

## The Burning River

by Kevin Strange

When I cleared that final hill, when I laid eyes on it for the first time, I dropped to my knees and wept.

The burning river.

After a time, I gathered myself. I trudged weak and weary to its bank.

I pulled off my gas mask. I pulled off my duster jacket. My bullet proof vest, my gloves. As I stripped before her, entranced by her majestic flow, I already felt naked.

Long before that day I'd lost my innocence. My pride. My ignorance. My pity. My compassion and empathy. I'd lost my fear, my longing. My honesty. My integrity.

My will to live was all that remained.

My group was twenty strong when we'd set out to find the burning river. Most of us didn't believe in its magical powers, but we had nothing else. Had we stayed behind, we'd have died inside a month. We expected no salvation, yet had nothing to lose.

No comfort.

No food.

No clean water.

So we went. Toward the Burning River. Toward the cleansing. To the place where dragons pissed fire and men worthy of its power became gods.

There were no dragons. Not even fire. The burning river was pale, colorless. Like bones melted down to goopy pudding, sloshing slowly between a nuclear power plant and a chemical manufacturing facility twenty miles away. The river was a soup of radioactive waste and god only knows what else. No magic. No salvation.

I pulled off my shirt and my pants. Stood naked before her majesty. Stood naked for the first time in as long as I could remember. Stood alone for the first time since the world ended.

It wasn't global warming, nuclear war, biological weapons. The Earth simply quit on us. Spat up its lungs and shit out its guts like a cancer. The trees fell, the grass. Gardens and farms shriveled and died like worms in the sun. Volcanoes. Earthquakes. Tsunamis.

Mass extinction level event.

The clean water stopped flowing.

Our cell phones, our twitters, our television talking head messiahs couldn't save us.

We died.

But not all of us. Only the lucky ones.

Those of us dumb enough to live starved. Sixty days and it was all gone. Millions upon millions of gallons of bottled water, canned food, boxed dinners, preservatives, cholesterol warnings, MSG. May contain Acrylamide. May cause cancer. May cause planetary anal leakage.

All gone. Panic, looting. It was like the whole world was whacked out on some strange kind of speed. There was no tomorrow. No time to conserve. No time to ration. Eat it now, drink it now, before someone else drinks it for you. Before someone else stabs you in the fucking throat and eats your happy meal.

We killed our mothers and fathers, our daughters and sisters, our nephews and uncles just to get their last package of pizza rolls.

Then it was all gone. Every last bit. And that's when we started cooking people.

I stabbed a man in both his eyes for a stick of bubble gum.

It was the only meal I ate that week. Not the gum.

The man.

Those of us who refused to die learned to run in packs like wild dogs. The dogs were dead. We ate them first. Then we turned on each other.

Last year I was a teacher. Now I eat people. It just happened like that. There was no great speech about survival. No mourning the dead. No honor. No justice.

After six months we hunted. We slept. We ate. That was life. That's all that mattered.

My pack was lead by a black man missing the last two fingers on his right hand named Dojo. I don't know what happened to his fingers. I don't know if that was his real name. My real name is Bradley, but in the pack, in the now, in this reality, I'm known as Cockbiter.

I'm not the biggest or the smallest member of the pack. I don't fight the best, I don't run the fastest. What I do to survive is bite the dick off anyone who fucks with me. That's how I got my name.

Dojo faught the best, so Dojo led our hunts. Dojo picked the places we slept and we didn't die in our sleep from a rival pack ambush in the middle of the night, so every day he picked again.

It was really that simple. When the world dies, you don't sit around and ask it questions while it bleeds to death. And when Dojo fights off five guys at once and then makes them eat their own stomachs, he's the leader.

We learned about the burning river during our last hunt.

Resources were running thin. A pack of twenty was relatively large. Big packs and loners got it quick. Spot a loner, surround him, an hour later you're roasting loner leg around the fire, picking the bones clean. Big packs were easy to spot, not really easy to kill, but the hunger usually turned them against each other.

Dojo kept us fed. He was ruthless. Dojo would take two or three men out to hunt. If they didn't catch a meal, they'd come back a person light, and that would be our meal. If someone got hurt, stabbed in a fight over food, rolled an ankle, caught a cold, passed out from exhaustion. We ate them. No remorse. No friends. No pacts. No votes. Just walking TV dinners. All of us.

We hadn't caught food for a week. Our backpacks were empty. We were drinking our own piss.

There was no home. There was no stop. You kept moving or you died. Sharks. Kill. Eat. Shit. Repeat.

We'd been hunting near a landfill for a while. The awful stench of the garbage dump hid our awful stench. The chemicals in the garbage went up quick when we put flame to it. We set fires and traps.

There was talk amongst the pack that we'd picked the area dry. Some wanted to move. Dojo said stay. We stayed.

That night we heard the scream. The next morning, we checked the trap. You don't check traps at night. Night traps are traps.

It was a woman. She had big, curly brown hair and scars across her nose. She was chopping at her leg, trying to cut it off. The trap held. The world was dying but the metal was still strong.

Women didn't die off quickly. Everyone assumed they would. Women are tough. Hardy. Quick. Viscious. Most of us were too weak from malnourishment to get hard, but those of us who wanted to

fuck learned to fuck each other.

She had a map. We got it off her after she stuck Charlie in the throat with a pick she pulled from her boot. Charlie fed us that night.

Dojo took her away. He came back alone. His backpack was full. Heavy. He told us about the burning river. He told us about what she'd told him while we ate Charlie. Dojo didn't fuck any of us that night.

He told us she told him she was on her way back from the river to get the rest of her pack. She told him about the dragons. She told him that two men with her waded into the water and transformed into gods. She told him they soared into the heavens and disappeared. She told him she was scared to join them because she wasn't worthy. She said a third man climbed into the river, caught fire and died screaming as he melted. He wasn't worthy, either.

Jim the tailor said it was bullshit. We called him that because he made us lining for our boots and coats and hats from flesh. He made people suits. He was damn good at it.

Dojo dared Jim the tailor to prove him unworthy. Jim the tailor sat silent.

And so we walked.

What was twenty men became fifteen in short order. The woman was lean and small, mostly muscle. She didn't feed us for more than an afternoon. Dojo followed the map which lead away from the cities. Away from the other packs. Away from everything.

We died.

Fifteen became nine became six.

And then it happened.

As we entered what had been a dense wooded area before it all crumpled in on itself, Dojo tripped over a series of fallen trees. His foot lodged between two logs. His leg twisted the wrong way against his bulk. The bone broke the skin. Dojo screamed in agony. Demanded we pull him loose.

The five of us stared. Dumbfounded. Then Jim the Tailor, eyes yellowed and bulging from starvation kicked Dojo in the face. Then we all kicked Dojo in the face. We kicked and we kicked until there was no face left.

It was me who grabbed the map off his body, while the rest cut him up and started a fire. We ate well that night. Dojo's meat gave us strength. Cleared our thoughts.

With full bellies, we fought. Jim the tailor wanted to turn back. We'd crossed the halfway point a day and a half prior. We were closer to the burning river than the garbage dump. Criss, an ugly man with the thick beard wanted to go on. Travis, a toothless Hispanic man agreed with him. I stayed quiet, gnawing the marrow from Dojo's leg bone while they argued with Jim the tailor.

The next morning when I woke, Jim was in three pieces and Travis was bleeding out from his neck. Criss and I made the last leg of our journey in silence. With plenty of food and no other packs way out so far from the city to hunt us, there was nothing to say.

It was the final night that he jumped on me, thinking me asleep. It wasn't out of hunger. It was greed. He wanted godhood to himself. He choked me with my blanket, screaming he was worthy and that I was food.

I hadn't been asleep, though. You can't sleep, now. Rest, yes. Sleep? Not with a dying world coughing out its last breaths. My blade came up between his legs. He was still not bled out—dying but not quite dead—when I left him at first light. I had plenty of food. I let him rot.

Naked. Weeping. Doubting.

The burning river smelled of sulfur. Of waste. I knew it contained no magic. I knew that wading through its current meant death. Meant agony.

That's exactly what I wanted.

In my life, before the planet gave up, I was an honorable man. I paid my taxes. I mowed my lawn twice a week. I did charitable work in my off time. I molded young lives. I inspired. I educated. I

believed in humanity.

The naked man at the bank of the burning river was not me. Cockbiter, the scared, scarred, shaking, paranoid man was not who I had intended to become. But he was all I had. There was no turning back. There was only the burning river.

I stepped into the pale muck ankle deep.

I felt the flesh instantly melt as searing flame licked up my calves. I did not reel, nor pull back out of the sludge.

I stayed, experiencing every moment of searing pain not because I thought myself worthy of its magic. I stayed because I remembered frantically leaving the house when the state of emergency and martial law was declared throughout the country. I remembered ignoring the calls from my elderly parents as I drove past their neighborhood, leaving them to die alone without their only son.

I stayed because I remembered racing to the military check point broadcast on all the televisions and radios. I remembered standing in line for twenty hours with my scared girlfriend Samantha at my side. And I remembered leaving her standing there, terrified and sobbing when the guards said one more, and I crossed through the fence instead of her.

It was not bravery nor delusions of grandeur that made me drop to my knees in the burning river, feeling everything from my waist down slough off and float away with the current.

What made me wade out even deeper as my body was consumed by the wretched ichor wasn't that I could no longer remember the faces of my parents, nor my girlfriend. I could no longer even remember the faces of the people I'd killed. Of the people I'd eaten.

I'd grown to savor the sounds the fat sizzling off the bone in a fire. I'd begun to size up a person the moment I saw them, look for the thick parts, wonder how they tasted.

I let myself sink below the surface of the burning river because I knew the difference between the taste of a four year old and a forty year old and I was disappointed anytime I was made to eat the later.

I let the river consume my body because I'd grown good at smothering children in their sleep, making it look like natural death because the spongy brain tissue of kids was my favorite part to eat.

I died in the burning river because once, not long ago, I taught kids to read and write.

I taught them the difference between right and wrong. The importance of being a good person. Of doing good by others. Now I fist fought others in the pack over the yummy fluid from inside the eyeballs of eight year olds.

I was not worthy of godhood. I was not worthy of manhood. I was only worthy of a horrible death. And so I found one.

My only wish? To suffer as long as possible before my life slipped away.

To pay for my sins with my pain and suffering.

And as the final vestiges of life left me, I saw a tunnel of light before me. A pinprick at first, growing larger all the time. I followed it, curious, as agony and sense of self dwindled, faded, became distant memory. More distant than the memory of listening to the voice mail my parents left me begging me to save them from the men banging on their doors and windows. More distant than the memory of watching Samantha led away at knife point from the other side of the fence, screaming at me. Cursing me. Blaming me for the end of the world.

More still distant than the first time I'd coaxed a child away from his father with the promise of that stick of gum I'd fought to the death for.

I breached the light at the end of the tunnel as a warm sensation washed over me. I felt orgasmic in my death. I radiated energy as I opened my eyes and saw heaven before me.

Heaven was a dying world. And I floated above it.

Above the burning river.

Worthy after all.

I gazed at the clouds above and wondered why those before me had chosen to leave this place.  
This shriveled planet.

My body glowed pale. White, transparent flames danced over my flesh as I flew across the river's surface. I did not join my fellow gods above.

The two men who'd followed me to the river bank without my knowledge cried out and fell back over the ridge toward the garbage dump.

With only a thought, I made them one. A twitching, screaming ball of flesh mashed together, writhing in the dust of dead plants. My will be done. Amen.

I could not leave the world as it bucked and seethed in death throes.

I am its God now.

There are too many men like me. Good men turned bad by circumstance. Or had we all been bad from the start? Only pretending to be good when the world was good enough to keep child killers acting like teachers?

It doesn't matter which. They are all me. I am all of them. One in the same.

All that matters is that I kill every last one of them. That I place a loving hand over the dying mouth of planet Earth like I'd done to so many before her. That I send her peacefully to eternal sleep.

To live forever in Heaven.

Thy kingdom come.