The Last Pagan

The last pagan of Sherman's Ferry did not live alone. His straw and stone cottage near the river was beside a war-made hill of red raw dirt and black debris. The sky above it had decided to keep its tattoos of battle smoke, where a soot-stained beard grew ragged about its blue and yellow mouth, and it smelled at creases that could not be washed between. The trees around the cottage were half-naked and wilting, patchy and tired and not long for the world. The ghosts were known to take residence in the old pagan's house, unable to find solace in places still guarded by Christian men and Christian women.

The town of Saffold had once been pretty and new. It had streets laden with bricks and window shops filled with golden cuffed suits and pearl rimmed dresses. It had a grand statehouse with a pointed dome made of alabaster. It had iron benches and clean cut people - gentlemen and ladies - who spoke calm, polite, tall-voweled words. To its outskirts, where the roads turned to dust and soil, the flowers and well-trimmed flora bordered the houses like colored ribbons in children's hair. And, most beautiful of all, was the river, which flowed there fast and cold and clear through the town center and straight out towards Lake Seminole. They renamed the town when it fell to the Bluebellies in '64, after General Sherman and his men crossed there to flank Hood's cavalry. But no one called it Sherman's Ferry but the carpetbaggers.

Now, many of the bricks were missing and the roads were gap-toothed. The glass had been shattered by rifle fire. The dome had a hole in it and the benches had been taken and melted down for cannon barrels. The plants had been left unattended long enough to grow wild and feral over the dirt roads, confusing anybody who still came that way, spinning them round and round like spools of thread. Even the accents of the people had turned harsher, their attitudes frank and

untrusting and angry. Only the river remained as it was. And perhaps it was that way by the grace of the last pagan.

Before there was a town at all, there had been a whole host of pagans. They had taken shelter in what became Saffold on the far side of the forest from Columbus when the Southern Baptists had seen fit to chase and chasten them from the parishes beyond the Chattahoochee. They had come through the wood in spindly wagon trains of three or four, finding each other like schools of fish, settling and building to worship the river and old river gods of which no one could remember the names. They built the first stone houses in clusters like the wagon trains. They laid the first bricks and smelted the first glass. And they were happy there for a time.

But it didn't last, as things don't. People spread from elsewhere and found Saffold, and they found it nice. They moved there in Christian bands of 100 or more, taking their beliefs and their families and their ways with them. And it wasn't long before the pagan life was strange. Why did they bathe themselves black in the soil of the riverbed? Why did they write in their looping alphabet which made words flow and slip between each other like the water? Why did they stay up whooping in the shallows of the river and sleep until midday?

These Christians did not chase the pagans away as had the Baptists. But they built new businesses and houses and wide roads that swung around and above and rooted unapologetic below all that of the pagans. Their churches loomed over the river with steeples that brushed the sky. Their schools taught Christian things, and their children played Godly games. They watched the pagans and their fires and paints and dances with quiet revulsion and louder disdain.

When the war came, there were already few pagans left, and those were very old. Their children had not followed the old ways. Every year, more young people had said goodbye to the

river – many wept as they did – and took the northern road or the eastern road and went to join the world. The town emptied even further when the flags of rebellion flew. The women gathered close to the center of town, while the men marched to war in the same bands of 100s in which they'd arrived all that time before.

Years passed. Cobwebs grew and fell apart. Men came back in pieces. The town was draped in black. And disease and famine and drought took all of the rest of the pagans but one. He survived the war as it passed and all its symptoms which remained long after, soaking into the soil and failing the crop, stunting the children.

He lived in the cottage described already. The mound of earth and sculpted ruin beside was from a round of shells from northern cannon. The resistance to Sherman's crossing had not been fierce enough to make it necessary. But still the federal army had fired from the far bank and destroyed much of Saffold before they ferried across the river. A few of the townsfolk had begged the pagan to pray to his river gods to sink the union troops. The water could storm and wash the whole host away southwest. Why did he not ask them to make it surge and pull them down into the depths? The pagan laughed and asked what good it might do if his gods did not exist. The Christians grumbled among themselves. They might pray to anything if it would stop Sherman's march. And they agreed that the pagan was no real southerner, that he was not really one of them.

And that thought remained when the war had gone and the seething peace was all that was left, a token to nothing. No one came anymore to the river. Saffold, or Sherman's Ferry by then, was quiet and bitter, like a wounded snake. The people forgot that ever there had been pagans living among them. They blamed the one who was left for the failed crops, the starving horses, the heat that would not dissipate even as December came, and January. He was scarcely

seen but often mentioned. They thought perhaps he did witchcraft there down by the riverside – black magic sacrificing their futures and wellbeing for everlasting life, for none could remember when he hadn't been. They worried what the ghosts with whom he was rumored to make company might be whispering about them.

Their anger boiled without much warning. One night, a group of loud-mouthed drunks marched with burning torches from the tavern to the riverside. The townsfolk who were roused watched silently as the men laughed and tossed those torches to the straw of the pagan cottage. Their eyes glistened in the reflection of the flames as the men tore apart the stones and tossed them into the water or atop the red dirt hill. The river watched on. Finally, the cottage was gone. But the pagan was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared. All that they had wrenched there from its sleep were the ghosts who nested there, quieted by the pagan and his river prayers.

The ghosts could not find peace in Sherman's Ferry thereafter. They moaned up and down the ruined streets. They rattled the panes of shattered glass and made the wilting trees sing such songs of sorrow that all who heard them wept. The birds did not land there anymore and all luck that remained turned sour. Milk was rotten from the teat. The grain was all chaff. And if one strayed in an unkindly, unnatural shadow for too long, he was sure to feel the touch of something else which did not belong, caressing and wanting the skin and heat that was no longer theirs to keep.

But southerners are stubborn. They scrubbed the town of all that remained pagan, convinced were they of righteousness. All the books they had written, all the town they had built, all the sacred places they had made to worship - all were torn apart and discarded. A fresh start. A clean slate. A way to quiet the old ghosts and the old gods who were not as great or real as their God.

For some, it worked for a time. They closed their eyes and clogged their ears to the noise of the other side. For others, it did nothing, and they went insane or fled Sherman's Crossing in the middle of the night lest they wake again to eyes which they did not recognize watching them from the dimmed lamplight.

But eventually, so much untethered shadow and death was there instead of where it should be that the border between worlds began to rub thin. A child crossing the street to play with a neighbor must have stumbled somewhere, into something, for she was never seen again. Strange flowers grew at the seams of splitting trees. A shaving man slit his own throat and watched as the blood molded with the cream in the basin, alone until his wife found him standing there dead. Dogs barked at nothing all day and all night. The river grew hot to the touch and tasted like iron when drunk.

Soon the decision was made to abandon the town. All who were left packed up their things, their antiques, their relics, their lives. They decided they would stay together. That was the only safeguard against the lengthening darkness, the only promise that what they saw was real and not madness. They would head north to LaGrange, and from there would seek shelter among the good people beside. They said their goodbyes to the homesteads they'd made, the places they'd loved, and set out on the long road.

Instead, and very suddenly, they found themselves floating on the river. None of them could remember deciding to go by water. Indeed, none could recall building the rafts, or boarding them. But as their senses returned to them, that is where they found themselves; aboard the glittering black current, below the canopy of stars. None of them spoke. The only sound was the lapping water; regular, breath, wild, watching, eager, eyes.

Some weeks later, a search party came to Sherman's Crossing. There were friends and relatives of the people there who had not heard from their loved ones for too long to be normal. Mail carriers and traders of other wares and foods had some strange sense to stay away from the town, and they had sent word too that something was amiss.

The search party found the town abandoned. Nothing was left of the people there. Nothing except their luggage, piled by the pier. The river itself flowed empty and quiet. Wind whimpered as it dragged unhindered through the open streets.

The sky was lonely and even, except for a single plume of smoke which rose from the pagan's cottage, standing alone by the red hill and the riverside.