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Pamela A. Livingston

Standing inside the shadow of the dying gum tree, Gadje counted the curses. There must be one for every misshapen god Ashtong's coffins had offended and the train of coffins was long. Very long.

Brittle bone prayers swayed, clicking in the crisp breeze that broke through the branches of gum forest everywhere but where Gadje stood. He only had to toss some bone dust into the wind and mumble his request to make the wind god understand, they had worked around each other for many years. Crushing the shards of broken prayers in his palm, Gadje refilled the stiff gator sack as the coffin train was long and there would be many curses to make. He chanted slowly to keep the wind at bay.

The wind had been still the last night he had chanted over Ashtong's dam, but something had gone very wrong. Upon the high precipice of ochre stone Gadje purified himself for weeks before calling on the most powerful of the gods. To call Ktang required more than he had ever asked in his sixty-four turns of the sun. In only the skin the god had clothed him, Gadje rolled in the in the blood red ochre and danced atop the hot stone, night and day, until his body felt the chime of its core and the river snake ate its tale in the moon's glow.

The machete of his ancestors was unsheathed, it's edge sharpened with the whetstone blessed by the great Gai. Gadje repeated the incantation for life, as he knew it was Ktang's favorite and would remind the old god that Gadje was his servant in this business. Holding his member safe, he opened the life-hole below his scrotum with a swift stick of the point, a technique he'd perfected when the boys became men.

The train rattled past on wooden wheels as Gadje faded deeper into the gum tree. He would not give Ashtong the satisfaction of his presence. Paa Joe's hand could be seen in the curve of the leopard coffin tail and its mouth's grin. Covered with skin and the dead eyes of the god whose image had been slain for vanity, this coffin alone begged for Gadje to seek revenge. He added an extra curse to the list, but this time it was for the sculptor Paa Joe.

Gadje fingered his machete through the skin hanging off his belt. Just seven nights ago atop the ochre rock of sacrifice, he had captured his life-hole blood, the blood of the universe, inside a rhinoceros tusk before packing the wound with spider webs. Prostrate on the ochre stone, he had beguiled and begged Ktang to keep the river flowing, but Ktang had misunderstood the witch doctors plea. Gadje climbed down to the concrete floor of the dam and danced again, but this time his legs didn't rise as high and his voice shrieked its spells. When Gadje climbed above the damn and joined the river, he offered his captured blood, piercing the center of the moon's reflection with the rhinoceros tusk. The river flowed cold around his ancient bones, but he spoke the incantation learned long ago clearly and added his own magic to strengthen its power. Ktang thought it was a new language and did his best to know this man who called for his attention. But even gods are flawed.

A more elaborate coffin rolled over a rock and bounced to life if only for a moment. The interruption irritated Gadje and he counted a curse for Ktiche - that one would take lion teeth, which would require a favor from his brother. No matter. The soul of the tribe was at stake.

But the memory of the river seeped into his work again. When Gadge had filled the river with his blood and moon's reflection flickered with sunlight, he fought the current to reach the shore. The river held him in its maw until its horns broke as a wave from its surface, spitting him swiftly onto the muddy shore. Gadge's body was spent, and his bones were cold. He waited by the shore to warm but never did. When the sun was near the top of the tallest tree, he knew. The blood flowed a river from his life-hole but the dam still stood. Soon, too soon, Ashtong would change the waters himself and flood the village of their ancestors.

"Gee-pa! Gee-pa!! You must come!" Peejay could always find Gadge, particularly when he was trying to work, "You must! The best float is hidden inside the walls – come Gee-pa!"

"You must not go in there!" The boy's chest was soft to the boney hand; his body easily flew backward – skidding atop the dirt road.

"But papa is already there. He sent me to find you." Looking up while toying with the amulet about his neck, the boy begged, "Come, Gee-pa. I can't see it without you."

What had his son done? Dede-Nunu had been told not to take Ashtong's gold, and Dede-Nunu said he hadn't. Gadge believed his son.

"Gee-pa, papa is going to win the competition! I know it! He made the greatest god of all..."

"He sculpted Ktang?" the blood flowed thicker down Gadge's leg, "Peejay, did your papa make a Ktang coffin for Ashtong?"

The bright white's of Peejays eyes lit-up in the shade of the gum tree. The little hand pulled the crackled twigs of the witch doctor's fingers towards the barbed wire walls.

Inside the enclosure gods were strewn like carrion tossed and rolled and left for another. Skins of the plains and jungle stretched over wooden carcasses covering the boxes that would hold Ashtong's hands, knees, member, neck... Mixed scents of animal oils decaying in the sun rubbed the air with the curry feast. Gadge reached into his gator bag and sprinkled crushed prayer bones to quiet the unhappy spirits while he thought of new curses to bring.

"Gadge, you honor me." Every tooth could be seen in the smile of Ashtong as he bowed touching each point of spirit from head to belly in deference. But Gadge knew there was no respect spoken through teeth capped in gold.

"You have invited - them." Gadge's yellowed eye hadn't missed the linen suits and parasols standing far away from the feast table.

"Oh, yes! They gave coins to see me buried in honor." Ashtong's voice dropped to a hum, "Their God makes them feel guilty for my illness, so they think if they help me go with Ktang they will make their God happy too."

Gadge spit and dribbled a little prayer bone to his left.

"You still bleed..." Gadge's skeletal hand stilled Ashtong's tongue with its gesture. Despite his gaunt form, Gadge's power was never to be questioned.

Hollow hands on skin drums interrupted the dry sky, pulling Ashtong and his gawking guests to the new tin building.

"Gee-pa! Come!" The stilt-legged skeleton covered in pouches of skin and horn followed the boy, the boy that would not remember the home of his ancestors once it was covered in Ktang's river. People parted as Gadge moved with Peejay toward the rug-covered door of the tin shrine. Even the pale people held their breath and the jewels of their savior to their breasts as he passed.

The ice light of high sun was sliced by the black into pinpoints of candle and incense sparks. Ktang greeted Gadge blowing the hot breath of the desert into the face of the witch doctor. Dede-Nunu steadied his father as Peejay hid behind Gadge's leathered haunches.

Ktang laughed, his horns moving in the waves of heat that emanated from his hide bound body. His skin was salted and curried, the air told its tale to the old nose. But the body was covered in a thick past of ochre. How dare they!

"Father, you see the honor Ashtong has bestowed onto us."

"I see blasphemy!" Gadge's crisp twigs were swift to remember their purpose in this world and the machete flew through the dotted black without a sound. Ashtong's body continued to stand for minutes after his combed head had fallen.

The witch doctor bent easily to chop the rest of the body into the parts the gods preferred, as Peejay's small hands dug into his father's thigh.

Dede-Nunu waited in silence until the incantations had been completed and the bone dust was saturated with Ashtong's blood to tell his father that the Ktang coffin was made for him, the great Gadge.