

Bright Waters

by John Brown

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In the spring of 1718 Jan van Doorn returned to his log house with a load of molasses, flour, and a fine green dress for his new wife. He found she had run out on him and taken half of his goods with her.

She was the second wife he'd bought. And the second one to run away before a season was out.

Her name was Woman With Turtle Eyes, an older Huron of 23 years. He had thought an older woman would be more stable than the girl he purchased the first time. Besides, she said she wanted him to buy her.

Jan didn't understand how the men in the settlements courted and kept their women. And it couldn't be because he was ugly. He'd seen plenty of ugly men marry. The only ones that seemed to have any interest in him were the whores at Fort Montreal, and when he'd given in to his urges that one cursed time, they took far more from him than his money.

There was nothing to do about Woman With Turtle Eyes. If he hunted her down, she'd just run away again. He could beat her, but she'd run nevertheless. Besides, her theft meant he'd have to start working his old claim, and there were precious few weeks before the beavers began to shed their winter coats. No, there was nothing to do but fold up the dress and put it in the cedar chest.

He looked down upon the dress for a few moments admiring the fine, shimmering cloth. Then he closed the lid.

That night Jan cooked himself a meal of kale and old potatoes. When he finished, he rubbed deer urine onto his traps to prepare them for the morrow. Then he went to bed.

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Over the next few weeks he worked his claim, cured pelts, and began to rebuild what he'd lost. But as the weather warmed, someone began raiding his traps. The third time this happened he found six traps in a row with both bait and beaver gone. He held up the last trap and examined it. The other times he'd been too late to catch the thieves, but this time the blood matting the hair on the jaws was still wet.

If it was LaRue or English Pete, he was going to murder the man. That, or sell him off to the Abenaki. If it was a Mohawk, well, then he'd have to tame his response.

He didn't trap much anymore. There simply wasn't as much game here as there was ten years ago. Besides, it was much more profitable to trade instead of trap. Let the Iroquois tribes do the work. He'd profit on both the buying and the selling. Nevertheless, he held agreements with all the trappers and Sachems in the area. This was his claim. Even if it was small.

His next set of traps lay only fifty yards farther up the stream. And by the great William of Orange, they'd better be full.

He decided to walk carefully and was rewarded for his caution, for as he crested the next rise in the trail, he spied three Indian boys standing over the trap he'd set next to the willow there. Two held a pole with half a dozen beaver draped over it. The third bent down and sprung the trap.

He looked at their leg tattoos. Mohawk. One of the Iroquois tribes. Well, he couldn't kill them then.

Not that he'd want to. They were, after all, just boys. Still, Indian boys weren't like the lads back in Rotterdam. It had been small Abenaki lads, just like these, that tried to take his scalp the first year as a trapper. He'd killed them all with the blood flowing down the side of his face and a chunk of his scalp flapping about like a wig.

And so he'd need to be ready. Hunting knives hung from the belts at their waists. But none carried a war club. Only one held a bow.

Jan sneaked back the way he had come and then up and around in front of them so that the boys would walk right up the trail into him. The path bent around a hill where the river willow grew thick. He waited for them there.

He withdrew rope and a knife from his pack. He couldn't kill them, but he could tie them up and scare them into good Christian men.

Just before he wondered if he hadn't misjudged their direction, he heard footsteps and low voices. He wrapped the ends of the rope in his hands.

The first two boys passed and didn't see him. Each carried the end of a pole laden with beaver on his shoulder. When the third turned the corner, Jan roared and lunged for him.

But instead of catching him up in the rope, he ran into a white woman wearing a yellow bonnet who yelled like the devil himself and all his horned helpers.

She did not look like a slave. She did not react like one either. Before he could turn back to the boys, the woman set herself, brought up an Iroquois corn stick, and walloped him on the side of the head.

Jan lost his vision momentarily. When it came back he could see the boys preparing for an attack.

He pulled his war club out of his belt and warned them away. He was two heads taller than most men, and his war club was a good three feet long.

"I promise you by Hiawatha's bones," he said in Mohawk. "I'll crack every one of your thieving heads like a pumpkin."

"Stop," said the woman in Mohawk. "All of you."

One of the boys looked over at her.

"Stop this now."

Neither Jan nor the boys put down their weapons.

"Crow Child, put your knife down. Now!"

The boy hesitated and then lowered his knife.

"And you," she said. "That is Iron Wood's boy. You touch any of us, and his village will feed your parts to the dogs."

Iron Wood's boy? Jan looked at the boy closer. He saw the turtle tattoos on his legs marking his clan. He saw his face. How had he not recognized him? He'd grown.

"These are my traps," he said. "This is my claim. And I'll suffer no thieves to take what's mine. If he's Iron Wood's boy, then I'd like to talk to the Wise Mother of the turtle clan about the proper punishment for thieves."

The boy didn't show much. They were trained not to. But Jan saw his eyes round just a little. The Wise Mother of the turtle clan ran her village. She was the one who chose the Sachem, and she was not someone to trifle with. They'd flog the boy twenty times or hang him up from a

tree for a day. There had been too much blood shed between Indians and traders over incidents just like this.

The boy looked to the woman.

"I think we can work this out," said the woman.

Jan turned to her. What woman in her right mind would be out walking with three Mohawk boys anyway? Granted, the Mohawks around here hadn't attacked any English or Dutch settlers for a few years. But Mohawks weren't the only ones in these woods.

"Who are you?" asked Jan. "And why do you speak Mohawk?"

"That is none of your business," she said.

Her accent when speaking Mohawk was just like Pete's.

"You're that English teacher the Indians have been talking about," he said.

"I'm not English," she said. "And no one has trapped here for years. How do we know they're yours?"

Most women avoided Jan. None looked him in the eye. It was disarming to have her look at him so. But it was also obvious she didn't know anything about trapping. "They're mine because the traps have my mark."

The woman looked hard at the boys. They did not meet her gaze.

"I see," she said. "And if they promise never to raid your traps again?"

He looked at the boys. They'd be back. He would have come back were he in their position. "You may speak Mohawk and spit fire, but you're still an English woman. Not a Sachem or Wise Mother. You can't bind them. I'm afraid that won't do."

"They're boys," she said.

"They're thieves. And they're still young enough that they can learn. Or would you simply let this bad wood grow until it was too hard to cut out without killing the tree?"

"There are other ways," she said.

"Well, until you think of a better one, I'll be walking back to Iron Wood's village with you."

He could see she did not like that. But he didn't care. He raised his club and spoke to the boys. "You can put down your knives and we'll walk to your village like men. Or I can break a few bones and then carry you to your village over my shoulder."

The boys looked at the woman.

She motioned for them to put their weapons down.

The surprising thing was that they did. How an English woman got such authority he could never guess.

When their weapons lay on the grass, he quickly bound their wrists to the pole holding the beavers. It would not do for them to be able to act on second thoughts. And they would have second thoughts. Then he began to march them the three miles to the village.

On the way he asked her what she had been doing.

"They were escorting me to their village to teach them English, the Bible, and how to shoot muskets."

Yet another surprise. She took a great risk, or the English had suddenly reversed their policy on Indians and muskets. The English thought it wise to prohibit the sale of guns to their Iroquois allies. It was a stupid policy that Jan never followed. The Dutch had traded guns freely with the Iroquois and profited greatly. He supposed the magistrates would consider shooting lessons a similar offense. If they ever found out, she'd be pilloried and whipped.

"You're teaching them how to shoot?" he asked.

"Are you deaf?" Then she looked at his ear.

His ear was just one of the many things about his face that people felt they must look at.

"A bear thought it might taste good for lunch," he said.

"A bear would have taken more than that for lunch. I'm not a fool."

He didn't think she was. But it was the truth. "OK, let's see. I lost it in a fight."

"See, a little truth never hurts."

"Then how about this truth. You're a foolish woman to walk about in these woods with nothing more than a corn stick. What if I had been Abenaki? They'd love a pretty thing like you."

She set her jaw at that and walked up ahead of him and stayed there the rest of the way.

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Iron Wood's village was medium-sized for Iroquois villages and sat in the middle of 20 acres of cleared land. They burned the forest here many years ago. It would not be long before they would have to burn another place and move the village there. The land only lasted so long before it failed.

The village was encircled by two wooden palisades 14 feet high. Inside that ring stood ten great longhouses and a number of smaller ones. Jan hailed the warrior keeping guard over this entrance, and then led the boys to Iron Wood's longhouse.

Just this walk through the village would shame them.

When he arrived at the longhouse, a girl ran inside. A moment later the Wise Mother of the clan stepped out. She wore a fine blue soldier's jacket, French cut with brass buttons.

"May the sun favor your crops," he said.

She looked at the boys and back to Jan.

"May you have corn in season," she said. "What have you brought me, One Who Keeps Them Awake?"

"Beavers," he said. "And boys who need learning."

"Hummm," she said. "Let us talk in private." She led the boys and Jan into the longhouse.

They talked long and Jan agreed that they should deliver double the **number** of beavers stolen or the equivalent in wampum.

Jan actually preferred the wampum because the Iroquois and many of the trappers used it as coin. You could carry a tidy sum in nothing more than a sack. Of course, that also made it easier to steal. It had been his wampum his last wife stole.

He told Crow Child he'd bring him back a musket if he delivered by next spring. And he'd warned him not to steal any of it, beavers or wampum, from anyone else. The boy promised. It was a fair penance, but one that would bring esteem to Crow Child if he kept it.

Jan could have asked for some physical punishment, but it was unwise for traders to make any enemies among his sources. Those boys would grow up, and Iron Wood's son might become the next Sachem.

During the conversation he also found out the Mohawk called the English woman Bright Waters. They said she'd been taken from the Abenaki.

She must have been a slave to the Abenaki. No wonder she had gotten prickly when he mentioned that. But then she was twice the fool to be walking about with nothing more than a corn stick. He didn't want to think what the devils had done with her. Unless, of course, she had been held for ransom. Then they would have left her unmolested. Otherwise, he hoped they'd taken her when she was a child.

She should have been Iron Wood's property. But she had bartered almost a year's lessons in English and muskets for her freedom.

Jan suspected there was more to it than that. Iron Wood probably knew owning her would anger his English allies. They would have made him give her up eventually. So he got what he could. And knowing English would place Iron Wood in a better position to trade and negotiate. Och, but Iron Wood was smart.

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On his way out of the village Jan stopped by Crazy Rabbit's longhouse. Iron Wood was the war Sachem. But Crazy Rabbit was the peace Sachem. It didn't matter who currently ruled, a trapper needed to have good relations with both Sachems if he wanted to trade with a village. Jan always gave Crazy Rabbit first look at the goods he traded.

Crazy Rabbit was not there, but his wife Willow was.

"Ah, One Who Keeps Them Awake," she said. "I'm about to eat succotash with venison."

"And maple syrup?" asked Jan.

"Of course," she said. "Come sit and tell me if you have a son. Or better yet, a daughter."

She wanted one of his children to marry into her family. "Neither," said Jan.

"Barren?"

"Well, she never stayed around long enough for me to find out."

Willow clucked and shook her head. "Huron cannot be trusted. I told you."

Jan shrugged.

"Why don't you come into my family? I have daughters and granddaughters that would keep you warm. You can have your pick. Mix your blood with that of a real human and I cannot imagine the sons you'd grow. My warriors would be the talk of the five nations."

"It's a great honor," he said. She'd invited him into her family before. "But you know I cannot."

"Bah!" she said. "I do not want to hear your excuses. You are wasting your seed. Lie with one of my daughters. Sons with your strength, your orenda, would send the Abenaki and Huron running for the caves."

He considered her offer the first time. She thought the orenda, the spirit that was in all things, made him large and quick. But he could not lie with her daughters. Not that he was the most pious man. But fornication was clearly forbidden by the Holy Word. If Jan's grandfather

could die by the hands of Catholic armies for his beliefs, Jan could certainly keep his urges buttoned up.

He would not marry into her family and become part of her longhouse. And it was her longhouse. The Iroquois were strange this way. They traced their genealogy through their mothers. The mothers ruled the longhouses. The Wise Mothers of each clan chose the Sachem. But it wasn't just that the mothers controlled everything on a local level. He wasn't against a woman ruler. After all, many a land had been ruled by a queen.

The problem was that he would then be a Mohawk. He would have to fight their wars and live here in this village. He didn't want to live in a European settlement. Why would he want to live here?

"My guardian spirit tells me not to," he said.

"I do not like your guardian spirit then."

"I'll marry someday," he said. "And then we shall see." And perhaps he wouldn't marry. It seemed the good Lord wanted to make a monk out of him whether he was Protestant or not.

Jan ate his succotash and told her the story of a German man who awoke one morning to find his cow wearing his pants. Then he'd told her about Ulysses and the sirens. She always asked for his stories. They all did. That was how he had gotten his name.

"That's a powerful magic," she said. "We have a powerful magic. Perhaps it is time to use it on you to help you find a wife."

Jan suspected she wanted a medicine woman to come chant over him.

"I will call the bone breaker to help you find a wife."

"I don't need magic," he said. The last thing he needed was an Indian witch placing some curse on him. "No amount of blowing tobacco smoke in my face is going to make me any prettier."

Her brows furrowed.

"You won't give me sons. You won't take my magic. Maybe the One Who Keeps Them Awake does not want to trade with this village anymore."

Was she threatening to prevent him from trading? She could influence the council. She was Crazy Rabbit's wife and the mother of the turtle clan. There were others they traded with, but Iron Wood's village traded with him the most.

He decided she was threatening him.

"What do you propose?"

"A small tattoo."

A tattoo? That was all?

"Where?" he asked.

"Here," she said and poked him beside his eye.

It was only a tattoo. And it would secure her good will, at least for one season. However, he was convinced that nothing but God's grace would produce him a wife. "Fine," he said. "As long as it comes with more of your succotash."

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Jan slept in Willow's longhouse that night. The next morning a very old mother came into the tent. Tattoo lines and triangles crisscrossed her forehead and cheeks. Tattoo spiders clung to each of her index fingers.

"This is our healing woman," said Willow.

Jan had never seen her. But the village held about 700 people. Maybe he'd missed her. It was possible.

"I know you," she said. "I dreamed about you."

Jan doubted that. These Indians were always trying to read meaning into their dreams. They could dream of horse farts and still think some guardian spirit was trying to communicate with them.

She uncovered a bowl of pigment that smelled bitter. She made him sit on the ground next to the fire. Then she placed a small white bone in a clay pot and placed the pot in the coals.

"Where's your awl?" asked Jan.

"Shush," she said. Then she lit a pipe and blew smoke in his and Willow's faces. After that she chanted for quite some time in an unfamiliar language.

Jan was wondering if she was going to chant all afternoon, when she took the hot bone out of the pot and broke it. She changed her chant and, with the sharp points of the bone as an awl, scraped the pigment into his skin.

It burned. But he told himself it would only make him more acceptable to the clans.

The old mother finally stopped her scraping and chanting and sat back and watched him.

Willow wore a huge grin. She gave him a small looking glass, then rose and left the longhouse.

What he saw was a bright red line that spiraled around itself five times. It's small tail connected with the corner of his eye. He thought the red was his blood, but when he touched a finger to it, he realized it was the color of the pigment.

He looked at the pigment bowl the old woman had used. It was not red.

"Does this change color?" he asked.

"When the orenda has run its course," the old woman said.

For a moment Jan wished he had not let them do this to him. But he told himself it was an investment, a piece of flesh for a good trading contact.

A few moments later Willow returned with her thirteen-year-old daughter, Moon.

She motioned at Jan. "What do you think?"

Moon looked at him then shook her head and looked away.

This was the daughter Willow offered him before. Moon had not wanted him then. She obviously did not want him now.

Willow grimaced. She turned to the old woman who shrugged.

Perhaps Willow thought Jan would be more agreeable if Moon showed more interest in him. If that was true, she was wrong.

"So what's this supposed to do?" he asked.

"Make you more appealing," said Willow. She looked him up and down. "It's his hair, isn't it?"

"Corn does not grow in a day," the old woman said. "The magic will gather strength over time."

Willow grabbed a basket with a flint knife. "But we can clear away the weeds to help it grow. With that beard and pelt on your head, you look more like an animal than a man. Let me shave it off."

"No," said Jan. This was exactly why he couldn't live in her longhouse. She would be telling how to blow his nose before too long. "Shave my hair and I lose my power."

"Ah, I've heard that story from the children." She nodded. "Then at least take some bear grease to tame it."

"I'll ask my guardian spirit for approval," said Jan.

Willow frowned and shook her head.

"I thought this was powerful magic," said Jan.

The old woman spoke. "We don't bend the bones of our ancestors to unnatural magics. This will not force a yearning for you upon anyone. It will simply help your beauty shine forth."

"And nobody can see that beauty underneath an animal's hide," said Willow. "If you cover it, you bury the magic."

"Hair is the mantle given us by the creator," said Jan.

He could tell none of them believed that, but he wasn't going to shave. His hair covered his birthmark and scars. And he wasn't going to go about plastered with stinking bear grease.

"Don't waste the orenda from those bones," said Willow.

"I wouldn't think of it."

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When Jan left the village later that day, he saw the English woman again. She was showing five children how to pack a musket.

Perhaps she wasn't as helpless as he thought. If she had lived any amount of time with the Abenaki, she would have to know more of the woods than any number of ladies fresh off the boat from the old land.

He watched her. She was not a proper woman. But that wasn't always a liability. She knew how to load a musket. And quickness would be good to have at your back if you needed to defend your home.

She looked over at him.

After a moment he realized he was simply standing there looking at her, so he waved a fare-thee-well.

She acted like she didn't see him at all and turned back to the children.

So much for the magic of Iroquois bones.

Jan walked down to the path that followed the river. He wondered where she would go when her bargain was completed. One thing was for sure. She'd better go out walking with more than her courage and a corn stick next time, or she just might not fulfill her bargain. A dog and musket would be a good investment.

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Jan's tattoo earned him some remarks when he went into the trading post. He never told them how or why he got it. Let them guess. In the end, they made up a better story than any he could think of. He heard from LaRue that all the traders thought it was a sign of a contract

between him and Iron Wood and the principal reason why they were having such a difficult time moving their goods.

Jan replied that they all could get the tattoo if they just asked for it. Of course, it would cost them each a child.

He trapped for the next few weeks on his own. When he came back to the settlements, he began to notice women offering him furtive glances. A few days later came unabashed smiles. He told himself that the women had always been so friendly, and he only noticed it now because of the fuss Willow made with her tattoo.

But not long afterwards English Pete stopped him at the trading post.

"Have you found gold then?" asked Pete.

"Gold?" asked Jan. Why would anyone think that?

"It's being noised about that you're preparing to build an estate."

"The rivers are fatter this year than I expected, and I've made back all the wampum my last wife stole from me. But it's hardly a treasure trove."

"No," said Pete. Then he lowered his voice. "It's said that Jan van Doorn has happened upon a great Iroquois fortune."

"Pete," said Jan, "you and I both know that the Iroquois are not gold diggers. There is no Spanish treasure in the north."

"Well, then I can't figure it out."

"What?"

"Either you've become handsome or rich. Looking at you I can see that you're ugly as ever. So I have to guess that it's because you're rich."

Jan had no idea what he was talking about. "Pete, you've been drinking bad whiskey."

"Van Doorn, I'd hide the gold if I were you. Not everyone is as honest as I."

Then Pete walked off.

Jan turned into the trading post and soon found out what Pete was babbling about. Both Gordon, the post owner, and Lancaster were there. It seemed the baker's wife, the spinster Patrice, and the widow Millard had all expressed an interest in him.

"I don't even know the baker's wife," said Jan.

"You're about the only one who doesn't," said Lancaster.

"She's married."

"That hasn't stopped her before. What I can't understand is how you found the gold."

"There is no gold," said Jan.

"Then don't let anyone know or you'll lose your advantage. If it were me, I'd warm the spinster first. She has a fine stout figure."

Jan realized they all thought he had found gold because that's the only reason anyone would take an interest in him.

Suddenly Jan did not want an advantage. He did not want to warm anyone. He didn't want their smiles.

Then he thought of Willow's tattoo. Was there actually something more to it than chanting and smoke?

Jan had an easy way to find out.

He turned to Gordon. "I need some scraps of cloth."

"Not another dress," said Gordon.

"No, I need an eye patch." Except it wouldn't cover his eye. It would cover the tattoo.

When he'd stitched together his patch and tied it about his head, he visited the baker's. The wife stood at the counter dripping honey onto buns.

She looked up and smiled at him. Then he shut the door behind him and slid the patch over the tattoo.

Her face changed. It was slight, but the welcome was gone.

He looked her in the eye. "I've a hunger for something sweet and warm," he said.

"No," she said. "I can't. I've baked nothing today."

"Perhaps tomorrow."

"No," she said. It was barely a whisper.

Then he moved the patch off his tattoo.

She looked intently at him as if she'd noticed something strange or was confused. Then her demeanor changed. She placed her hand over her breast. "I think the light from outside affected my vision. I'm sorry. What did you want?"

"I've a great appetite."

"You're a large man."

"That has its advantages," he said.

She arched an eyebrow and grinned. "I should imagine."

It was the tattoo. Of course, it didn't help that she was as unsteady as March sunshine. Jan slipped the patch back over the tattoo and watched her wanton look turn all to business. Then he walked out.

He tried his experiment on the spinster and widow and a few others along the way. All but the Chandler's wife reacted in a similar fashion, but it was said a pickled heart beat in her breast and she couldn't be relied on in matters of love and friendship. Whether that was true or not, she was certainly immune to heathen witchery, for he planted himself next to her in the Apothecary for at least two minutes, and she didn't so much as bat an eyelash.

And witchery was what it was, plain and simple.

He'd been a fool. They could have performed any manner of Indian devil craft upon him. This was exactly how a man lost his soul.

That evening Jan sought out a minister and inquired how he might remove the evil. The minister told him that if his hand offended him, he should cut it off. If his eye offended, he should pluck it out. Surely, his tattoo should be sliced off. No miracle would do him any good as long as he displayed an open invitation to Satan on his face.

It seemed the procedure for casting out devils had changed somewhat since the days of the Apostles. Jan was hoping for a simple blessing, a painless take-thy-bed-and-walk approach.

Perhaps the patch wasn't such a bad idea.

He thanked the minister and left.

The next day he trekked out to Iron Wood's village. When he found Willow, he demanded she remove the curse.

"If I had wanted to curse you," said Willow. "I would have ordered the healing woman to put a yearning on you for your horse, or maybe a bear."

"Curse or blessing, I want it removed."

"I cannot remove it."

Perhaps the minister was right. "Then I'll cut it off."

"That might have worked the first few days, but that won't stop it now. The orenda is in your bones. It will stay there until you let it run its course."

"And how long will that be?"

"Until you are complete."

"It's unnatural devilry," he said.

"It's how you are made," she said. "Your own stories say it was not good for the first man to be alone. He needed a Wise Mother. And only when she arrived was it good. There's a piece of you missing, and until you find it, you won't be whole. Now come see my daughter again."

"I'm not going to deceive her," he said. "Or anyone else."

"It is not deceit."

"And will she say that on the day the orenda runs its course? No, she will look at me and despair."

"Bah," said Willow. "That happens to every pair who feels the fire of passion. One day the roaring fire burns down. Did the passion deceive them? Was it unnatural? No, it took its course and burned down to something you can cook with, something useful."

Jan could not see the fault in her argument, but he knew it was wrong. It simply wasn't honest. Besides, such things could not be from God. He'd read about the gift of miracles, tongues, and charity. But not the gift of glamour. And so if it was not of God, it must be of the Devil. And Jan did not want to owe the Adversary even a nit's teaspoon.

"No good can come of this," he said.

Her looked softened. "You do not listen, One Who Keeps Them Awake. When one bathes in the river and braids his lock of hair before meeting his beloved, is that dishonest? Your own women wear painful clothing to appeal to the silly European sense of beauty. Is that dishonest?"

It wasn't the same, but Jan couldn't see the difference.

"All we've done is highlight what's good in you. Now come let my daughter see what I do."

"No," said Jan. "I cannot."

She looked hard at him then. "So be it." Then she dismissed him with a flick of her wrist.

He could tell she was exasperated. But he could not reconcile witchcraft with girdles and perfumes. And he was sure he didn't want to lure a woman into his bed. Jan was determined: He would have a wife honestly or would not have one at all.

It seemed he would have to carry the devilry in his bones, but it couldn't be considered a sin if he didn't profit from it. So he wore his patch and traded as he normally did.

Sometimes when he saw the spinster Patrice he was tempted to walk about without the patch. But he never gave in.

The days passed and he began to think more about the English woman. She was the only European woman he'd found who looked at him with something other than pity or fear. Perhaps she was beyond the powers of the tattoo. It was possible. Not all the women in the settlements had inquired after him. And the healing woman had said the magic would not force anyone.

In August he found out who she was. He went to the post to get powder and beans. He was drinking a glass of whiskey when Lancaster said, "Have you heard about Devil Jack's daughter? She's out teaching the savages the Bible."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" someone asked.

"Well, I guess not for the daughter of Devil Jack," he said.

Devil Jack was renowned from New Amsterdam to Ticonderoga for killing more Indians than any man living. He'd taken twenty arrows and lived to tell about it. He was as bloody a man as had ever lived. And he'd had eight sons just as bloody as he.

"I thought him and his were all killed by the Abenaki," said Jan.

"That's what we all thought. But apparently he had a daughter that was taken as a slave. That was nine years ago. She was recovered just last autumn by a Mohawk raiding party and bargained for her freedom."

"What did she bargain with?" someone asked.

"You figure it out," said Lancaster.

Devil Jack's daughter. Surely this was the same woman he met earlier. It would explain her bite.

"I would not be so hasty to smirch her name," said Jan. "It wasn't that sort of bargain at all. I talked with those who took her, and they wanted her English."

"What for?"

"Think a moment," said Jan. "How might it profit a Sachem when he realizes that he doesn't need us anymore, that he can go directly to the traders in New Amsterdam and speak their language?"

That caught their attention.

"What's her name?" asked Jan.

"Shannon," Lancaster said. "Shannon Burke."

"Has she gone savage then?" someone asked.

"No," said Lancaster. "I was just down in New York. I hear she has an aunt there."

"It's a waste," someone suggested. "Who would want an Indian-used woman?"

"I would not dismiss her so hastily," said Jan. There was a spirit in her that was very appealing. "She's got a bit of her father's fire."

Then he told them all about his beavers and getting clobbered on the side of the head. He decided to embellish a few of the details.

"That's not quite the version I heard earlier this summer," English Pete said. "I think at least three warriors were added to the count this time."

Pete and his memory took all the fun out of it.

"You must have heard wrong," said Jan. "I'm telling you there were nine."

*

In September, before the river froze, Jan helped guard a load of goods down the river to New Amsterdam. He still could not bring himself to call it York. Why the King signed it away, he'd never understand. The Dutch had, after all, won the war.

The trip down might have been pleasant, but the cook put something evil into a soup that made him vomit for three days. However, by the time they arrived, he had recovered enough to get off his deathbed.

The city was grand. In the last three years it seemed a thousand more houses had been built. The English were multiplying here like rabbits.

He had two days before the ship sailed back up. During the first day, Jan ate enough fritters and crullers to make a man sick. He bought a Protestant Bible and a copy of a Dutch translation of a story about a crazy man in Spain who thought he was a knight.

In the evening of that first day, he thought he saw Devil Jack's daughter hurrying down Wall street holding a basket. He tried to follow her, but lost her when she called at a house and went inside.

The next day he found out from a Lutheran minister where Shannon lived and thought of making a call. But then rethought. Why would she want to see him? He could bathe and shave, but that would only show more of his scars and birthmark. They had not met in favorable conditions. Still, he'd never quite met a woman like her.

That first night he did not sleep well and he couldn't decide if it was the fritters or the woman that kept him awake.

He did not have much to offer a woman. He lived alone in a small house far from such a splendid city as New Amsterdam. Here it was safe. There she might be molested, again.

Still, she was a brave woman. She knew the tribes.

Sometime before the sun came up, he decided he'd call on her. The first thing he did was go to the bathhouse. Then he paid a barber to trim his beard and hair up short.

But when he exited the barber's, he despaired. He had not called on a proper woman before. He did not know the rules. He'd never known the rules. He supposed he should bring some gift but had no idea what that would be.

In the end he settled on a fine cheese.

When he stood on the porch of her house he realized he would have to make conversation. But what would they converse about?

A woman opened the door. Her eyes widened and she took a step back.

He always had that affect on women. They always acted like he was going to eat them. He'd hoped the haircut would have made him more of a gentleman. Obviously, Willow's advice did not help with Europeans. He thought about uncovering the tattoo, but decided against it. He cleared his throat. He could tell she did not trust him. "I'm here to see Miss Burke."

"And you are?"

Och, he was so clumsy with these things. "Jan van Doorn."

"She's not here right now," she said.

"I see," said Jan. He had been a fool to come. "Perhaps I could wait. I have a cheese."

The woman looked confused by his last statement.

"For her," he said.

"Oh, I can take that. Did she purchase it from Zwaart's?"

She thought he was a delivery boy. "No, I wanted to bring it to her myself as a gift. I met her among the Mohawk and thought I might speak with her. I'm leaving back up into the interior tomorrow, and well I--"

"I see," the woman said. She tried to suppress a smile, but the corners of her mouth gave it away.

A cheese must have been the wrong kind of gift.

"I'm Shannon's aunt. She's out gathering firewood, but you can wait on the porch."

"Of course," he said. It wouldn't be proper for him to wait with her alone in her house. This was proving more difficult than he imagined.

He waited on the porch with his cheese sitting next to him and watched two boys run up and down the street trying to fly a kite. He did not see or hear Shannon arrive. Just when he began to wonder if he would have to wait on that porch until dark, the door opened again and the aunt said, "Will you come in, Mister van Doorn?"

Jan rose. He ducked into the doorway but then he couldn't straighten back up. Whoever built this house had been exceedingly short.

"Please sit here," she said and motioned at a chair that looked like it was made for a child.

"Are you sure I won't break that?" asked Jan.

She looked him up and down. "No, not entirely."

He almost offered to sit on the floor, but thought better of it. The chair wobbled and creaked when he settled onto it. He could feel if he shifted his weight just a little that it would indeed crack.

Shannon came in then wearing a plain lace covering over her hair and just about stopped his heart. She did not wear fine clothes. She was not shaped like the spinster Patrice. And yet she was beautiful.

Jan rose and thrust the cheese out in front of him. "I thought you might enjoy this," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't believe I ever heard your proper name."

Jan thought back. She was right. She didn't even know who he was. And here he'd come calling. "Van Doorn," he said. "Jan. I grew up outside Rotterdam."

She took the cheese from him and handed it to her aunt. A meaningful look passed between them that Jan could not fathom.

They talked then about the Mohawk and trading and living with the English.

He could a tattoo on her left ear, the marking of a slave. He had not noticed that before. That meant she had not been held for ransom, and he wondered how the Abenaki had treated her.

He showed her the Bible he'd purchased.

When she asked him if he'd ever read the Bible, he told her that his mother taught him to read Dutch starting with Genesis. He knew all the stories.

That made her smile. They talked more about their homelands and he found out she was not English after all, but Irish.

The aunt came in and joined their conversation. He was telling them both the story of the time when LaRue tried to turn a foundling moose into a packhorse when someone knocked at the door.

It was a man with black boots and a green overcoat.

The aunt introduced him as Michael O'Day, a farmer just outside the city and from the same town in Ireland as Shannon.

He looked at Jan and then walked straight to Shannon, caught up her hand, and kissed it.

"And who is this great fellow?" he asked.

"A trapper I met while among the Mohawk," Shannon said.

The aunt laid her hand on Michael's arm. "Shannon and Michael are to be married in the spring."

Jan's heart sank. "Oh, I see. Well, then. You've found yourself quite a woman, Mister O'Day. Quite a woman."

He suddenly didn't know what else to say. An odd silence hung in the air and he said, "I think I must be on my way. But I give you one warning, Mister O'Day. If you're ever in fight, never let her near a corn stick."

Shannon smiled.

"A corn stick?" asked O'Day.

"She can tell you," said Jan. "Enjoy the cheese for lunch." And then he picked up his hat and coat and left. He told himself it was probably better this way. A farmer would provide a stability that he never could.

On the way back to the ship he felt a bit unsteady and wondered if he really was over the illness that afflicted him on the trip down. So instead of visiting a tavern, he reported to the captain and slept onboard. In the morning they shoved off before daylight.

That winter was colder than the last. The snows drifted in some places higher than his head. On Sundays, he took his books to the post and read to the men who were there. Lancaster said he'd heard there was a song of songs in the Bible.

But Jan acted like he didn't know what he was talking about. He simply did not want to read them the Song of Solomon. In fact, there were ministers who thought it didn't even belong in the Holy Book.

When he read about Elijah calling fire down on the priests of Baal, English Pete commented it was a shame no prophet was alive today to call fire down on the French.

LaRue protested, but most of the men at the post were English and they shouted him down.

*

In June the Mohawk and Abenaki skirmished with each other. During that time Jan heard that Shannon had reappeared among the villages. With all the battles and various parties skulking in the woods, it was not a safe time for her to return.

A few weeks later Iron Wood asked for crates of powder, balls, and muskets. Jan brought a mule loaded with the contraband. He also made sure to pack a special musket with crows carved in the stock.

Crow Child did not disappoint him. He proudly delivered a mixture of wampum and beaver and then whooped when he saw the special musket.

Of course, the first thing Willow did was turn his face to look at his tattoo. Then she shook her head and walked away.

It seemed, despite all his efforts, he was making her into an enemy.

He took his mule out to pasture and saw Shannon at the river washing clothes on a rock. He walked up behind her.

"Miss Burke," he said.

Shannon turned in fright and walloped him upside the head with her soap.

"Och," he said and wiped the suds away from his eye.

"Do you scare all the women?" she asked.

"Oh, I scare them all, but it seems you're the only one that intends to make me pay for it." She turned back to scrubbing her clothes.

"It's a dangerous time, Miss Burke, or should I say O'Day?"

"It seems I was bred for such a life."

"And where's Mister O'Day?"

"Sleeping with his pigs."

She said that with no love. He felt better about this. He wasn't the only one who struggled at the beginning of a marriage.

"Is he here then? Trading pigs?"

"No," she said. "He's back in New York. He called it off."

"The engagement?"

Shannon nodded.

Why on earth would the man do that? He looked at her. She didn't show any sign of feeling sad. But she wouldn't. She'd lived with the Abenaki.

He wouldn't say anything. He knew what it was like to have the lads at the post poke at such a loss. It was all in good fun to make him feel better, but it never did.

Jan's mother always told him that the finest gift he ever gave her was the day he'd done her wash. So instead of saying something, Jan took her basket of washed clothes and asked her where her line hung. He stood hanging up a petticoat, when she joined him with the rest of the wash.

"So you've come back to the Mohawks for good?"

"It seems they don't care about my past," she said.

She was right. The Mohawk would prize her father. "Devil Jack was a bloody man," said Jan. "But sometimes a man has to be bloody to survive."

She looked over the clothes line at him. "He said he didn't want dirty undergarments."

"What?"

"O'Day."

And the Dutch were marked for their fastidiousness. But then that didn't make any sense. "So you were a poor housekeeper? He could have hired a maid."

"I was with the Abenaki as a young woman," she said.

Ah, he was so slow sometimes. Her ear tattoo was that of a concubine. He should have made that connection. But wouldn't O'Day have known that when he engaged her? Perhaps O'Day suspected some things. But then, for some men, knowing what happens in general is not the same as knowing specifically what happened to the women you're to marry.

If O'Day was that type of a man, he was a fool.

"Do you have a child then?" asked Jan.

"I did. But my husband sold him away to humiliate me."

"The Abenaki are worthless dog turds," he said.

"Only some of them," she said.

And then he realized her son was probably still among them, sold to another village. Besides, she had once been Abenaki herself.

"You are right," he said. "There are devils among all men."

*

That night Iron Wood and most of his warriors left. They returned the next day with much shouting and hung fifteen scalps on their palisades at the entrance. Many wore French hats. This would bring a reprisal. The French would seek revenge.

He found Shannon outside the city cleaning muskets. "Do you not think it a good time to leave?" he asked.

"And go where?"

Jan didn't have a good answer to that.

"I'll stay here. They can use my skills."

"A teacher can't do much in a time of battle."

"I'm no fine lady, remember?" She picked up a musket that stood in a round stack and with amazing speed half-cocked it, poured in the powder, inserted the ball, withdrew the rod, rammed the ball home, then replaced the rod.

A person could not load a musket that quickly unless they'd done it hundreds of times.

"I'll stand upon that wall," she said. "I have five of these children trained to load the musket. Do you know how many balls I can put in the air?"

Jan looked at Shannon with new eyes. By the Holy Mother, Devil Jack did have a daughter.

"I can't imagine. I've never met a woman quite like you," said Jan. "You're something of an inspiration. Maybe I'll stay."

"You have no ties here," she said.

He thought about that. He didn't have family here, but then again, this was really the only family he had. These savages and the lads at the post. And if he had to choose, well, he'd rather stay with the savages.

"You're right," he said. "But then I've no love for the Abenaki either."

"It's a good thing this village purchased what powder they did," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I'm thinking they were waiting for my load before going off on that raid. I can tell you one thing, these fields will run with blood."

"One of these days," she said, "it will be my son that comes painted for war."

*

The Abenaki and French came just before dawn. A village boy went out to the stream to check his weirs. He managed to yell twice before they cut his throat.

A warrior on the rampart heard him and gave the warning cry. Flaming arrows flew over the palisades and into the roofs of the longhouses. Jan saw one bury itself in a woman's back as she ran away.

The warning had come almost too late. The Abenaki were within yards of the entrance when Iron Wood's warriors poured out of the village to meet them. Warriors ran up the ladders and fired muskets and arrows.

Jan decided to stay back by the entrance. The ends of the palisades overlapped here so you could not get a straight shot into the village. If any of these devils wanted to get in, they'd have to go through the Dutch Bear. And by William, he'd smash them to pieces.

The two sides on the field clashed and mingled. Not wanting to hit their own, the archers and musketeers on the wall ceased firing.

Then a cluster of Abenaki broke the line and ran for the entrance. Their faces were painted in horizontal white and black stripes.

It had been too long since Jan had seen any real battle, and he could feel himself begin to quail. There was only one solution to that. Jan raised his musket and shot one of the demons in the belly. Then he took up his war club.

The first one to close with him leapt like a deer. Jan's war club was longer than most of those the Iroquois used. So he was able to smash the inside of the man's elbow as he came at him. Then he stepped out of the man's path and with a roar crushed the side of his head.

The Iron Wood warrior next to Jan fell then began to drag himself back into the village.

A yell rose from the far end of the village. Jan glanced back. Archers ran along the rampart back towards the noise.

He hoped Iron Wood's runners were fleet. And then he realized they ran because the village was surrounded. The runners had probably not made it more than 20 rods into the woods.

The Abenaki in front of him began to retreat, and Iron Wood's men chased after them.

Something was not right. They never broke off the attack so quickly. And then Jan realized he'd seen no French. He looked at the woods.

The further the warriors ran, the more room they gave someone lurking in the woods to make for the village. Only a handful of warriors could defend the village from the inside. It took many more to attack.

It was a ruse. The retreat was a ruse.

He yelled to the archer above him to prepare for an attack from the woods. The archer barked orders to the others on the wall and then let out a yell. It was the call for retreat. Others on the wall took it up.

A few of Iron Wood's warriors turned. And then the main body stopped its chase.

The woods boiled with men. French and Indian came rushing out.

They were half the distance to the village before the warriors in the field caught up with those in the rear.

There was no way Jan and the seven who stood with him could hold the entrance. There had to be 200 French coming down upon him.

The French line stopped and fired a volley that dropped four of the men with him and sent chips of wood flying. One chip struck him on the cheek. Another few inches and it would have put his eye out.

He retreated into the village. Women and children stood on the walls armed with bows. Shannon stood among them with her five boys. She shot and took a ready musket from the boy behind her, shot again, took another, shot again.

He needed to find the barricades. The village kept them close to the entrance. He and the other three lifted them into place. They set the fourth just before the French broke upon them.

The arrows and musket fire rained down upon the attackers, but there were simply too many of them and they reached the barricade.

The first two men over were shot with arrows. Jan finished them off when they reached the ground.

He heard a cry and an Iron Wood woman fell from the wall and crashed almost at his feet. More men tried to leap the barricade with the same result. And then he heard a volley of muskets crack at his back.

He turned and saw a dozen French loading muskets. They'd broken through the other entrance. Two of them took arrows and fell.

A group of young warriors rushed those remaining. Only lads. He hoped they had learned their killing lessons well. Jan searched for Shannon on the wall, but saw only her five loaders.

His heart fell. She must have been shot.

In front of him more French and Abenaki tried to break through. He and the other warriors rushed up the barricade to meet the attackers, but they could not hold. Too many men got past them.

And then Jan found himself back in the village swinging for his life. He downed five men and then saw some Abenaki running for a ladder.

He turned to chase and found Shannon had reappeared. She stood with her boys, blood smeared down her cheek. She must have taken only a grazing.

One of the men threw a tomahawk that struck one of Shannon's boys in the head.

She turned her musket down the ladder and blew the first man off; she took another musket and did the same to the second.

But the enemy in the back of the village gained the rampart and now ran toward Shannon. "Shannon," he yelled and pointed.

That distraction cost him. He saw someone out of the corner of his eye. He was fast enough to avoid getting his shoulder crushed, but he was not fast enough to avoid the sharp point of the man's war club in his back.

Jan swung his war club into the man's face. But then another Abenaki stood before him. Jan roared and charged.

The man was quick as a snake. He ducked Jan's swing twice and then smashed Jan's fingers.

Jan dropped his club.

The man drew back for a killing blow.

Then there was a wet thud and half of the man's neck disappeared. Another shot took out the man behind him.

Jan looked up. Shannon hadn't missed a beat. She handed her smoking musket to one of her four boys and took another.

He picked up his war club with his left hand and limped to the barricade. He found Frenchmen penned in by those above, Iron Wood's warriors coming back from their chase, and those that fought inside.

The attackers died in that spot.

A yell of victory rose from the other end of the village. The warriors there must have chased the attackers out of the far entrance.

However, many of the French and Abenaki had retreated to the woods.

The village regrouped. Jan stood at the entrance and waited for another charge. They came, the French in their pretty lines and the Abenaki yelling like devils. There were still so many of them.

He felt weak in his knees and fell to the ground. He tried to crawl out of the way but didn't get far. He lay there watching the backs of the warriors.

The attack broke upon the village. He looked for Shannon and found her. Then his vision started to blur.

It was very possible that too much of his life had already leaked out his back.

Men and women yelled all about him. Musket smoke clouded his vision even further. An Abenaki fell crossways over his legs. Someone scuffed dirt in his face. And then another cheer rose up from the walls and the noise of the attack broke off.

"They're running," someone said.

"Don't let them escape!"

Then all went black.

*

He found himself on his stomach in a longhouse. Willow sat on the floor below him.

"We drove them?" he asked.

She turned and smiled. "We slaughtered them from here to the river."

Jan looked at his splinted fingers. He remembered Shannon on the wall. "And Bright Waters?"

"She's a demon," said Willow. "All the warriors want to take her as wife. But I don't think she'll accept."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because all she's done is come in here and check on you."

He suddenly suspected Willow. He reached up to feel his patch. It was still there.

She smiled at him.

Then he brushed his cheek. There was no beard. He felt his chin then the top of his head.

He had no hair at all. She'd shaved him.

"What have you done?"

"Saved your life," she said. "Be grateful."

"You haven't been bringing your daughter in to look at me, have you?"

Willow smiled. "Of course not."

He didn't trust her. He asked her to fetch him a looking glass and held it up to his face.

He looked like a fright with his tanned brow and cheeks all surrounded by the white skin that had been hidden under his hair. But the tattoo had not changed color.

*

That evening he felt well enough to walk so he got up and shuffled outside. He must have been asleep two days for he saw none of the dead. One of the longhouses was now nothing more than ash.

He saw Shannon. She stood with her back to him grinding corn with a foot-long pestle.

He walked up behind her, but not too close. "Miss Burke," he said.

She did not startle this time, but turned and smiled at him.

"Come here and sit by me," she said.

"Is it safe?"

"What were you expecting?"

"A clop with that murderous pestle."

"And you would have received one," she said. "But it seems you've learned it's bad manners to sneak up on people."

Jan went and sat down on the bench beside her as she ground corn into meal. She'd stitched the gash that went from her cheek to one ear.

"That's quite a wound you have there."

"I'm afraid it won't do in proper society."

"Hang proper society."

"Yes, but I will miss the cheeses."

He looked over at her. There was a playfulness in her expression. But he didn't know how to build on it, so he changed the subject.

"Was your son among the dead?"

"No," she said. "He's not old enough yet to fight with the men. I wonder if I'll even recognize him after his growth comes upon him."

"You'll know him."

"But not from a distance," she said and then was quiet for some time.

She emptied out a bowl full of meal and then looked over at him. "Why do you wear that patch?" she asked.

"I've got a mole the size of a mushroom growing there."

She reached up for it, but he held her hand.

"No," he said.

"It's not a mole," she said.

"It is."

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"Fine," he said. He'd tell her the truth. He doubted she'd believe it. He wouldn't have. "It's a bit of Iroquois devilry to help me find a mate."

"I know," she said. "Willow showed it to me."

Willow. First it was a shaving and now this.

"I've seen something similar twice before while I was with the Abenaki."

She knew what it was. He felt ashamed. It was a weak man who tried to buy or trick people into liking him.

"Why cover it up?"

He didn't want to explain it all to her. "It's devil craft."

"I would think the power to magnify the beauty found in unlikely places is a gift from God."

She smiled at him. Her expression was full of warmth. Or was that pity he saw? He'd mistaken pity for kind words before and paid dearly for it. Of course, Shannon did not seem to be one of those social ladies who smiled at and touched every man they met on the back of the hand.

"You don't believe it's witchcraft?"

"I believe that our Lord rains his gifts on the heathen as well as the just."

She reached for the patch again.

This time he let her move it aside.

"See," she said. "No harm done." Then she touched it. "It's fading."

He looked down at her. Deep inside he could feel this was an opportunity that would not come again. "I've got a fine green dress in my log house," he said. "I think it might suit you."

"I've never had a man offer me a dress. I don't know that anyone but a husband should offer such things."

"You're probably right about that." Jan didn't know how to say what he wanted to, but he knew he must say something. "Would you like the dress? You can try it on for a while and see if it's comfortable."

She looked him in the eyes. "I'm not a house keeper," she said. "I don't own even one serving set."

"I eat out of a wooden bowl," he said.

Then he took her hand in his good one. What did he have to lose? He raised it to his mouth and gently kissed it. "I'm not a polished suitor," he said.

She smiled, and the warmth in her face filled him with light.

"As long as I can keep my corn stick around," she said, "I think you'll do."

About the Author

John Brown currently lives with his wife & four daughters in the hinterlands of Utah where one encounters much fresh air, many good-hearted ranchers, and an occasional wolf. Please join him at www.JohnDBrown.com

Servant of a Dark God

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Set in a world where humans are ranched by beings of immense power... for their souls

★★★★★

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“*Servant of a Dark God* delivers solid pacing, a great setting, and a smart story that breaks away from genre conventions”

BRANDON SANDERSON

★★★★★

Young Talen lives in a world where the days of a person’s life can be harvested, bought, and stolen. Only the great Divines who rule every land and the human soul-eaters, dark ones who steal from man and beast, know the secrets of this power. In Talen’s land the Divine has gone missing, and soul-eaters are loose among the people.

The Clans muster a massive hunt, and Talen finds himself a target. Although his struggle is against both soul-eaters and their hunters, Talen actually has larger problems. A being of awesome power has arisen, one whose diet consists of the days of men. Her Mothers once ranched human subjects like cattle. She has emerged to take back what is rightfully hers.

Trapped in a web of lies and ancient secrets, Talen must struggle to identify his true enemy before the Mother finds the one whom she will transform into the very lord of the human harvest.

