



**Other  
Worlds  
Were  
Possible**

**Joss Sheldon**

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POSSIBLE**

***JOSS SHELDON***

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"Part of what I mean by the myth of normal is that we assume the conditions of broader society are healthy simply because we're used to them, even when they're not healthy at all."

**Gabor Maté**

"The assumption that what currently exists, must necessarily exist, is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking."

**Murray Bookchin**

"The struggle of man against power, is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

**Milan Kundera**

“The world of hunter-gatherers, as it existed before the coming of agriculture, was one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms... Many of the first farming communities were relatively free of ranks and hierarchies... A surprising number of the world’s earliest cities were organized on robustly egalitarian lines, with no need for authoritarian rulers... Human beings, through most of our history, have moved back and forth between different social arrangements; assembling and dismantling hierarchies on a regular basis... How did we get stuck? How did we end up in one single mode? How did we lose that political self-consciousness, once so typical of our species?”

**David Graeber and David Wengrow**

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# UNCLE CROW'S LAMENT

The *Tale of Uncle Crow* had been rattling around Sunny's mind...

It was a well-worn fable; one he had heard on innumerable occasions, whilst sitting beside the campfire, chewing on barbecued meat. That yarn was always recounted by the oldest member of their clan, who always swore blind that the subject was their very own uncle; a man not much older than themselves. The other elders must have known this was not the case. Yet they never doubted the truth of the story itself; a story they had first encountered at that impressionable age, when the young believe almost everything they are told.

The story had once been true. Of this, there was little doubt. But it had been embellished by the whimsy of time. It was impossible to say how much of the tale had actually happened, how much had been forgotten, which bits were correct, and which bits had been re-remembered, re-imagined and re-invented; intentionally or by accident, in the recent or distant past.

The story was so simple, it barely merits such an introduction. But it was spinning around Sunny's head with such ferocity, it was only natural that Sunny ponder these things, *as well as* the story itself.

Uncle Crow had a big belly, or a big smile, or a big mouth. What was big, had a habit of changing. Sunny, for his part, never had a fixed image of Uncle Crow in his mind. If he had been with his mother, that legendary ancestor might appear to him with his mother's peculiar eyebrows; the ones which took an unpredictable turn as they reached their outer limits. But if he had been with his sister, Harmony, that character might appear with *her* marbled eyes; cerulean, turquoise and teak. Uncle Crow could look like a mighty warrior. He could run with a rhythm that matched the wind. And he could look like a gawky teen, with limbs which moved in contradictions. He could be tall or short, stocky or lithe; a fact which said as much about Sunny, and his volatile imagination, as it did of Uncle Crow.

On this particular occasion, however, the image which appeared in Sunny's mind did not have his sister's eyes *or* his mother's eyebrows. It did not look like a warrior *or* a teen. *This* Uncle Crow was the mirror image of *Sunny*.

The resemblance was uncanny. Here was the scar Sunny got as a boy,

when he had insisted on going hunting with the grown-ups. He had struggled to keep pace, tripped, and lacerated his ankle. Here was Sunny's oversized nose and his broken chin; the two features which dominated his face to such a great extent, that they hid most of his eyes and mouth. Here were the tattoos which covered Sunny's skin; his loincloth, his only item of clothing; and his legs, which were the second longest in the clan. His torso was not in proportion. It was not especially narrow, but it was a little short. This imbued Sunny with a mildly comedic appearance; something akin to a dog on stilts.

Why did this Uncle Crow share these features with Sunny? And why had he appeared at this specific time?

Uncle Crow may have looked like Sunny. He may have looked different in every possible way. No-one could say for sure. All they knew was this: Uncle Crow was a great hunter. Nobody doubted the fact that he was the greatest hunter the Eagle Clan had ever known. A few people had gone so far as to claim that he was the greatest hunter *the world* had ever known; an opinion which could neither be confirmed nor denied. Yet such trivialities had never prevented the clans-folk from falling for the superlative; describing Crow's abilities as "Marvellous", "Exceptional" and "Wonderful"; remarking on how he was almost certainly better than any hunter a rival clan had ever produced; insisting that he had mastered his craft, and was, dare it be said, pretty much perfect when it came to his ability to hit any target, from any range.

"Why, haven't you heard? Uncle Crow once downed two antelope with a single arrow!"

"No, it was three!"

"Three antelope with one *broken* arrow."

"No! They were buffalo. Uncle Crow killed three buffalo with a single broken spear."

"And, what was that? His back was turned? Uncle Crow killed three buffalo, with a *blunt* spear, without even spotting those creatures?"

"No! Surely it cannot be true?"

"But yes. This was the mark of the man."

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When he was still a child, Crow's successes had been welcomed with warmth and appreciation...

Young Crow was a prodigious talent, but he had a lot to learn. He could spend days in the bush, and still return empty-handed. On those rare occasions



when he *did* return with food, his kinfolk celebrated, and complemented his achievement. When he shared that meat, he was received with appreciative gestures; with cheesy grins, stomach rubs, and even the occasional wink.

Young Crow was a quick learner. By the time he reached Sunny's age, he was bringing home more meat than anyone else, feeding half the clan. Yet his unprecedented generosity was not met with any additional gratitude. If anything, he was met with *less* appreciation than before. His kinfolk still rubbed their stomachs, whenever the meat was tasty. But the winks had become a thing of the past. The smiles were a little too stony for comfort.

As Crow moved into his prime, there could be no doubting the matter. He was the most successful hunter anyone could recall. Thanks to Crow, everyone was able to eat meat for both lunch *and* dinner.

But his peers no longer *rubbed* their bellies, to show their appreciation. They *hugged* their bellies, to comfort themselves from the stomach pains this meat induced. The cheesy grins went the way of the cheeky winks. Uncle Crow had not seen one for so long, he began to suspect that they had been nothing more than a figment of his imagination.

It had become the norm. Like the clouds, which brought the rain, which nourished the grass. The grass did not give thanks to the clouds. And his kinfolk did not give thanks to Uncle Crow.

Things moved ahead, as things have a habit of doing...

In one of those mythical years, in which the sun shone for just the right amount of time, and the rains fell whenever they were called; the valley bloomed, animals feasted upon the new growth, multiplied, and filled the plains. Uncle Crow took advantage, hunting more animals than anyone had hunted before.

The clans-folk gorged themselves, eating far more meat than was good for their health. They became bloated. They retched. An elderly woman keeled over and died, mid-sentence, whilst addressing her peers. A toddler's corpse was discovered beneath a tree.

A consensus began to form: This was an abomination, and a single man was to blame.

That evening, the clans-folk held a meeting. Uncle Crow pled his case: He had only tried to help. He was providing them with the very food which kept them alive. Had he not always been there for them? Should they not be grateful? So what if he brought home a little too much? He had not forced

anyone to eat that meat. His peers should have shown a little restraint. They should take personal responsibility for *their* actions.

His kinfolk did not interrupt Uncle Crow, even when they disliked the things they heard. They maintained a dignified silence, as tears assembled in the knuckles of their eyes, and as their brows crumpled into furrows. Members of their tribe *always* remained silent whilst their peers were speaking, granting them the time they needed to plead their case. They only ever made a decision once they had listened to everyone's point of view. And even then, a vote had to be held, and the result had to be unanimous.

In this case, the vote was unanimous at the first time of asking. Uncle Crow was invited to enter into a voluntary exile.

Crow respected the group's decision, agreeing to this request without a word of complaint.

And yet, in an unpredicted turn of events, the clans-folk *did* heed Uncle Crow's advice. They did take a little more "Personal responsibility". Or perhaps it was *collective* responsibility. Rather than rely on a single hunter, they each hunted a little; sometimes alone, and sometimes as part of a group. They never secured quite as much meat as in the days of Uncle Crow. But that never seemed to matter.

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The Eagle Clan did not measure time using seconds, minutes and hours...

They could not help but notice the difference between daytime and night. They knew of the seasons, solstices and lunar-cycles. But they had no need for such things as "Weeks" and "Months". They rose a little before the sun, when the air was at its coolest. They fell asleep as the moon approached its zenith. They hunted if they were moved by a desire to hunt. They fished if they felt like fishing. They gathered plants whenever they appeared. And they repaired their huts whenever it took their fancy. No-one ever told them what to do, and no clock ever told them when to do it.

But if had they used such units, it could have been said that Sunny had recalled *The Tale of Uncle Crow*, on no fewer than five occasions, in what had been a little under an "Hour". An image of that legendary hunter was reappearing in his mind's eye, on an increasingly regular basis.

But why?

It started three days before...

Sunny had awoken before dawn, jumped to his feet, and tiptoed out of

the circular hut which he shared with eight other people; avoiding the bark-less wooden pole in the centre of that abode, stepping over the bodies which were strewn across the earthen floor, and slipping out through an opening in the wall; a head-high bamboo structure, which was interwoven with strips of banana leaves.

Sunny had collected a spear from the clan's communal store, and wandered into the bush.

Things had not gone as smoothly as he might have envisioned...

On that first day, Sunny had only spotted a single animal. Impelled by an inebriating cocktail of excitement and nerves, he had tangled his gangly legs; rustling one too many plants, and kicking one too many pebbles; alerting his prey, who bolted from view.

Too proud to return empty-handed, Sunny had slept in the wilds, and tried again the following morning. This time, he failed to locate a single target.

On the third day, he believed his perseverance had finally been rewarded, when he backed an antelope into a cave. He thought he might die, when that animal readied itself to charge; bowing its head, exposing the points of its antlers. And he thought he might triumph, when he pushed through his fear; lunging forwards, bracing his knees, and thrusting his spear into space.

Neither of these things had come to pass. The two combatants had danced a tango; passing without touching, making a sound, or leaving a mark.

What was Sunny to do?

He needed another plan. And, in one of those rare moments of inspiration, or luck, or destiny; he remembered, or found, or was discovered; by a nomadic clan, who had erected their camp nearby. Perhaps Sunny had spotted the smoke, which bellowed out from their fire. Or perhaps he had smelled their food. He was so drowsy, overcome by hunger and thirst, that he could not be entirely sure how he found those people. Nor could he remember how he had ended up by their fire, clasping a bowl of pigeon soup.

That meal, and the sleep which followed, had set Sunny straight. Come dawn, he was back on his feet, raring to go, and determined to complete his mission.

As he was leaving the camp, he noticed five oxen, who were tied to a tree. He must have been mesmerised by those animals, because he was oblivious to the person who approached him from behind:

"Pretty impressive, right?"

Sunny jumped. His heart missed a beat, and his nose missed a breath. He had to thump his chest back into action, and gulp down a mouthful of air, before he was able to form a response:

"Aah... Aah-oooh... Yes! Yes, yes."

"Why don't you take one?"

"Eh?"

"What's ours is yours?"

"But... It's just... Well, I couldn't."

"Consider it a gift! Take it now, and re-gift us whenever you're ready."

"Really?"

The woman nodded.

Sunny shrugged.

It had never been his intention to take another clan's animal. He would have preferred to hunt one himself. But these were particularly fine oxen. And he could always hunt a different animal, sometime in the future. He could use *that* to settle his debt.

Sunny reached a conclusion: He would have been stupid *not* to accept that ox.

He trod back into the camp, spoke to the elders, received their blessing, chose the fattest ox, and led it back to their clan's Small Camp.

It really was a splendid animal; so shiny it sparkled, as tall as most men, with horns like an eagle's wings. Sunny supposed it might provide enough meat to feed his peers for half a lunar-cycle.

He daydreamed as he walked, envisioning the claps and cheers which would greet his arrival. Allowing his imagination to roam free, he saw people emerge from their huts, burst into song, lift him, throw him, and catch him as he fell:

"Amazing, Sunny!"

"What a fine animal."

"Wow, Sunny, you're the best!"

"You're a hero."

"Please will you have sex with me?"

He knew, deep down, that he was unlikely to receive such a welcome. But he still expected a little praise and a modicum of respect. He could have never predicted the sheer indifference with which he was met.

There he stood, as proud as a sunset; with his chest puffed, and his hands

on his hips; with the animal before him, and the camp before them both.

And *nothing*. No-one came to meet him. No-one said a word. At first, no-one even glanced in his general direction.

After several moments had passed, a couple of elders finally turned towards Sunny, almost unwillingly, as though it was the greatest of all possible burdens. They did not say a word, or react in any other way. They merely looked him up and down, before returning to face each other. One nibbled the piece of wood he had been chewing since daybreak. The other nodded, as though to agree with her friend, who was yet to voice an opinion.

Sunny was happy to wait. He knew there wouldn't be a procession. That was a flight of fancy. There wouldn't be any hollers or hurrahs. But he was certain that a few people would smile. Someone might offer a word of praise. Someone else might pucker their lips or clap.

As the moments rolled by, his certainty gave way to doubt, which gave way to dejection. This was a fine animal. Its meat would feed the clan for several days. Why was no-one coming to greet him?

He broke.

Calling out to the two elders, he implored:

"Come and see this miraculous beast. Come and wonder at its stupendous thighs, astonishing rump, and eye-boggling hulk. Dearest auntie and beloved uncle: This is the finest catch of the season. Come and feel its bounteous meat. There's enough to satisfy us all. I mean... I couldn't possibly take a share, until the elders have taken theirs."

Nothing.

"Come! Come and look at its muscled limbs. Come and see its opulent coat. Come and feel its sturdy bones."

Nothing.

Supposing he had little to lose, Sunny led the ox between the two rows of huts which gave shape to their Small Camp; the place they called home during the dry season. He had already jinked his way through the clan's allotment; a hotchpotch of plants, which skirted around the southern end of this encampment, blurring the border between their home and the scrublands which lay beyond; an unnervingly flat expanse; dusty, dry, yellowish, amber and bronze. Now he was strolling down this avenue, which had formed organically over the course of a hundred generations. None of the tiny flowers, which filled the grasslands to the north, could be found on this earthen track.

It was a perfect desert; hard-packed, impeccably smooth, without a crack or dent in sight. A visitor might have supposed it had been designed this way. But the clans-folk had never maintained this space, unlike the fire pit which took pride of place at the opposite end of the lane. A few of the elders *did* take care of that circle; the place where the clans-folk roasted their meat and held their parliaments. They swept that space every morning and most afternoons.

Sunny came to a stop in the shade of one of the twenty-six bulbous trees which lined this road. They were all alike; emerald spheres, which towered above their podgy trunks; balancing precariously, as though they might tumble at any moment. Those trees provided a certain symmetry to the camp. There were two of them between each hut. And they served a purpose; supplying the shade which cooled this place when the heat became too much to bear.

There were only two seasons in this region; a *rainy season*, and a slightly longer *dry season*. The rainy season was characterised by daily showers. They did not last for long, but they were intense; pounding the ground, churning the earth, and flooding the land. The dry season was oppressive. The air was so dry, it glistened. The heat could cook an egg. The tribes-folk had evolved to tolerate these temperatures. But they were still grateful for the shade these trees supplied.

Sunny took a breath, allowed the shadows to stroke his skin, and gazed along the lane.

Something caught him by surprise: There were people in almost every hut. They seemed to have stopped what they were doing, just to stare at him. Or at least, Sunny *felt* they were staring at him. In the days which were to follow, he would question if this had really been the case. But in that moment, he had no such doubts.

He led the ox a little further up the lane, reached the silent couple, stopped, and addressed the woman, who was called *Aura*:

"Dearest Auntie Aura: Feast your eyes upon this."

Aura lifted her face, revealing a maze of tattooed lines; bluish, bruised and blurred. Every adult in their tribe had facial tattoos, but Aura had more than most. Her face was a leathery canvas, confused by a mishmash of patterns, which had been drawn by an array of different artists, over the course of hundreds of seasons. It took quite an effort to work out which line belonged to which pattern, and to focus on that design, whilst ignoring the surrounding

fuzz.

Aura was wearing the type of loincloth which was worn by almost everyone in their tribe. It was made from two pieces of antelope hide, which had been stitched together with boar sinew, such that the front piece covered her genitalia, and the rear piece covered her buttocks. She wore her hair in the style which was common among a few of the local clans; tying it into plaits, before combining those plaits into a bun. Her neck was decorated with ivory pearls, and her wrists were adorned with eggshell beads. But the rest of her body remained as naked as the day she was born, covered in nothing but these bluish tattoos.

Whilst her attire made Aura look like any other member of her clan, her features marked her apart. Her face was longer and thinner than any other face Sunny had ever seen. Her teeth were skew-whiff. They pointed outwards in different directions, and met her gums at different angles; they were different shapes, shades and sizes. Time had not been kind to Aura's body. But she still retained an unflinching femininity. People said that she had been a wondrous beauty in her youth. All the men had desired her body. And, since she was a generous person, she had shared it with anyone who had asked.

"Oh, that?" she finally replied, with an almost aggressive form of disinterest.

"Yes, Auntie."

"That old bag of skin and bones?"

"Well... Auntie... Can't you see? This is a fantabulous beast!"

"Beast? It's *beastly*, that's for sure. All I see is limp skin and withered bones. Its own mother must have been ashamed of the wretched thing."

Sunny tried to suppress a frown. Surely Aura was mistaken. She was old. She was probably losing her sight.

He changed tack, turning to address Aura's friend, a man named *Sparrow*.

Sparrow was also wearing a loincloth. His hair was also plaited, and his skin was also awash with tattoos. But despite these things, Sparrow and Aura could not have looked less alike. Though they were a similar age, time had been gentle with Sparrow. His teeth were still aligned, white, and well-proportioned. His face was neither too long nor too short, too wide nor too narrow. Yet it was hard to imagine that he had ever been handsome. There was nothing wrong with Sparrow's appearance. Everything was where it was supposed to be. But it lacked character. It was scientific, not artistic; too

average to catch one's attention, too blurry to pique one's interest, and too plain to inspire warmth or love.

"Beloved uncle: What do you say?"

"Bag of bones. Worthless. You must have burnt off more energy, dragging this creature home, than you'll ever get from the crumbs of meat on its shrunken carcass."

Sunny stalled:

"But... It's just... Well, I wanted to share it. Won't you do me the honour?"

"What would I want with that?"

"To eat it, uncle."

"Eat what? I'd have to eat its horns, because there's certainly no meat on its body."

Sunny froze.

It was probably for the best. It would have been disrespectful to argue with his elders. And he could still share this gift with the other members of their clan.

He bowed his head, backed away, and continued down the lane.

But he could not let the matter rest.

Hungry for validation, he paused outside the next hut, waited for a person to appear, and boasted once again:

"Auntie! Feast your eyes upon this tremendous creature. It'll fill our bellies for twenty dusks and twenty dawns!"

Sunny had been addressing *Kitten*.

Kitten was a similar age to Sunny's mother. She had borne no fewer than fifteen children, although only three had survived past infancy. Her losses weighed heavily in Kitten's eyes. Yet there was an inescapable sense of defiance in her demeanour. Kitten's shoulders were aggressively square, and her breasts projected forwards, as though intent on poking anyone who approached.

Kitten scoffed, generating so much mucus, she was forced to spit it out:

"*Tut, tutty-tut-tut, tutty-tut...* That sack of guts will barely feed the members of a single hut. Don't you know that we are many? What, have you forgotten your Auntie Aura, and the people with whom she shares a hut? Or your Auntie Butterfly, and the people with whom *she* shares a hut? What about that hut, where Health is the matriarch? Or that one, where Mountain lives with her children and grandchildren? So many huts, with so many people in each.



And you have the gizzards to arrive here with such a tiny amount of meat? Huh?"

"But... I mean... Haven't you seen this animal's mountainous height? Just look at how far its body extends. Dearest auntie: Gaze your eyes upon its gargantuan, humongous, super-colossal chest."

"Size? It's big, but there's no *fat* on the thing. It's all carcass and air. Are you blind? Can't you tell the difference between a proper animal and an old wreck like this?"

"Oh."

"I'm surprised at you, Sunny Boy. For how many seasons has the sun shone upon your head? You should be old enough to hunt properly; to bring home *real* meat; to know the difference between a good animal and a bone-bucket like this."

"Oh."

"Of course, we'll eat it. But it won't fill us. It won't give us the energy we need to hunt. We'll traipse off to sleep, dejected, with hollow legs and rumbling bellies."

Blown back by the savagery of Kitten's response, Sunny opened his mouth to say "Sorry". But he barely emitted a sound. He turned, paused, and tried to apologize again. He failed, accepted defeat, bowed his head, and trudged away; heading back to the hut in which he slept, where he greeted his mother:

"Mother kindest: Don't you think we could feed just a few people with this ox? It's just... Well, there's got to be *a bit* of meat on these bones."

Sunny's mother took her time; pondering her son's question, as though mulling over a mouthful of berries, some of which were sweet, and some of which were sour.

She eventually deigned to respond:

"You know our tastes, chick-i-lick. We love meat. In fact, we love *fat*. When we see a skinny animal like this, out there in the bush, we almost always let it go. We save our energy for a worthy creature. A creature who's dripping in fat. You know the sort. The kind of animal whose meat is layered with white fat, which turns into a clear, thick oil when it's cooked. The sort of fat that slides down your throat, lines your stomach, and gives you roaring diarrhoea."

Sunny could not disagree. His people *did* like fatty meat. This was why he had selected this particular ox. It possessed more fat than any other animal they had captured since leaving their Big Camp, at the end of the rainy season.

Why could his peers not see this?

"No doubt, its bones will be good for soup. But there's no *fat* on the thing."

Sunny pinched the ox's belly.

"What's this?"

"It's a little fat, but not much. Lovely: I worry that this animal will cause a fight. You serve up something like that... There'd be so little to go around, one person is sure to accuse another of taking all the prime cuts. A few people will go hungry, whilst others will eat. And then what? Smoke in a beehive! You'll have provoked a riot."

Sunny thought better than to disagree. A single person might have been mistaken. But he had heard the same opinion from *four* different people. They could not all be wrong.

And yet, no! They *could* all be wrong. This *was* a fine creature. It was jacketed in layers of fat. He had done well to get it, and his kinfolk should have been grateful.

That was when it hit him...

That image of Uncle Crow appeared in his mind's eye, replete with his mother's unpredictable eyebrows. There it was, providing more meat than anyone else. And there it was again; cast into exile, chided and disparaged, in much the same way that Sunny was being chided himself.

No-one had called him "Uncle Crow". At least, they had not done so out loud. But Sunny was almost certain that they were calling him an Uncle Crow, in the subtext of their speech; in the hidden meanings, which lurked between the lines; all the more powerful because they were left unspoken, and so remained unpolluted by the inadequacy of words.

Perhaps those people were envious. Sunny very much doubted that they had ever returned with such a majestic animal, back when they were as young as him. He doubted that they had *ever* returned with such a catch.

Did they know that he had been gifted this ox by another clan?

Surely not.

Then what?

Sunny could not be sure.

But of one thing he was certain: This image of Uncle Crow. This semi-mythical character had not just appeared to him once. It had appeared again and again, with increasing regularity; transforming in shape and appearance, until there could be no doubting the matter: Sunny was no longer seeing an

abstract Uncle Crow. He was seeing an image of himself.

# SHAMING THE MEAT

The ox moseyed around for an unspecified number of days, that no-one seemed inclined to count.

As though obeying an unspoken law, the animal never ventured beyond the camp's invisible boundaries; remaining between the two rows of banana-leaf huts, stopping to eat the grass which surrounded the fire pit, and avoiding the windbreaks, made from reeds and grasses, which protected the clan's possessions: Their stone-bladed hunting-spears, wooden thrusting-spears, and the barbed-points they used to spear fish. Their arrows, whose tips were covered in poison. Their bows, clubs, rabbit traps, fish traps, fishing nets, blades, and water vessels. The baskets and cords they had made by weaving plant fibres together, the stone anvils they used to crack nuts, the pot they had made from clay, the sewing needles they had made from animal bone, the digging-sticks they had made from antlers, and their burins; the stone flakes, with chisel-like tips, which they used to decorate these objects.

Whilst the members of the Eagle Clan did own a few personal possessions, such as their loincloths and beads, the items kept in this store were held in common. People borrowed them whenever they wished to use them. But they returned them once they had finished; treating this store as though it were a *library of things*.

The ox moseyed on; indifferent to Kitten, who had gathered some yams, which she was sharing with her hut-mates; and indifferent to Aura's nephew, *Buffalo*, who had gathered some bananas, and left them for anyone to take.

Unseen and unheard, the ox observed a group of children, who were playing *Grown Ups*; pretending they were adults, and thereby learning *to be* adults. The younger children were hunting butterflies with bows and arrows they had made themselves. The older children were hunting small mammals. In time, they would join the adults; hunting alongside their elders, whilst maintaining this spirit of play.

None of this was organised. There were times when the children were content to do nothing. They were comfortable, living in the moment; unafraid of boredom, happy to daydream; to stare at the distant hills, or observe the dust motes as they danced between shafts of light. If they wished to do

something, they did not nag their mothers. They invented a game; drawing shapes in the dirt, nursing the dolls they had made from sticks, and picking berries from nearby bushes; experiencing the world first-hand.

The ox meandered on, reaching a cluster of children who had just built a model camp, filled with replicas of the huts in which they lived. In building this camp, they had taught themselves how to build *real* huts.

Now they were playing inside that camp, re-enacting the events they had observed, and mimicking the adults' behaviour; holding mock debates, deciding when to hunt, and where to gather wood.

It was an education...

Left unsupervised, these children could get hurt at any time. Harmony still had a scar which skirted around the ball of her thumb, because she had tried to catch a flame when she was still a toddler. But this painful experience had taught her to respect the power of fire. She had never been burnt again.

Most lessons were not nearly so harsh. The youngsters learned through a process of observation and exploration. They only ever asked for advice when it suited them, and they never had to endure a lesson which had been imposed upon them by an adult.

It worked. In the same way that toddlers learn to walk, and infants learn to talk; through a mixture of play, trial and error; so the members of the Eagle Clan learned to hunt, fish, gather, navigate, build, debate and negotiate...

They discovered the habits of hundreds of different mammals and birds. They worked out how to track game, by spotting the most elusory of clues. They learnt how to make spears, arrows, blowguns, darts, snares and nets. And they began to master these weapons; setting traps for small animals, hunting by themselves, and as members of a group.

They began to gather. There were tens-of-thousands of plants in their region, but most were inedible or poisonous. Only a few hundred were good for human consumption, and by the time they came of age, the clan's children could identify them all. They could name twenty-nine different types of edible mushrooms. They knew where each one could be found, on what hosts they might grow, and when they would be ready to harvest. They knew which mushrooms *not* to eat. They knew which roots, tubers, nuts, seeds, fruits and leaves were the most nutritious, and which could be used as medicine. They knew how to dig, peel, roast, grind, mix and sift each of their favourite treats.

In time, these children would discover how to cook, make fires, predict the

weather, treat injuries, care for the sick, raise babies, play music, tell stories, perform dances, perform rituals, and maintain diplomatic relations with other clans.

They were never cajoled into learning these things. It simply happened, just as soon as the moment was right.

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The ox remained in a stationary position for most of its days, only setting its legs into motion when it felt it had no other option; begrudging the inconvenience, even though no-one had compelled it to move.

Nobody deigned to slaughter that animal, until it had been three days since the clans-folk had eaten any meat. Only then did an elder, named *Serenity*, take it upon himself to perform the fatal deed; slitting the ox's throat with a blade they had fashioned themselves, using a hard cobble to strike flakes from a triangular rock. Unprompted, several of his peers emerged from their huts. Two youngsters, named *Pilgrim* and *Blue*, took the blade from *Serenity*, and used it to remove the ox's leg. It took them a while to complete this task, although this was of little concern; they had all the time in the world. When they were done, *Health*, the group's medicine woman, wandered over, blessed the meat, used the same blade to score its skin, turned that utensil around, and used the blunt end to pound some medicinal herbs. She rubbed those herbs into the flesh, and passed the joint over to *Sparrow*, who had already prepared a fire. *Aura* and *Harmony* took over. They turned the meat and managed the fire, whilst *Mountain* and *Setting Sun*, the clan's eldest members, observed proceedings from afar; ready to offer their advice, should ever the need arise.

When their meal was almost ready, the community began to gather. They mixed the ox's intestines with the contents of its stomach, took a dollop each, and used it to wash their hands. Then they turned their attention to the stomach itself; cutting its lining into tiny squares, and eating them raw.

Acts like these helped the clans-folk to maintain a rich balance of bacteria, which protected them from disease. No member of the Eagle Clan had ever suffered from allergies, diabetes or cancer. They had never even heard of "Obesity" or "Autoimmunity".

When it was ready, the group removed the roasted meat, laid it out on top of some banana leaves, and squatted down to dine; forming circles, helping themselves to a few shreds of fatty meat, chewing them slowly, before

returning for another portion.

Sunny waited for the others to dig in. He took a little for himself. And then it struck him: No matter how hard he tried to deny the facts, he could not ignore the quality of this food; the meat's marbled flesh, the layers of fat, and the crispy skin, which had crackled and fizzed upon the fire. *He had been right all along.* This was a splendid animal.

Sunny took a great deal of pleasure from observing his kinfolk, as they devoured the meal, with inflated cheeks and dizzy eyes. Their happiness made the hairs on his arms stand on end. But the feeling was bittersweet. Sunny had not forgotten the reception he received when he returned with this ox. A kernel of anger still nestled in his stomach. And now it was germinating; transforming into a seed of irritation, a shoot of vexation, a growth of fury; bursting forth, compelling Sunny to speak in a manner he had not intended, and which he would later come to regret:

"Beloved Uncle Sparrow! Didn't you say that this animal was a 'Worthless bag of bones, possessing nothing but a few measly crumbs of meat'? And now you chew down upon the largest of mouthfuls, before helping yourself to a second serving, and then a third!

"And you, dear Auntie Kitten: Didn't you say it was a 'Sack of guts, barely sufficient to feed the members of a single hut'? Can't you see how many people are eating right now?

"And you, dear Auntie Aura: Why on earth and the ancestral realm, are you eating an 'Old bucket of bones'? Have you pooped out all your pride?"

Sunny silenced himself before he could challenge his mother. But it was far too little, and far too late. Wishing to avoid a confrontation, his peers had stood up and walked away. Sunny had been abandoned; left here alone, insulting the breeze. A swarm of flies could be seen feasting on what remained of the roasted meat. And the fire was collapsing into ash.

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Sunset had come and gone by the time anyone talked to Sunny.

He was approached by Serenity; an elder who possessed an irrepressibly melodic pair of eyes. They were not *hypnotic*. You did not lose yourself in their gaze. But they were *metamorphic*; so placid, they inspired you to relax in their presence. Serenity was almost always the first person to attend the scene of a fracas. His mild persona served as a natural tonic; soothing his companion's annoyance, and dulling their grief.

But Serenity knew all too well that his ears held a greater power than his eyes; that the grieved must be heard, before they can begin to heal. And so he looked into Sunny's eyes, raised his eyebrows, and waited for the youngster to speak.

Sunny did not produce a sound. His mouth had landed him in enough trouble already. But when Serenity placed a hand upon his shoulder, and performed an empathetic nod, he supposed it would have been rude to prolong the silence:

"Beloved Uncle: It's just... Well, it's just that I feel... I feel that too many people take. Not enough people give... And... I mean... It's the *takers* who're accepted... Uncle Serenity: *The givers are insulted...*"

Serenity looked almost sorrowful, as though he was attempting to suck the pain out of Sunny's eyes.

He waited for Sunny to continue:

"Take Sparrow... Didn't you see how he tore into the meat?... You know, I don't wish to say rancid things about a beloved uncle. But... Well, I've watched on as he's gorged himself on the fruit my mama spent a whole day collecting. And yet I've never seen him gather any fruit himself. I've never seen him hunt... It wouldn't be so bad if he made an effort. If he tried and failed. I'd understand that... But he just takes and takes. He never gives thanks. And it's just... Well, he's always the first to criticise. He did call the ox a 'Bag of bones'. I didn't make that up. And... Well, he wasn't eating bones tonight!"

Serenity took a deep breath, inhaling Sunny's angst.

It had the desired effect, up until the point at which Serenity closed his eyes. Breaking off eye-contact, left Sunny feeling exposed; helpless, alone, and riddled with fear.

What on Mother Nature's green earth had he done? Would his kinfolk ever forgive him? Or would he be exiled, like Uncle Crow?

Serenity did not answer these unasked questions. He simply sat there in silent contemplation, for an uncountable number of moments; only revealing his eyes once he sensed that Sunny was ready.

A smile wafted across his face.

"Sunshine: Sparrow wasn't always like this."

Sunny waited for more.

"He used to hunt as much as could be expected. He wasn't particularly proficient. He could go for months without downing a target. But he tried his



best, and he kept us entertained; providing companionship; telling stories and jokes. Whenever another hunter was successful, Sparrow would rush to their side, congratulate them, and help to carry their meat."

"Oh."

"Sparrow's sister's son was his greatest happiness and joy. And, unlike Sparrow, that boy *was* a talented marksman.

"Sparrow accompanied his nephew whenever he went to hunt. You should've seen the size of Sparrow's smirk, whenever the lad hit his mark! It didn't matter if that kill was small or scrawny. Sparrow was like the parrot who wore the rainbow!"

Sunny waited for more.

"Child: Sparrow's nephew was killed by a snake, right there, in front of his eyes. Sparrow tried to protect the boy. But by the time he got close enough to strike, it was already too late. It wasn't Sparrow's fault. There was nothing he could've done. But he blamed himself nonetheless."

Sunny bowed his head.

"After that, Sparrow never went hunting again."

Serenity allowed his story to linger, gazed into Sunny's eyes, and waited to see if it had the desired effect.

But Sunny did not sound entirely convinced:

"Oh... Yeah... I suppose that explains it... Well, it explains why he doesn't *hunt*."

Serenity closed and reopened his eyes.

"But it doesn't explain why he doesn't *gather*?"

Sunny nodded.

"Okay. Allow me to explain... Now, Sparrow's lover had a daughter; a girl with a butterfly heart. You know the type? The sort of person who likes to flutter away on their own, even when they're young, and not yet educated in the ways of the world... Once upon a time, when that girl was still younger than you are today, she went off to collect berries... Sunshine: You know what berry collectors are like? They feel a need to check every berry they find, to be sure they're the sweet ones... And this is what came to pass: That young girl tasted a berry she had never seen before. It was poisonous, but she didn't feel any ill effects. And so she ate a second berry, a third and a fourth. She ate almost as many as she collected.

"Only when she had filled the basket, and begun her journey home, did

she start to feel a little queasy. But she persevered without complaint. She didn't collapse until she had reached the edge of our camp.

"Sparrow came running, looked at the girl and gasped. For it was at that very moment, that the girl took her final breath. Sparrow was helpless. He couldn't do anything but watch, as her spirits escaped from her body, and floated back to our ancestral forest."

Serenity shook his head in solemn contemplation.

"Child: Every life that's lived is a story. Some people like to tell theirs. Others prefer to keep theirs to themselves. But behind every action, there's another action. Behind every character, there's a lifetime of tales; tragedies and comedies alike."

"I... I..."

It did not feel right to push for more. Sunny had been insensitive enough already. And Sparrow *did* help a little, in his own individual way. When the clans in their tribe gathered to form their Big Camp, in the rainy season, Sparrow helped in the fields; growing tobacco and harvesting coffee. He also grew cassava, on the fringes of this camp, albeit with limited success. Farming was inefficient. It required a great amount of clearing, weeding, fertilizing, watering and picking. It was nowhere near as productive as hunting or gathering. And so Sparrow only ever produced a small crop; a fact which gave Sunny the false impression that he barely contributed at all. But Sparrow did what he could, given his circumstances. And the cassava he grew did provide a degree of insurance; something which clan-members could eat on the days when they were unable to secure any other food, and something they could trade with the neighbouring clans.

Sunny would have been happy to bring this conversation to an end. But Serenity could sense that he needed to unburden himself a little more.

"Go on," he said. "Let it out."

"Okay... But only if you insist."

Serenity nodded.

"It's just... Well, you've explained why Sparrow doesn't hunt or gather. Thank-you, uncle. But... But none of this explains why he insults the people who do."

Serenity chortled so loudly, the noise jolted hundreds of birds from their branches; creating a cloud of feathers and beaks:

Aah-oooh. Ah-ah-ah. Chuck-a-chuck ooh!

"What's so funny?"

"Our sweet, sacred, ancestral mothers! *Ho ho ho*. Sunny: How long have you lived with us?"

"Since I entered the mortal realm."

"Since you entered the mortal realm? And you still don't know our ways?"

Sunny frowned.

"Haven't you heard us call the greatest animals the worst names? If someone were to slay a giant buffalo, single-handedly, and drag it back here alone; we'd call that thing a 'Rat'. The hunter would probably call it a 'Mouse', just to pre-empt his sistren's sneers... The person who kills a falcon, might complain of its feathery, good-for-nothing wings. 'So much to pluck! So little meat!'... The person who hunts a boar, might criticise its unappetizing smell, inedible tusks, and the hairs which get stuck in your teeth; anything to divert our attention from the quality of its meat.

"If we miss a target, our friends might laugh at us for the rest of the day. But if we kill an animal, things are sure to be even worse.

"When we ask for help, carrying a creature we've killed, our friends will come to collect it. And as soon as they see the animal, they'll say: 'What? You dragged us all the way here *for that*? If we'd known it was so skinny, we'd have stayed at home.'

"Child: When this happens, you just have to nod, agree and apologize. Then you must watch on, as everyone takes their share. And still, they complain! It's 'Too gaunt', 'Too old', 'Too small', 'Too thin'.

"The insults are compliments, when you come to think of it. The more someone insults your meat, the better it must be. The ancestors know it to be true: Up is down, and left is right... If someone returns to camp and says, 'I've killed an animal, but it's so small, I don't know if we should even bother to fetch it'; then you know that a mighty fine feast awaits."

Sunny could not deny it. He had seen this several times before. Yet somehow it felt different when *other* people were involved. That was fun and games. When *he* was the butt of the joke, it was another matter entirely. Sunny had spent four days in the wilderness, alone, without food; risking attack, sunstroke and dehydration. The insults had dented his pride.

"But why?"

"'Why'? *Why!* Sunshine: Surely you must know?"

Sunny shook his head. No-one had ever told him, and he had never asked.

He had learnt almost everything he knew through a mixture of observation and imitation; watching his peers and copying their behaviour. As a technique, it was pretty efficient. It had taught him *how* to perform an abundance of different activities. But it had not always taught him *why* things were done the way they were.

"By the good earth, that explains it!... Sunshine: We're an egalitarian bunch, wouldn't you say? No-one really bosses anyone else around."

Sunny nodded.

"And why do you think that is?"

"Because we don't allow them?"

"*Because we don't give them the means!*... Imagine there's one hunter who's better than the rest. It's not hard to do. Uncle Crow may be the stuff of legends, but there's usually an individual, each generation, who returns with enough meat to feed half the clan... Child: Let's say we dollop sunshine upon their head. We inflate their ego. What do you think will happen?... They'll stomp about like an elephant. They'll tell us to 'Do this' and 'Do that'. And if we refuse, they'll withhold our meat, and we'll starve... Before you know it, that person will have bribed a bunch of their friends with the prime cuts. Then *they'll* start making demands; saying 'Do this' and 'Do that', on behalf of the Uncle Crow... Whoosh! Mother Nature's lightning! A whole hierarchy will have emerged."

Sunny tensed his cheeks.

"Sunshine: There are two wolves who live within us. One is good. It's joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth and compassion. The other wolf is evil. It's anger, envy, greed, self-pity, resentment, lies, pride, ego and arrogance.

"To be the best people we can be... To be the best *clan* and the best *tribe* we can be... We must nurture the good wolf, and suppress the evil one.

"This is why we shame the meat. We say it's worthless, in order to constrain the hunter's evil wolf; to obliterate their pride, greed and arrogance; before these dangerous traits have the chance to ravage us all.

"This is how we keep would-be-bullies in their place, and remain an egalitarian sort of clan."

Sunny nodded. It was all becoming clear:

"And this is why we share?"

"Exactly! Sparrow does his part. He's the clan's *griot*; the spreader of news, singer of songs, and teller of tales. He tries to grow vegetables too. Okay, he's

hardly proficient. But he always shares the cassava he grows.”

Sunny had one final question:

“Beloved uncle: Why hadn’t you told me any of this before?”

Serenity could barely repress a smile.

“*Ho ho ho*. Why, sunshine, because you never asked!