

Cowboys, Indians—and a Devil

A Supernatural Fantasy Origin Short Story

Written by John C. Campbell

Narrated by Dan Johnson

Cowboys, Indians—and a Devil Copyright ©2020 by John C. Campbell

Contents

Chapter One: **The Cabin in the Valley**

Chapter Two: **The Black Bear**

Chapter Three: **The Posse**

Chapter Four: **The Killer of Men**

Chapter Five: **The Chase**

Chapter Six: **The Fight**

Chapter Seven: **The Maiden**

Chapter Eight: **The Bear Returns**

Chapter Nine: **Lost**

Chapter One: The Cabin in the Valley

My name is Smoke on Distant Mountain. I am a Cherokee warrior. I am born of the Real People, and I am a human being, but I am not only human. I live with a light inside. When I was a child, my grandmother told me it is an angel's light. I am a young brave now, and I have learned that fighting my own nature is a miserable thing to do, so I try to pay attention when my angel shows me things others cannot see.

This morning, after many moons seeing no other humans, I came out of the woods, looked out over a valley, and noticed a swollen shadow squatting above a rough log dwelling. It was a peaceful scene, but the greasy darkness was distinct, hunkering like a bloated snake next to the cooking smoke still rising from the chimney. I knew what I would find before I went down to that cabin, but ugly and needless, it was still as terrible a thing as I have seen, and I have witnessed many dark acts in my short life. The man had his head twisted around on his neck, the woman was desecrated, and the boy, only a handful of years old, had been beaten until most of his bones were broken. I do not particularly care for white folk, but what someone, more monster than man, did to the boy and his mother is abhorrent to me and intolerable to my angel. Men sin, creatures abuse, the innocent and the weak are always the victims.

The angel in me has given me several gifts. One is *The Sight*, but I can see only dimly into the future. I've been following the killer's spoor for the last hour, and I sense a sad ending in front of me, but as I have already said, I cannot deny my angel, so I will not give up until I can find and

stop this evil. The quick rhythm of a horse's hooves lets me know someone is riding up hard from the valley behind. I search with my God-light and see it is a young life, hardly more than a boy. His soul is badly agitated.

Pretty sure that he's seen what I have—I am also pretty sure he will try to shoot me. I hide in his path, using a large tree. It has to be big because I am a very large man. I am also fast. As he rides by, I reach out and pull him off his horse, then tie him up before he can recover his wits. I take his pistol and whistle for his pony. The boy is a wiry youth with tousled red hair and a wagonload of freckles. He looks very much like the mother and child in the cabin. He is spitting mad, his eyes filled with hate.

"Son or brother?" I ask in the good English taught to me on the reservation.

Unable to contain his rage, he screams at me, "You killed my sister and her family!" Then, helpless, he starts to cry. I go to fetch the pony as it has wandered back our way. I tie her to a tree. He has been unable to wipe away his furious tears and the snot running from his nose. I take pity and clean his face with his shirt. The crying fit slows, and he looks up. Miserable, his heart breaking, he has one word for me, "Why?"

I tell him, "I did not kill your family. I am hunting their murderer. You are slowing me down."

He goes as still as a fawn under cover, and I can see him thinking hard. I am patient. Finally, he mumbles in a much-subdued voice, "I was on the ridge. I saw you walking up to my sister's house. You went inside, then came out a few minutes later and bent low to the ground, searching for something. You seemed to find what you were looking for, and you moved away from the cabin. I rode down and found"—here he gulps, then repeats in a steadier voice—"and found what I found." He pauses, gathers his wits while looking me up and down, then says clearly, "I thought you weren't in there long enough to have done all that damage, but I was scared and mad, and you're an Indian."

I cannot help a small smile. "I am a Cherokee. You can call me Smoke." I untie the youngster but do not give him back his pistol.

He stands up, rubbing his wrists, not making a move. "If you're going after the one who killed my sister, I want to go with you." I consider his words, as well as the one who speaks them. I want to tell him, "No," but decide he will go after the killer by himself. He has no idea what he faces. The sadness I have seen at the end of this trail might mean that he will be unlucky enough to find the devil by himself, or more likely, that the murderer finds him.

"What is your name," I ask while I ponder.

"Toby," he says defiantly. He no longer sees me as the enemy, but as my teacher used to say about me, he is not going to give an inch.

"OK, you can come with me." I hand him back his pistol. "But, there is something you should know about the one we hunt." He takes the gun, looks at it for a moment, then holsters it

decisively. He doesn't say anything, just climbs stiffly back atop his horse and looks at me, waiting. I take his reins so he can hear while I talk, find the spoor again, then resume my tracking while I weigh how to put what I have to say into words. It takes the rest of the morning to convince him, but I am not sure he ever really understands—until it is too late.

Chapter Two: **The Black Bear**

It is mid-afternoon when we surprise the bear. Although its fur is a lighter brown, it is called a black bear by white folk. We startle it on the path we've been following. It is my fault. I wasn't making enough noise, but I had not expected to find a bear in this area of the country. I look around for cubs and don't see any, so keeping hold of the reins, I slowly back us away. It is a medium-sized black bear, maybe three-hundred pounds. It is only thirty yards from us. It had come over the top of the hill as we were getting ready to crest the same peak on the same path. The bear looks even more impressive when it stands up on its hind legs to get a better look and smell of us. Unfortunately, at this point, Toby's horse pulls the reins from my hand, turns, and runs like wildfire on a dry summer day.

Toby yells in surprise and, thrown from the saddle by the sudden change in direction, hits the ground hard and is still. The bear, just as startled, clacks its teeth and growls, swaying its massive head back and forth. I stand as tall as I can, which is pretty tall, and sternly tell the bear to go away in Cherokee, while I move to stand over the boy. I throw a shield of God-light over us while I watch the bear sniff the air. I hope the barrier will protect us, and I wait to see what the animal will do next. The bear drops back down on all fours, clacks its teeth at us again, slaps the ground with one big paw, then turns and lopes away.

I let out a breath I did not know I had been holding and bend to check the boy. He has landed on his hard head and is barely conscious. I can sense a bruise forming on the back of his skull, but he is not severely injured. Another of my divine gifts from my angel, the one I thank The Creator for most often, is my ability to use my light to heal. I press a palm against the lump on his head, the boy groans, then a few moments later, he sits up, still dazed, wanting to know what happened. I grunt—it would be too much to try to explain. I leave him to go find his horse, whistling for her several times while I look, but have no luck. I return empty-handed, and Toby stoutly claims he can walk. I am not willing to make him less a man in his own eyes, but our pace is slow. We track the murderer until darkness falls.

Toby is for pushing on into the night, but we have found a clearing near one of the streams that run across the valley floors, and I tell him finding food is our priority now. Toby gives in and offers to build a firepit. I spit several fish in the stream with a makeshift spear. As we eat, I find myself staring at blood memories brought alive again by the fire. Toby chews his fish, also gazing silently into the flames. When he finally does speak, it is an echo of my dark visions. "Smoke, how can someone murder people just like that? Strangers and all. Never having done the murderer any harm?"

I have already told him my belief that his sister's killer is not human. Instead, I say, "Evil does not have a heart. Let your gun avenge your family. It may keep you alive as well."

Toby looks at me, and I can see his haunted eyes harden. He nods very slightly, then our conversation takes an unexpected turn. "I could hear you, you know. I couldn't understand the language, but somehow I knew you were telling that bear to go, and then it just ran away. Afterward, I could feel a strange and wonderful warmth. I was pretty sure it was you healing me. What are you, Smoke?"

"I am a human being of the Cherokee nation."

Toby shakes his head, his eyes never leaving mine. "I don't think so, at least I don't think that's all you are. I believe you must be my guardian angel." I had begun to get used to being around another person, but now I am very uneasy. I tell him, "That sounds like a dangerous belief to hold while hunting a killer."

Toby has a stubborn sureness that only makes me more uncomfortable. "I know you will keep me safe, but I'll do my part."

Chapter Three: **The Posse**

I am still trying to figure out words that will make sense to him when I hear the hooves of many horses coming our way from further up the river. I search and find nine life-lights. I know they will see our campfire in a few moments. I point to my chest, then in the direction we have been tracking the killer, pick up my satchel, and fade into the night. When the posse rein in their horses and sit gazing down at an unmoving Toby, I am not far away. The firelight dazzles their eyes, so the men cannot see me.

I listen as the sheriff, a dour-looking, older man with what is called a "handlebar mustache," tells Toby that Joshua Spence, a neighbor, reported the murder. The sheriff also says they've found Toby's horse. With a startled expression, Toby jumps up and goes over to stroke his mare's mane while she nuzzles his neck. The sheriff and his men watch Toby without saying anything for several minutes, then the sheriff coughs and tells the boy he figures Toby is after the killer, which he says sternly is the wrong thing to do.

He also informs the youngster that they found a big man's tracks next to Toby's, and they want to know who I am. I can hear that they don't believe him when the boy reports that I am an Indian but am helping him track the killer. After he describes my size, the men laugh at him and want to know where I am.

I am a bit concerned, myself. These men and their horses make for an awful lot of life-lights crowding these woods tonight. I decide my best bet is to get back on his track again before the killer discovers this posse. Worst case, I figure nine men can handle a single creature of darkness. Whatever it is. Probably.

I circle noiselessly, outside the radius of the firelight, until I pick up the spoor. For an hour, I follow the creature along a straight path, then his track swings suddenly around in a wide arc until it is headed back toward the camp. I decide I can add hearing to a growing list of the killer's supernatural traits. The longer I stalk it, the more bestial this murderer feels. After pulling out both tomahawks, I set my pack aside. I'll come back for it. Spurred by my angel side, I run faster than a human could through the dark woods. I am still too late.

Chapter Four: **The Killer of Men**

I hear the screams while I am far too far away. My senses lighting my path, I fairly fly over the uneven forest floor, but the cries of the men and the dense echoes of murder do not last long. As I enter the clearing, I see that most of the horses, including Toby's, have broken free and galloped off. The few that remain are wide-eyed, whinnying in alarm. Dead men are strewn like broken timbers throughout the camp. It looks like not a single man of them had a chance to draw their weapon. I see heads stove in, broken necks, crushed chests, and chunks of flesh ripped free by sharp teeth. One person's arm has been torn from their body and is charring in the fire.

I well remember the smell of burning human flesh. I try not to let it bother me too much. Working quickly, I kick the dead man's arm out of the flames and put the fire out. Then I untie the rest of the horses, holding onto the reins of a single black pony who blends well with the night. I had not been able to find Toby among the fallen. I search for his spoor now and am surprised to discover that he walked out of this place on his own. He had gone down to the river, then made a detour around the camp. He had finally headed in the direction we'd initially been traveling. That means he had snuck away before the monster arrived. If he has not run into the beast on the trail, that also means he may still be alive. I scan the woods carefully, but cannot see any sign of life, either light or dark.

Which way to go? Head after Toby or track the devil? I decide to go after Toby. I hold onto the black pony's reins, and he follows me from that place willingly enough. I alternate between looking around for Toby's light and making sure I'm still following his spoor. I smell the boy before I find him. He is fouled with the stink of blood and excrement, and his guts are strewn all over the trees, even up into the branches. I let the mare go. She is shying from the body, and I am too big to ride anyway. I dig a hole in the moist earth with my tomahawks, then steadily curse my gift of prophecy while I bury the boy who will never finish growing up. Once he is in the ground, I offer up an apology to Toby's sister for not properly taking care of him, then say the white man's *Our Father*, a prayer Toby will know. I hope it helps speed his departing soul.

Chapter Five: **The Chase**

I am not far from my satchel. I fill my pockets with fish jerky and fasten an amulet around my neck that I am not willing to lose. I hang my pack on a tree limb in case I make it back that way, then head out on the now-fresh track of the killer. It seems likely Toby had been making too

much noise, but I am not worried about traveling quietly. I can only hope the beast will realize I am on his trail and decide to take me on.

I follow his foul spoor all the rest of that black night, never sensing his dark presence. Shortly after the impersonal dawn arrives, I traverse another crest in the endless series of rolling, wooded hills, look far ahead and, for the first time, see the killer. He is close to topping the next rise. I have been moving fast. Now, I break into a run. Almost, he seems to pause, then promptly, he disappears over the ridge.

All that day, I chase him. Before nightfall, I have drawn close enough to see the killer I am pursuing. It is a giant. If I am close to seven feet tall, he is easily eight. I can tell he is running naked, but a thick pelt of hair hides most of his body. His vitality equals mine, and he keeps the distance between us with long, loping strides. To gain on him, I have to run flat out periodically, before dropping back into a more sustainable gait. He carries no weapons I can see, and when he comes to the occasional stream, he pauses only long enough to squat and drink.

It is night again, but I am close enough to easily track his dark presence. I follow without resting, determined to end this evil. In small increments, I gain on him as the hours grind by. On the morning of the second day, the shrunken sky bows over me like an old man. The lowering, grey-clad clouds straddle the trees and make footing treacherous. My senses reel with exhaustion, and the thin light throws up ghosts that are only tendrils of fog drifting across my path. Still, I run.

I am close now. I can see a darker shadow in the mists, and I hear the killer's feet striking the ground. The clear bellows of his lungs sound like a steam engine. I know he is only a few steps ahead of me. I grip my tomahawks tightly and put on one last burst of speed even as we step from the trees onto the shore of a large body of water.

Chapter Six: **The Fight**

The fog is woven among the trees, but the open shoreline and the lake are like a painting of a perfect day. I make a mighty leap. The giant's preternatural senses must hear my feet shoving off the ground. He turns, lightning-quick, grabs the shafts of my poised axes, and falls backward, using my own momentum to throw me over his shoulder. I hold onto my weapons but splash heavily into the shallow water. Before I can do more than stand, he is on my back, teeth tearing into my neck while he strangles me with one thick, hairy arm.

I reach back and smash his face with the butt-end of my weapon. Then I hit him again. Finally, he lets go, an angry growl throbbing deep within his chest. I turn and try to bury that same hatchet in his heart, but he throws up an arm so thick with body hair, it is like an armored coat. My weapon bites, taking a section of his hide, leaving a bit of bone showing, but doing no great damage.

I use my left foot, crashing my full weight down on his shin to take his leg out from under him. It is like kicking a tree. I take two steps back, deeper into the water, freeing my arms. Then I

swing both tomahawks. With that same unearthly speed, he grabs my arms again, and we stand there swaying like two drunken giants, neither of us able to gain an advantage. Unexpectedly, using his great strength, he pushes hard against my left arm, then that massive hand rakes across my chest. A burning sensation makes me look down. I can see four raw furrows of flesh where his claws have torn through my jerkin. I look back up just in time to see him finish becoming a bear.

With a shock, I recognize the black bear we had come across in the woods. The image of that bear running away flashes through my chaotic thoughts and makes me wonder. I create a shield of shining white God-light around me. The bear drops onto all fours, turns, and runs. Bears are much faster than humans. I realize I will have to go back on the hunt, unless—I cock a tomahawk behind my ear, and throw. It flashes in deadly arcs through the morning air, burying itself in the bear's rear right leg. The shapeshifter stumbles, falls, rolls back to his feet, then tumbles again as his hamstrung leg cannot hold his weight.

Rising to his three good limbs, the bear turns and charges me. It is an awkward run, but the force of his charge is overwhelming. I go down, his claws raking my arms and chest while he bellows out his rage, sharp teeth rising and falling above me as he shakes his head like a man groggy with the fight. He seems to have forgotten everything, submerged within his own wild fury. Suddenly, his mighty skull bends toward me, his jaws open wide, and two rows of fangs clamp onto my left arm. I can feel him dig his front paws into the ground to get the leverage he needs to tear my arm out of its socket.

I put every bit of strength I have into the wide arc of my swing, and my other tomahawk hits his skull precisely where I intend. The bear's right eye explodes in a shower of gore. He arches his big body back, coming off me as he rears up on his hind legs. Then the shapeshifter collapses backward, his hamstrung back leg betraying him again.

My left arm is mangled, my chest and upper body are scored by deep wounds, and the last of my energy is draining helplessly from my over-abused body. My final conscious thought wonders why this monster is so afraid of my God-light. Just before my awareness flickers out, I shield myself, then the darkness takes me.

Chapter Seven: **The Maiden**

I awake, believing I am still in a dream. A beautiful Indian maiden leans over me, long, straight midnight hued hair streaming over her shoulders, hazel eyes filled with concern. I remain lost in her beauty until I come fully awake, then the pain makes me remember. I ask her, "Where is the bear?" and I try to sit up. I make it as far as my right elbow.

She leans back on her haunches, regarding me. The morning is like a rare jewel, the woods around the shore are thick with tall pines, and the lake that frames the maiden is a landscape of surreal, otherworldly beauty. She half-turns her head, looking over her shoulder, then gazes back down at me. "The bear became a man, then swam across the lake. He is gone now."

I frown and lay back. I let my light begin to heal me while I consider everything that has happened. The maiden rises and goes to the lake. I turn my head to watch. She looks like grace in motion. Scooping water into her hands, she returns and carefully feeds it to me. It soothes me more than water should. "Who are you?" I ask.

"I am the lady of the lake."

I cannot help a small smile. "Do you have a sword for me?"

She laughs musically, and it is like chimes floating in the air between us. I have only heard chimes once before in my life. She says, "You are well-read, but no, I am not that lady of the lake. I am the guardian of this sacred place. Its waters heal all who are sick or hurt. The lake has already restored your friend."

"He is not my friend. He is my enemy."

She looks at me with gentle reproof. "This is not a place for hate. Swim in my waters, and you will be healed too."

"He was badly injured. How did he know the water would heal him?"

"I told him, as freely as I tell you."

I frown again but am distracted from my vengeance by her words. I can heal myself, but this is a new thing. I push myself up once more onto my good right arm. My left arm hangs useless. Painfully, I get to my knees. The maiden bends and puts her shoulder under my right arm. She is strong and, heated by the morning sun, her skin holds a soothing warmth. Hanging onto her carefully, I stagger to the shore, and we both enter the lake. Although her leather skirt gets soaked, she helps me into the deeper water. I am finally able to lean away from her and dog-paddle out into the lake. When I look back, she is still standing waist-deep in the water, watching me.

I stretch out my left arm and find I can use it again. I swim toward the far shore, not turning back until my arm moves freely, and I can no longer feel pain. I find I want to know more about this miracle and about her. When I stand up out of the water next to her, as though reading my mind, she says, "Stay with me for a while, and you will see."

"I will. If you will tell me when the man who is a bear leaves this place."

"I can do that."

On the shore a short distance away, she has an old, but well-cared-for lodge made of skins. We go there. She takes advantage of my renewed strength. Her love arts are infinitely gentle and drawn out, as though pleasure is a rare occurrence in her life. I find out her real name, but she says it is a secret, so I will not tell it here. The food is plentiful and the weather pleasant as it is still coming into summer. We have many long conversations. She teaches me more ways of

healing and of how to live in the sacred now. We do not wear clothes. Every morning we swim in the lake and are refreshed—heart, mind, and body.

One day an old woman arrives on a brave's arm. He is as tall and straight as she is old and bent. He tells us he is her grandson. She has gone deaf. She was a singer of her tribe's legends and, since she can no longer hear them, she cannot make the words come out right. With a gentle smile on her graceful features, my lady of the lake takes the old woman's arm and guides her into the water. She puts the elder's hands on her shoulders and, while the grandson and I watch, they swim together out into the lake. They both stay with us that night, and we listen to the old woman as she sings her songs once again.

On another day, we awake to a snuffling at our lodge's entrance and emerge into the morning light to find a great stag standing between us and the lake. It is a mighty animal with many tines on the beams of his antlers. His head is level with my own. He stands very quietly, but there is an arrow in his side, and blood cakes his flanks. The maiden asks for my help this time. I move carefully, letting the beast lick my hand, then stroking his fur before I reach up to take a light hold of one antler.

The stag, I can see he is an old, wise veteran of the forest, shows no fear. I walk with him into the lake. He shivers when the maiden removes the arrow but does not flinch. Then it is my great joy to guide him into deeper waters. We swim together across the lake. The deer climbs out, looks back across the water toward the maiden, then disappears into the woods. I swim back to her slowly, my soul at peace.

Chapter Eight: **The Bear Returns**

Then comes the day when the man who is a bear shows up at our lodge. If I had thought about it, I would have known it was going to happen. He says, "I have never had such peace as this. It is making me crazy. Let us fight again."

The maiden takes me aside and tells me I have to get this man to follow me far from this place before we fight. She warns me I may not be able to find my way back, but I do not doubt my abilities. I tell her I will be with her again before the sun can cross the sky. She looks sad and rises onto her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. I dress in the buckskins she has so carefully mended, gird myself with my tomahawks, then tell the bear-man, "See if you can keep up with me."

We run into the forest, and this time, the devil chases me. We run through the morning, and when the sun is high in the sky, we come to a large meadow. I judge we have gone far enough. I grasp my tomahawks firmly and turn to face the man. I have only one thing I want to know. "Why did you kill all those people?"

The bear-man laughs bitterly. "I cannot answer. How am I supposed to know? Boredom? Maybe everything that happened was because that woman, with her cherry cheeks and fire-colored hair, looked good to me. Maybe, it was just for fun. Once I've killed you, I will go and

find more humans. I will ask myself that question again after I have killed them. If I figure it out, I will share the truth with your ghost.”

I see the raped woman clearly in my memory, and I see her husband, his head twisted around on his shoulders. I remember the horror of the boy’s broken body, the men scattered about the camp like massacred dogs, and Toby, his insides ripped out, his future forfeit to an abomination’s random urges. This creature’s lusts and innate cruelties are the sins that make evil a force to always be confronted and fought. I wonder how I could forget that for so long, and I think—*This devil will not walk away from here today, or else I will not.*

I tighten my grip on my hatchets and charge the man with a war cry dredged up from the depths of his victim’s pain. As I race toward him, the man transforms into a bear, but I do not hesitate. I know his weak spot. His paws reach for me, and I drop to the ground, roll past him, come back up to my knees, slice at his right leg with one tomahawk. Springing forward, I throw myself flat and strike out with my other tomahawk, slashing the tendons on his left leg. I continue rolling out of the way as, like a falling mountain, the bear comes crashing down onto his back.

His paws look almost like a man’s arms waving futilely in the air, and I chop down with my left, then my right-hand tomahawk. Blood spurts from his neck, cutting off his angry roars. I keep cutting until the bear’s head comes off, and his body goes still. I stand and look down at the remains of one of the strangest and most malevolent entities I have encountered in my young life. I do not pray for his departing spirit.

Another present my maiden gave me during our time together is an incantation for fire. I gather the materials, then use the spell to ignite a pyre in the clearing. I chant a cleansing song as the dark, greasy smoke from the hellish creature’s carcass drifts languidly into the clear blue sky. I am drained by the fight, but I have promised her, so I wearily begin the long trek back.

Chapter Nine: **Lost**

Only, I cannot find her, nor the lake. I look until summer turns to fall and winter is a cold note on the near horizon. Eventually, I make my way back to my satchel, then to Toby’s grave. I spend the day with him recounting the adventure I had avenging him. When I leave his side, I believe I hear the wind sigh. I know the world is as right as it can be, but I miss my maiden, my lady of the lake.

For many springs to come, I find excuses to visit those blue hills. I search ever and again but never do I find my maiden or the magic lake,

—until—