search of food and when none could be found I made the long journey to the shelter of the witch, hoping that she might give me the wisdom to find the beasts of the field and thereby feed my family. But once there I found the old crone sitting cross-legged with her head tilted upwards looking past a burnt out fire and into an overcast horizon covered with snow. She was frozen in acolyte

immortality. I made a sign to ward off any evil that might be on the witch's property, then I took what little food I found in her hut and put it in my sack.

I left the place of the witch without moving or touching her because I did not know her preference in death; some of my people preferred the fire and others preferred the earth. Fearing that I would choose wrong and thereby cause her spirit to be forever earthbound, I let her be and trusted her spirit to the gods.

I looked out across the lands on which I had chosen to live and saw that where there had once been never-ending fields of grassland full of critters and herd upon herd of beast, there now stood nothing except white snow for as far as a man could see. The snow I did not mind, the problem was that it was so cold that the animals had moved away from the storm or died, I did not know which, but I did know that they were gone. Never in the history of my clan had this happened.

Another day without food, then another and another and after what proved to be another unsuccessful forage I returned to watch my youngest child die before my very eyes and in my very arms. I wept. My woman hardened by the life we had chosen did not show any outward signs of sorrow and when I began to rock back and forth in my own misery, refusing to let go of the limp body of my dead child, she slapped me across the face and said to me, "Green eyes, is gone." I lowered my head in shame and then nodded with understanding, then I took her body outside where I put her to the long sleep of fire.

More days followed and still no food. Another storm came and my children fell into constant sleep; seldom were they awake at all now. I knew that they were weak from lack of food... but what could I do except go outside and search once again for some form of nourishment? I found nothing.

I began to look for alternative means of food, I tried to remember what the animals ate and all I could think of was roots and grass, so I dug through the snow and searched and searched until I found frozen grass and then roots and then bugs. These things I gathered and took to my woman who then mashed them into a paste and fed them to the children, but they were so weak that they could not even eat what she gave them and that night another storm came and covered our shelter and I was beset with fear and grief.

That night another one of my children began to cough and cry without ceasing and all I could do was watch as Ummah held him and rocked him and talked to him; but he continued to cry and then so too did the others. Days followed and my children suffered. Days followed days and my children starved before my very eyes.

After what seemed like an eternity my woman, who seemed to be the strongest of us, came to me and aroused me and loved me. When she finished I lay down beside the fire and fell asleep and slept till I felt her straddle my chest. Bewildered I awoke to look into her eyes and saw that tears had cut pathways through the dried blood that covered her face. I tried to rise but she put her cutting tool to my throat and told me to be still. I did not understand, but I did not move either.

The sobs of our children were gone, our shelter was quiet, I could hear nothing except the crackling of the fire as it did what fires do, and the lights of comprehension came to me. And somewhere in that silence, came acceptance, as my beloved Ummay took my life.

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