

## A Memoir in Ice

I was born on a tiny island in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Of course, it wasn't the Baltic Sea back then, but an endless ocean of shadow and ice. But if you asked me to point on a map to where I was born, I shall point there.

My father was Frost, my mother, Snow. This was before the first dragons were born, before the plates beneath the earth began to shift. There were stars yet to be conceived.

Alone? No, we were far from alone. There were bears on the island. My parents gave me to them when I was a few days old. They knew the bears would educate me in all the ways I would need.

My early years were spent in deep caves beneath tangled forests. I curled with the cubs, suckled from the breast of Mother Bear. My first speech was the prickle of ice and rain, but my favourite tongue will always be the growling hymns of bears.

When I was grown enough to hunt food, the first great change came upon my life. A storm brewed in the sky, the first of the great storms which ravished the world. It was one night that a shaft of lightning felled a tree. The sound woke me from my bearskin dreams. The others moaned in fear, but I ventured on all-fours to the fallen tree.

I still have that first carving. I keep it in my desk. It is of rough black wood, a type long extinct today. I suppose I meant it to be a bear, though I was less skilled then.

The bears recognised the potential in my early art. Knowing they could not teach me such things, they sent me to train with the white woodpeckers, to learn the ways of whittling.

A woodpecker is a wicked teacher. They are the greatest of perfectionists, and my skill only accentuated this. I still have the scars where they pecked my hands, when I whittled something wrong. One carving I did with uneven eyes, and they opened the veins between my thumb and my wrist. But I would not give those lessons for anything in the world. I became the greatest of carvers, until the eldest woodpeckers bowed their beaks in defeat.

The day I graduated from their teachings, I resolved to leave the island. I was young and had visions of adventure. With my bear-sharp claws I brought down a tree, with my woodpecker-skill I turned it into a boat.

My parents came to wish me goodbye. My father gave me his second-best knife, my mother gave me her birch-bark paints. I set sail from the stony coast, delving into mists which hung above the sea.

Land? I knew of none. The continents were unformed; mountains lay beneath waves. The only map I had were the stars in the sky and the songs in my mind. I sailed for a long time, living on mist and moonlight, until I moored on an utterly frozen land. This was nothing like my island: as soon I stepped on its surface I felt its size, stretching beyond the horizon and into the sky. It would be where Russia is now, though back then we knew it only as North.

I left my boat on the shore and waded through snow. I stayed a while in this land. I passed through villages, earning wonder and respect for the carvings I made. In time I built a hold for myself: my own hall made with my

own hands. I gained followers, gnomes and wood sprites; black beasts who came to my hall to sit by my heels.

Will it surprise you to hear I was a warring god? I was young and strong, with hands that could break as well as make. When I looked from my hall, I saw a wide unconquered land and wished it to be mine. I battled giants who had laid claim to it, I pillaged towns and slaughtered babes. I rode before armies, drank honeyed mead from my enemies' skulls.

I heard tell of The Glaciar King, a monarch reigning in the frozen east. I went to him, sat at his table, ate his meats. His daughter sat by his side. She wore a gown of stars, her face as delicate as falling snow. She danced for us after the feast, her skirts twirling like a song.

I wanted her. I told as much to her father. I offered my knife and my paints as a dowry, but he refused. I marched my army to his palace and broke upon his door. I found him in the throne room and cracked his head on the floor. I hung his lungs about my neck. I carried his daughter from her chambers and we were wed in my hall.

We were happy together. We still are. I gave her everything she asked for. I believe she gave me more. As the nights went by, love softened my hand and I wearied of war. My armies fell apart. My wife and I took to walking the ice-fields together, watching mammoths graze.

My life changed again with the first sunrise. The world was lit only by moon and stars, but spring had begun. The snows thawed and the land turned green. Birds trilled and flowers waved in bloom.

But my wife and I are creatures of winter, and we missed the cool nights. We left the hall and migrated north. We crossed seas and mountain ranges newly born. We spent our evenings in a tent, huddled close as the day's fire smoked and died.

We arrived at the very top of the world. Here, at the most northerly point, the ice was still fresh and the glaciers floated free. We set a pole in the earth to mark our home: no wind has ever knocked it down.

We built, not a hall, but a humble cottage, from the pines that clustered in the cold. It was there — here, I should say — that I focused again on my work. War had made me sloppy, so I refined my art in the woodpecker way. My wife practised pastry, though she never told me where she got the wheat.

They are my fondest memories: a pie sizzling by the hearth, the snow a-thunder outside, while I finished a sculpture from the leg of an old chair.

One morning I strode outside, my cloak wrapped about me, to watch the sunset. The days are short and brilliant here, sunrise only slightly preceding sunset. As the snow glowed scarlet-pink, I felt a susurrus in the earth. I lowered my ear and heard footsteps under the ice.

I struck my staff against the snow. It broke into crystals, revealing a cave. I saw a gathering of creatures, small sprightly beings: a colony of ice elves. They gazed at me with wonder, each the height of a child. I helped them out and resealed the hole. I learned they were tunnelling underground, fleeing a thaw in the west, when the cave collapsed around them, leaving them trapped.

We took them in. We wrapped them in blankets and sat them by the fire. They whispered with each other, while I whittled a bear. Their eyes followed my hands, widening as my creation came to completion. Later, a chosen representative approached me. He stood, eyes fixed on his feet. At last, he asked me to teach them to carve.

They were good students. Woodwork came naturally to them — though they were perfectionists of a kind I had not seen since the white woodpeckers. When they honed their skill to a place that pleased them, they produced with greater force. Every day, dozens of sculptures were churned out. They filled the shelves, the cupboards, jostling for room. We grew fond of the elves:

we built them a cottage, for they had no wish to leave, but there was no room for their carvings.

The first traces of the idea came to me. I lay in bed with my wife, mulling it over with a good wine. It would be a commitment, something to keep me busy through the long night. But what else did I have to do, here in the farthest north?

I sent the message with the birds, to every household they could find. A song for the ears of children:

*Write a letter: name all the toys you wish.*

*Send it north, and hang a stocking*

*on the longest night of the year.*

The letters came thick and fast. They asked for all manner of things, plenty the elves had already made, and some we never imagined. I took out my birch-bark paints, sharpened my knife, and we set to work, sculpting their dreams.

Leading up to the main event, I wondered how to get around the world in one night. I heard rumour of a reindeer, as old as Orion, who could fly the sky like a bird. I found her grazing on a frosty outcrop, her four antlers framing the night.

Oh, how I loved that beast. She thrashed beneath my weight, bucked with all her might. I held tight to her coat, as her antlers tore my cheek. We rolled together in blood and snow, her hair in my mouth. We cartwheeled through the northern lights.

She relented and admitted I was worthy. I fashioned a sleigh from timber; she accepted the harness, watching the elves load presents.

On the darkest night, she pulled the sleigh into the sky. In my experience, time is fickle and easily changed: midnight had scarcely tolled when we filled the last of the stockings. A victory feast was held when we arrived home:

lamb and hog and several geese. When we finished, the ravished bones reformed themselves, and the geese flew away.

My wife kissed me. She thought me mad, of course — she still does. Deliver elf-made gifts to every child under the moon? It is certainly mad. That is why I do it.

It was Boxing Day, when the reindeer fell into the snow. Her belly writhed. She bit my hand when I came close, but there was farewell in her teeth. Her time had come.

As she closed her eyes, eight lumps of fur fell from between her legs. They sniffed the air before stumbling to their hoofs. They nibbled my fingers, half-blind. I picked them up and put them by the fire. I went for milk; when I returned, one was prancing through the air.

They were all boys, each as proud as their mother. There were only eight then. The ninth came later — but that is another story.

The reindeer grew quickly. They were big enough to tow the sleigh by the next moon. They are smaller than their mother: it takes all eight to drag me into the sky.

Little has changed since then. I am older now. I leave most of the carving to the elves these days: my hands are not what they once were. But I make my mad ride into the night. I mount the sleigh, harness the reindeer, and soar through all the world.

Hmm? Am I leaving things untold? You are right, most likely. I have lived a long time, seen many things, heard countless tales. But what good is life without mysteries? Without stories you will never know?

But I have talked long enough for one night. The moon is high, the elves are working, and somewhere bears sing. Why don't you stay for tea? My wife is baking mince pies.