

Winter Solstice

by Nancy Mann

He lived in a small earth-lodge or hut, low to the ground and crudely fashioned. It was the Freezing Time. It was the Hunger Time – a time when he shredded every piece of meat from bones – bones that would be boiled for many days, creating a thin broth for his consumption.

He missed Wodke; she had helped cure and make pliable many skins of animals, and once made him an entire outfit of trousers and a tunic from such skins. She had wound the precious traded sinew with bison wool interspersed with small animal bones on the handle of his knife. She had rendered animal fat in simmering water to create odorless tallow for his daily work. She had been adept at hurling sharpened stones at the birds to fell them from the snowy tree branches. She had then completed his new clothing by sewing a muskrat hat, decorated and fortified with leather scraps of various colors. She had helped drag wood into the clearing with her strong back and large hands. And when wolves collected outside the hut's door, she had yielded a large club and stick against them – with a stick holding burning pitch from the fire.

Importantly, she had sung songs to appease their God.

When he woke and found her dead, he knew immediately that her spirit was taken somewhere above the sun; she belonged to the other Being. She would be mixing pigweed, pounding starchy roots and berries in some other hut.

So, around her neck he placed a heavy puma claw necklace, and he placed a small suede pouch of flint stones and a bronze knife under her left arm. He wrapped her in a reindeer hide, lashing it with strips of tied squirrel tails; raising the bundle to his neck and back, he carried her to the forest edge and forcefully pushed her over the cliff. Then he lowered himself into the ravine, planting tediously each large, felt-booted foot on the rocks, clinging to the overhanging pine tree limbs in his descent.

Her lump of a body had landed and rolled into a depression in the ice-slicked earth, and he buried it there, lifting and piling rocks over it; he worked with stunted emotions. He kept contained his grief. Though there was no surety in eternity, he had anxieties and problems of his own – his estranged tribesmen had not come in the fall to trade food for his store of pitch to be used on torches in the mid-winter, vital ceremony.

Wodke had died after the elk rut, when the nights were getting longer and longer, when the high fires had burned more wood, and the overhead sun quickly disappeared after its climb.

The movement of the sun was frightening for him, as he and his tribe felt they were at the mercy of unpredictable forces of nature.

After the burial, later that evening, Trog stirred the embers of his fire and thought, “If my dying time comes, who will wrap my body in hide, who will chant and move stones so I can be transported to God to labor and strive for Him?” A flash of anger went through him. He realized he did not prefer any social exchange with his tribesmen, without Wodke. He realized he had a huge capacity to be alone; he didn't feel authentic even

when hunting with his tribe, and didn't feel authentic especially when dancing in the festival of Lights, that necessary rhythmic dancing that would placate his God. So, how then, could he be reconciled to his tribe? he wondered. He was not rightfully a part of his world and cosmos, unless he participated in the larger ceremony; he had not possessed enough objects to offer his God, as Wodke had reminded him often. Surely the deed darkness would take over the heavens; his despair grew, becoming huge.

Then came the day when the sun rose only to blink, and be gone again, before one fire log had burned out. It was cold and bitter. Greater and greater darkness entered in a deep pocket of cold. For three nights, Trog was restless, opening the hut door often, straining his ears, flaring his nostrils again and again, drawing the scents of the forest into his brain, for interpretation. Quiet moons were suspended in the heavens.

All was hushed, but it was a nervous stillness. Unmasking a deep longing, he stood straight up on the fourth night, and exited his hut to face into the wind. He held within his mind the dim memory of the moments of victory in the dance ceremonies of the past. In the quiet, he strained for life itself...life in the cycle of an ancient mystery. He wondered "Will the sun soon die?" He wondered "When is the next moment?" because he had no real concept of time passing, everything was an event or occurrence unto itself.

In a "soon time", the ice would melt. There would be buds and flowers, and rabbits would give birth within their warm nests. Wildlife would be scattering across the forest paths as he would walk along, to commence his hunt. There would be regeneration of animals, and plants would appear ... because suddenly, Trog heard cries, loud shouts, and drumbeats from the distance. Again and again, shouting and crying! Again, he heard them, and they were mighty and strong.

"Yes!" They were giving a ceremony! It was the ceremony! The tribe was giving the ceremony! The vigorous gyrations of many, many dancers, the huge burning torches, and the many offerings of his tribesmen, the many chants of men, men that he would soon rejoin, would triumph, under God. There would be a joyous reversal at the deathbed of the solar disk! Because on this pre-dawn, his clansmen had caused the return to life of the living, growing sun!