

“A dark and brooding meditation about fatherhood: its burdens,
its depths, its permanence.”

John Darnielle, author of *Wolf in White Van*

BURNT

TIM KIRK



Burnt by Tim Kirk

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1873

The prairie goes on and on. Nothing moves. As if nothing has ever moved.

A sudden gust of wind rustles scrub and a dark shape appears, upright, cracking the bleak horizon right down the middle.

A rider on a horse.

Ahead is a squat adobe. In the doorway, a cigarette dies. Falling hooves grow closer. A sentry presses his back against the door, light from within shimmers around the brim of his hat.

A sharp intake of breath as a horse appears out of the dark night, stirrups bouncing below an empty saddle. He catches the reins with one hand; the other hand holds a gun.

He runs his fingers along the horse's flank. Wet with sweat.

Inside, a dozen men are frozen over a coffin, eyes on the door, hands hovering over their gun-belts. A beautiful young woman is laid out there, her arms cross her chest.

The sentry steps in. "Just a horse," he says, relighting his cigarette.

"The rider?" asks the largest of the large men.

The sentry blows smoke. "No rider."

The big man kicks the floor and a rifle is in his hands. He throws aside a man and then a door. In a small room, there is an empty cradle and an open window.

Curtains blow.

A horse whinnies.

The posse charges outside and fires blindly into the dark night.

WARING!



A vaquero crouches in the dry brush. He carefully lays his hat on the ground and raises his head. The stars are fading in the growing light of dawn. The camp is quiet. A smoldering fire. A saddle outside a simple lean-to. A horse stirs with a sleepy snort and a nicker.

The cowboy reaches for his hat. It's gone. A knife streaks across his neck.

Jeff Waring squats and watches. After a while, the thrashing and gurgling slows and then stops. Waring reaches over dripping twigs, the puddling blood and grabs a handful of shirt. He yanks the dead man upright.

He's not one of Arango's men. He's an independent operator. Probably just a horse thief.

The earth devours the blood. Relief flows over him. Waring looks at the camp. It's a peaceful scene. The baby lies swaddled in a horse blanket by his saddle. It starts to cry and he smiles.

"My baby."



There is a cleft in the rocky bluff. It's a natural fit for a baby and Waring slides her in there. He leans over

the edge for a better look.

Down in the valley, the wagon train has given up on the circle. Arango stands in what's left of its center.

Arango should seem a dot at this distance, dwarfed by the immense desert and towering mesas. But he is no dot. Surrounded by all this, Arango is huge.

Vaqueros prod, they push and in this way a child is ushered forth. This is Eirik's son. Eirik helped Waring build a little hammock for the baby and his wife nursed her over fifty miles of dirt and rocks. Arango rests his pistol on the boy's forehead and fires.

The shot and the scream bounce around the canyon, around the wailing pioneers, around Waring and the baby.

Next up are Jokkum and Nina's twins.

Arango is turning in circles now, shouting at the surrounding hills. The shouts are too faint for Waring to understand, but he assumes Arango is repeating his threat — that he'll kill all the children in the wagon train if the baby is not returned.

The twins hold hands. Waring swaddles the baby in a blanket their mother knit as Arango fires twice.

The vaqueros are burning the wagons. Arango starts in on the older children.

Waring takes the baby in his arms and speaks quietly to her. “Do you see? The devil determines their order.” He lifts the baby, giving her a better look at the carnage below. “Do you see? Do you see what this world is?”

He holds her face close to his. Her lids flutter. Her eyes focus. He starts to say, “Do you see what I am?”

No. That’s for when she’s older.



The old woman chokes it out between sobs. She tells him what he already knows. There are no men in Los Rios. They are with Arango. They are searching for the baby.

Waring lays his rifle across his saddle and waits as the women and children gather their things. He doesn’t dismount. They don’t have much.

He tries to remember the baby names. Martina had one for a boy and one for a girl. Then Arango saw her in the window of the farmhouse. Arango kidnapped his wife and, by doing so, also the baby inside her. It took Waring months to track them to Mexico. By the time he did, Martina was dead and he’d forgotten the names for their baby.

For a kick, he balances the girl on the horse’s neck.

She bounces up and down as he leads the people of Los Rios into the desert.

When they stumble, he drives them on. When they collapse, he leaves them to die.

Riding back towards the border, he shows her an apple and a knife. She wheezes. He cuts the apple and presses a slice to her lips. The wheeze becomes a laugh.

She tugs at his mask. He tosses it over her. She luxuriates in the black silk.



They straggle into town from time to time. Angry men, weary of traveling, weary of being driven by their anger. And they all want to kill him.

Waring found this one behind Stabler's barn, passing a bottle with a couple of tough-looking hombres from Mex Town.

"I have a message for Arango. He ain't gonna like it."

The vaquero wears two guns. He rests his palms on them. "English not so good, *señor*."

"In that case, I'll just give you the gist of it. It's mainly contempt. Contempt and scorn. We've been playing a game, him and me, and I'm winning. Arango took my woman and he took my child. But the woman

died and I took the child back. He followed me and killed everyone in the wagon train I was traveling with. But I doubled-back and killed everyone in his damn village. I killed the women. I killed the children. Maybe I killed your woman? Maybe I killed your children?”

Now they both have their palms on their guns. “So run along now. Tell your boss what I told you.”

The man is smiling and his English is a lot better. “*Señor*, I am not going anywhere.”

“You won’t give him my message in this world? Then go on and give it to him in the next.”

And now it gets loud.

Over the years, Waring has learned to rock from side to side as he fires. So far, this has worked well for him. He gets hit less and the movement doesn’t affect his shooting all that much.

This time is no different. He’s unhurt and the other guy is dead. And since he has his gun out, he keeps shifting left and right and firing and takes out the rest of the fuckers.

It was shortly after this that the good town people of Rubio City, New Mexico made Jeff Waring their Sheriff.



The steady stream of settlers has meant hasty additions to Rubio City. A cemetery at one edge of town and a tent for birthing at the other. Undertakers stay put but doctors come and go so Waring mans the tent. He has his hands deep in the Jennings woman when Cooper makes his drunken entrance.

“Holy shit! Stafford wasn’t pulling my leg at all! It’s Jeff Waring in the flesh.”

He offers a bottle. Waring shows him his bloody hands.

“Finish her up quick and I’ll buy ya a drink. The whole gang is over there – Stafford, Nichols and Dakota. That’s what Martin’s going by these days.”

“Not the Dakota *Kid*?”

Cooper laughs his familiar open-mouthed laugh. Waring peers into it, seeing every drunken night with this gang, every filthy saloon, every imagined offense, every unwarranted brawl and knife-fight. He tastes the liquor, smells the sawdust, feels the horror of waking to a snoring whore and an aching pecker.

“*Sheriff* Waring! Who would have thought it?!”

He pictures a tree with four nooses. Better yet, he sees a sturdy gallows that can handle four. He can imagine just how he'll build it. The design appears in his mind, fully conceived.

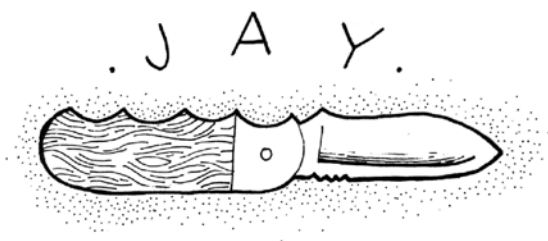
With a wail, the child enters this rotten world. It's a boy.



He's raising the baby in his arms when she shoots him.

"Shame!" she cries. "Shame on you! Shame! Shame!"





1970

It's a one-lane road heading deep into the middle of nowhere and we're stuck behind the school bus with the psychedelic paint-job. The fucking peace symbol on the back door is bouncing in my face – it's been doing that for hours. It looks like a chicken-foot. It looks like the foot on a cartoon chicken. This is the symbol of my generation?

“Breathe.”

This way of life has run its course, its bedrock philosophy proven bankrupt, and the group of followers have grown smaller and smaller, scattered in the wilderness, ceaselessly chasing their lost summer. And we trail along behind them.

“Breathe, daddy.”

These ideas of mine aren't even fresh. I've seen plenty of peace symbols, and had plenty of time to ruminate

on them, over the last...what? Three years? Shit, since Josey was seven. What a waste.

“C’mon, daddy. Breathe.” She strokes my arm. My little girl, keeping me sane.



Our caravan finally reaches the river. The psychedelic bus coughs out hippies and the rest of the clan gathers to welcome us. It’s a blur of free expression. Jesters prance and play. Dirty cherubs tumble in the grass.

I park the van and Josey starts setting up. A couple of clowns take a break from hanging banners in the trees to check out our wares. I eyeball their finger-painting: *‘Make Love!’ ‘Love is All!’ ‘All You Need is LOVE!’*

“I *love* your beard,” says the groovy gal, offering a joint. I don’t take it and I don’t love my beard. She bats her lashes.

Groovy guy bristles, “You holding, *dad?*” I shake my head. He lifts his tinted shades, his sclera red and grey. “You should see things through my eyes, man. It would blow your mind.”

Josey bows her head and cups her hands, saying a silent prayer. I know she's praying for restraint.

Sorry, baby. I'm going to kill this guy. Tonight.



The loons are laughing it up. They've got an old projector running off a car battery, throwing a black and white flick at a sheet hung up in the trees. It's "Tarzan" and the heroine is drowning in a flickering mass of crazy apes.

And here comes the hoots. "Give it up for the monkey man, baby!" and "Animal love forever!" and, somehow, "Have a nice day, LBJ!"

It doesn't matter what you say, funny or not, this crowd is high and everything gets a laugh. The triumph of equality, I guess.

I've been waiting for a long time, but even groovy guys have gotta shit sooner or later. This one finally makes his move to the woods. I follow. I have the photo of my wife in my hand and it trembles. Once I show it to him, he has to die.

His reactions follow a familiar pattern — the jokes, the lame protestations, a pathetic attempt at bravado.

The sharp cry of pain when I break his arm is nothing new. But he surprises me with his expression when he sees the knife – he knows he’s going to die.

So I show him the photo.

The second surprise. “I seen her! Saratoga, man, I seen her with Mackey. They call him Doctor Mackey. The Magic Man. In Saratoga!”

My grip loosens on his throat. This is unprecedented. The guy is cooperating and he has some real information. A sudden flood of doubt about the sanctity of my mission. Questions of ethics, they crowd my mind...

He shakes loose and gets one, two, three steps before my resolve returns.

Josey.

I drop him and I go to work with the knife. It isn’t pretty, and it isn’t easy, but I keep in mind that this guy willfully shrugged off any meaningful masculinity years ago.

I’m just making it manifest.



“Which one’s your favorite?”

“My favorite what, sweetie?”

“Your favorite gas station, of course.”

“The Shell station in Wichita.”

“Why?”

“You remember the guy who tried to sell me the transistor radio?”

“Yeah.”

“His teeth were the color of your hair.”

“Oh daddy, you say the nicest things.”



“Your turn, Josey.”

“Your favorite car we’ve seen today.”

“Just one?”

“That’s the rules, daddy.”

“Then the tan Rambler we passed at Lake Tahoe. No, it was the orange VW van.”

“That’s two, daddy.”

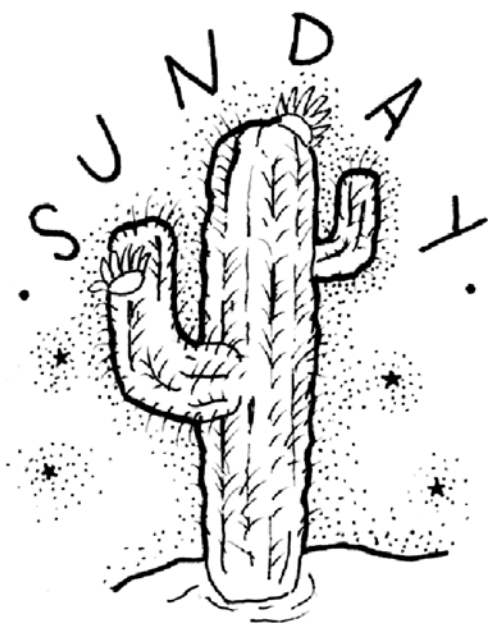
“Which is your favorite?”

“The orange one. But I’m lying.”

“The truth then! Out with it!”

“This one, daddy, cuz I’m here with you.”





1883

She's ten now and she finally has a name. For a long time it was Cutie, followed by Girlie and then, one day, she was Sunday.

They've been riding for a long time and the desert doesn't change. She couldn't guess how her father knows when to stop, but he does. He lifts her from her horse.

"Do you remember this place?"

She doesn't so she wanders here and there. She kicks scrub. She gets on her knees and plays with the coarse sand.

Her father is back in the saddle, scanning the horizon. She brushes the hair from her face and watches. His eyes are swallowed by the shadow of his hat. Grey hairs sprinkle across the black field of his mustache. He's moving a little slower these days. But he's still the strongest man she has ever seen.

Something sparkles in the sand. It's a tarnished silver necklace. She hangs it around her neck. She digs around a little and finds some more jewelry. And then some childrens' toys — a sling-shot, a couple of ragged dolls.

And bones. Lots and lots of bones.





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