

## The Tribe That Forgot How To Die

Deep in the northern forests of a land that may or may not be mythical, there exists a tribe that has forgotten the art of dying. Occasionally, one of the more foolish or unfortunate of their number would fall out of a tree, drown, or even get themselves eaten by wolves or bears. But, apart from these rare instances, death eluded them.

The climate was temperate, never too hot or cold. Rainfall kept the streams full and the trees plump and green, yet the sun still shone on most days. They were a happy people, a simple people with a simple God. Early each morning, before the day's business began, they would gather and offer their one prayer- That today, of all days, would not be the day that they rediscovered death.

Not even the elders could recall when they'd forgotten how to die, it just slowly grew out of fashion. They'd learned to be sensible though, the forest provided their every need, and they in return, were careful not to ask too much of it. To keep the forest happy, they kept their population stable, always careful not to outgrow their resources. To achieve this, each year they had the breeding festival.

They had many other festivals as well. They had a Sunhigh and a Sunlow festival. They had two Midsun festivals. They had a festival to thank the creatures of the forest for providing them with meat, and they had another festival to thank other creatures for not using them as meat. They had a single festival in honour of their low-maintenance God - to thank him for his continuing gift of not dying. And they had an Old Moon festival, once each lunar cycle.

These were the main ones. Naturally, because life was good, and food and drink were in abundance, spontaneous festivals could and would break out on any given evening.

But the festival to end all festivals was the breeding festival. It was here that each year the tribe would gather and in a sequence of rituals and challenges, the tribesmen and women would choose those who would breed that particular year.

It was part ballet, part bordello, and part rutting season.

Preparations would begin months before the festival. Men and women of an age neither too young nor too old would make their intentions known. The women would prove their fertility by creating huge shows of the flowers of the forest. Stunning blooms of orchids and heathers, bluebells, and daffodils would adorn

the village, each woman usually guided and chaperoned by a grandmother or a great-grandmother.

The men would grow the fruits and roots of the forest. In the weeks running up to the festival, the villagers would feast on rich soups made from sumptuous smoothroot, and stews of venison and bitter-sweet anisroot. The children would grow fat from the abundance of bramble and redberry pies, all sweetened with heather honey straight from the villager's beehives.

During those weeks, the villagers partied nightly, enjoying gallon upon gallon of the sweet, seductive mead. For the contestants, the competition was already intense. Games of Machiavellian politics were played behind the scenes, alliances were formed and broken daily. Gifts were showered on anyone who could have even the slightest influence. For the hopefuls it was a deadly serious game, for the rest of the villagers, it was the annual soap opera.

Each year the numbers to be chosen would vary. The figure was dependent on how many of the villagers had managed, in some unfortunate way, to defy what their God had granted them. It was also determined by how successful the previous winners had been at fulfilling their responsibilities. For a native, failure to breed was the biggest burden to live with, a humiliation that would lurk for decades, well past the age of fertility.

This morning, the morning of the breeding festival, the God of eternal life had been kind to them. The rains that had been plentiful throughout the night, had ceased as the sun rose. In the bright morning light, the villagers gathered for the morning prayer. There was excitement in the air and the promise of the day to come filled everyone's thoughts. Perhaps it was this excitement that took the potency from their prayers. Perhaps, God looked at them and thought, 'you know what, that's a half-hearted affair of a prayer. I need to remind them what's what.' Or perhaps he was just having a bad day and thought to himself, 'fuck them!'

Or perhaps there was no God, they were merely flukes of nature. And nature, that blind goddess, can take as well as give.

The villagers remained blissfully unaware of this, the prayer was hurriedly ended and almost seamlessly the procession began. A dozen naked women led the way. The chosen ones, to be whittled down to three, they gyrated and danced as they went. All bosom and buttock, swinging provocatively.

The drummers followed behind, playing the march of the maidens. A seductive rhythm beat out on the stretched deerskin drums that were ceremoniously used on this day only. The men followed, fifteen of them. There were always more

men, the mark was set higher. The demands of the day were harsh and unforgiving. They danced too, encased in their suits of thorns.

They reached the centre of the village. Scaffolding, towering higher than the canopy of the forest, ringed the central area. It shone and glistened in the morning sun. The blooms the maidens had nurtured for months decorated the entire structure. The sun blazed through them, bathing the arena in glorious shades that flickered and danced in the gentle breeze.

The maidens danced their way to a small dais of raised ground that stood in the centre. The elders of the village sat in a circle around the makeshift stage. They were unknown centuries old but still wiry and strong, they held aloft the torches of wisdom. The hopeful men formed a ring behind them and behind them were the women of the village.

The women watched with great interest, approving, or disapproving of the dancers as personal loyalties dictated. Finally, the remaining men of the village lined up behind them, facing outwards, away from the stage. A tradition born of common sense ensured the still hot-blooded males were barred from watching this most enticing of displays. A steady supply of mead fed to them by the women unfortunate enough to have missed out as this year's chosen helped temper their disappointment. The chosen women danced, the elders watched in silent appraisal, the chosen men stood in their suits of thorns, praying for arousal, and the women folk cheered and cajoled. And the men drank their mead and joked about frustration.

The day was just beginning.

Sir Barney Wormpole had never seen such a thing in his life, and he'd seen a lot of things. He was a native of a small group of islands that sat nestled along the coast of a northern continent. He was their foremost explorer and the clumsiest. Sir Barney's homeland was small, yet despite its diminutive size, it was powerful. Its influence webbed out across the globe, it ruled whole continents, raving them of their natural resources. It was a nation that could, and often did, fight a dozen wars simultaneously and win them all, such was its power.

Sir Barney was not a soldier. He thought of himself as an enlightened soul, he was born to explore. He had no interest in what natural resources could be pilfered from the lands he discovered. He had no interest in raving the native women and enslaving the men. He was merely curious; it was a trait that had always been there, within him. From his earliest memories, all he had ever wanted to do was to see what lay over the horizon.

His parents were wealthy plantation owners. Although they'd never seen the thousands of acres they owned or cared about the slaves that laboured in the fields. They preferred to stay on the temperate island on which they'd been born and lead the carefree existence of the aristocracy.

Even from an early age, the young Sir Barney had been different. Taking advantage of his parent's massive estate, he'd taken to disappearing for days on end. He would wander off into the hills with their rolling acres of dense forestry and foliage. He learned to live off the land and be at one with the nature that surrounded it. And in a lot of instances, obliterate it.

His clumsiness was as inherent in him as was his need to explore. He never set out with the intention of destroying large amounts of wherever he went. He certainly would never intentionally condemn a species to extinction, but that's what normally happened. It was on one of his first forays into the forest that surrounded his parent's mansion that this unfortunate tendency manifested itself.

Barney was delighted to have discovered how to make fire from just some dried moss and a couple of sticks. For a week he stayed in the forest, each night lighting a new fire from the moss that he kept smouldering, wrapped in waxy leaves and tucked away safely in his knapsack. It had been a long hot summer and the ground was dry, Barney had taken every precaution, aware of the danger. When he decided that he'd better return home, he'd meticulously dampened the moss and the firepit. The moss was resilient stuff, a spark was left. A spark that defied the dampness and bided its time. It took a week, but after it was finished, ten thousand acres of forest were a smouldering wasteland. And the last breeding pair of a falcon hunted to the edge of extinction was accounted for.

And, so it went.

On a fruitless journey to a distant mountain range, he spent weeks searching for a herd of cattle-like creatures that rumours said existed in the vicinity. He never did find them, but he did wipe them out in an avalanche he caused by dislodging a boulder on a remote ridge.

On an island in a distant ocean, he came across a colony of flightless seagulls. They were a friendly species, they had no natural predators and the forest flourished with bugs and grubs to feast on. Flight had become unnecessary, their wings were an evolutionary dead end, mere stumps. They almost rushed to greet Barney and his men as they disembarked to explore the island. They left the

birds in peace and taking a breeding pair with them, they left the island paradise.

A pregnant cat had jumped ship and a year later there was barely a feather left. The two birds he'd taken with him had died of seasickness and terror.

A flower he'd picked on one side of an arid mountain range and carried with him to the other side had grown with such ferocity that within a year it had throttled the crops of the natives. All but starving a nation.

The tool he'd left with a small, isolated population living on an island paradise of lush forests and azure seas in a southern ocean, had given them the ability to chop down trees. An ability they took to with relish. Less than ten years later the island was a barren rock and the islanders were nowhere to be seen.

Wars, famines and extinctions followed in his path, facts that he mostly was blissfully unaware of.

He was older now, his joints creaked and his back ached. The expeditions he undertook were now more modest. He stayed closer to home and never more than a few days away from civilisation. He'd thought his days of discovery were long gone, for despite its size, the forest of the northern land was too well known to harbour any great secrets, or so he'd always believed.

He took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. "We've never seen the likes of this before, Smithers."

"No, sir," agreed Smithers, long-suffering Smithers. Smithers would really prefer to be sitting at home in his modest cottage drinking a cup of tea by the fire. Sitting at peace while his missus whistled to herself as she prepared the evening meal. He'd spent a lifetime as an unsung hero, trailing in his master's footsteps. Always looking over his shoulder at the events that seemed to follow them and wondering to himself.

"They look a friendly enough lot," said Sir Barney. "I think it's time to introduce ourselves." Before Smithers could open his mouth to object Sir Barney had stood up and with his cane swinging by his side was striding off towards the village.

The natives weren't sure whether they, themselves, were friendly or not. In their remembered history they hadn't really had an instance to find out, due to never having met anyone from outside of the tribe before. They had a word for friend but not for enemy, within the tribe everyone was a friend or 'blesme.'

The men of the village noticed them first. Wooden pitchers of mead were forgotten about as the strange-looking pair in even stranger-looking clothes emerged from the forest. Some had their pitchers held as if glued to their mouths, some dropped them in astonishment. A woman stopped serving the men and turned to look at what had grabbed their attention. She squealed in astonishment, others followed, the men stood up, women stopped watching. The chosen men forgot all about thoughts of arousal. The drummers stopped beating. The maidens stopped dancing.

The elders were the last to notice, they were angry at first, nothing like this had ever happened at the breeding festival before, it was sacrilege! But the anger subsided, morphing into confusion and bewilderment as the villagers parted to allow them to see the figures striding towards them.

The tribe were about to discover whether they were a friendly people or not.

There was no stopping Sir Barney. He was an explorer, discovering things was what he did. Recently, he'd come to accept that all his great discoveries were behind him, this was too good a chance to miss.

Sir Barney strode straight up to the villagers, a silent avenue had opened allowing the elders and Sir Barney to consider each other. The whole village was in silence, you could hear a pine needle drop.

Sir Barney broke the silence, he put his hand to his mouth. "Ahh... Ahh... Ahh... Choo!" The sneeze exploded out of him. As one, the villagers jumped back in astonishment. Never had they seen a human do such a thing.

"Bless me," said Sir Barney.

The elders looked at each other uncertainly. Then Oldoak the eldest of them all smiled. "Blesme," he said.

The other elders joined in, they all smiled at Sir Barney. "Blesme," they said in unison.

"Ahh!... Ahh!... Choo!" Sir Barney sneezed again. "Bless me," he exclaimed again.

The villagers had just discovered that they were indeed, a friendly tribe. Spontaneously the whole village responded, "Ahh.. Ahh... Choo! Blesme," they shouted as one.

It was a cry that filled the forest for the rest of the day and throughout the night. Sir Barney and Smithers were welcomed with open arms. The celebrations went on long into the night, flaming pine torches lit the scaffolding, the colours

reflecting upon the dancers and the thorn-suited men. Never had there been a breeding festival like it before. Gallons of mead were dispatched, great platters of venison and sweetroot and huge berry pies were devoured. And each time Sir Barney sneezed the whole village responded.

The next morning the sun rose too early for the villagers. They had no word for illness, no means of communicating the fact that a lot of them were beginning to feel quite strange, their throats tickled, and their noses itched, they felt dizzy and somehow dissociated from everything. Some didn't turn up for prayer.

Sir Barney had come to a decision, this was one discovery he would keep to himself. It was much to Smithers relief when Sir Barney told him that they were going to leave that morning and say nothing to anyone about what they'd discovered. He did take an orchid of such beauty, the likes of which had never been seen in his homeland. It would give him something to present to his queen.

The villagers watched in silence as they left, there was a different feel to the day, like nothing they'd experienced before, they watched the men leave, exchanging nervous glances with their neighbours and friends. Ten minutes after they left, Oldoak put his hand to his mouth. "Ahh... Ahh... Choo!" He looked surprised, "bless me," he said quietly.

It only took a week for the virus to obliterate the population.

Sir Barney returned home, and on a bended knee, he presented the rare bloom to his queen. The elderly head of state smiled at Sir Barney, accepted the flower and took a sniff at the exotic scent. She suffered a massive allergic reaction and was dead within a minute.

Sir Barney was beheaded the next day.

Smithers went home and had a cup of tea.