

Coming of Age

As Joppi stepped from the safety of his tribe into the ensnaring wilderness, his parents were proud of him. He was tasked with finding and killing a lion all by himself, and given one sun's rotation of the earth for success. It was part of his tribe's initiation rituals; a tool to weed out the chaff from the wheat. Through his adolescence it was clear that Joppi was on his way to becoming a strong warrior, and perhaps late in his life join the tribal elders. Nevertheless, the ritual frightened Joppi. He had killed lions before, but never by himself armed with only a spear. As he walked into the forest where it was to take place, he looked back to the tribe. Noone was in sight save his two parents, smiling and waving to young Joppi. "I better get to eat the lion afterwards, for all the work I'm doing", he thought, after which deciding that thinking about his hunger was not the best way to start the day.

Despite the fierce dry heat; Joppi was happy. If he was competent with his spear there was very little chance he will be killed in his encounter with a lion. Moreover, he knew that his inevitable success will give great pride to his parents. He travelled around the land that surrounded his tribe, never venturing more than a dozen kilometres away lest he become injured. After hours of walking, his ears pricked up when he heard a great noise from the distance. "It sounds like constant thunder, yet the sky is clear" he thought. He quickly regained concentration for the task at hand, however, when he at last saw a lion sitting by a tree not far from where he was standing. Joppi thought to himself, "the lion has not appeared to have noticed me, I'll creep to a reasonable distance and then throw my spear into its neck." With the lion's back to Joppi, he took the utmost care creeping up behind the lion. After positioning himself into the best position for the spear throw, he noticed smoke coming up from the tribe's general direction. He thought "I bet they're planning a nice meal in preparation for my return as a man!", but quickly realised he would not get to return as a man if he keeps becoming distracted. After precious seconds angling the shot, the spear was away; Joppi's aim was true. The lion roared as it collapsed to its death. Joppi was exuberant "Yes! I passed the ritual, I'm a man now!"

Now came the hard part of finding a way to drag the lion back to the camp. Joppi decided it was too heavy to carry by himself, so he took his spear, impaled the stomach of the lion, and emptied it of all of the intestines and blood that he was able to get out. Lion blood covered his hands, but it was worth it. The lion was now noticeably lighter, and Joppi began the burdened journey back to the tribe. It was truly a day to remember.

-- 1 Hour later --

The lion grew heavier with each step, and a new worry engulfed young Joppi. The smoke coming from the tribe was getting thicker and thicker as he walked closer and closer. "Even the greatest feast-meal I have ever participated in during my life did not produce as much smoke as that." It worried Joppi, but he would not be able to know the cause of the smoke until he came to Snakefang peak. Snakefang peak was a steep hill that was uniquely devoid of trees, and offered a good position to inspect the tribe. It was named after his great grandfather Bani, who had apparently survived ten snake bites on that hill before succumbing to the poison.

Standing on the tip of Snakefang peak, with impaled lion carcass in tow, the realisation of the source of the smoke fell upon Joppi like a wave. The smoke was caused by fire. Not a bonfire, but rather a fire that had touched most huts in the village. To Joppi it felt like the world was coming to an end, as all he knew was the village and its surrounding forest. The lion became meaningless, and Joppi gave no pause in leaving it behind as he ran towards the village. He ran as fast as his little legs could take him; he did not flinch as wayward branches cut and bruised his body. As he raced towards the village, Joppi thought of his parents and friends. The hope of becoming a respected warrior in the village disappeared when Joppi was close enough to inspect the full effect of the fire. It ravaged the roofs of every hut, and the sounds of screaming brethren clanged in his ears. In this situation, tears would be the natural inclination, but they never came for Joppi.

Now next to the village, the smoke made everything a bit hazy. He saw his friends; some of them standing, most of them sleeping. Joppi carefully approached one of the elders.

"What happened? Where are my parents?" Joppi said. The elder looked at Joppi with horror in his face. Joppi had personally witnessed this elder three years ago kill a bear twice his size without any fear in his eyes, and yet this present threat overwhelmed him. The elder stuttered a response about ghosts, and pointed toward a bush trail that led out of the village toward the river. Joppi was not sure whether the elder was saying that the ghosts were down that path, or his parents. Bravely, however, he ventured down the trail anyway.

It was roughly two hundred steps before the edge of the river was reached. It takes more than words to explain what Joppi saw. His parents were among them. Their bodies were floating down the muddy river; pools of blood revealing how they had been torn to shreds. These ghosts had killed them, and they had truly killed Joppi. Although he lived to see one hundred years, his soul never left that place next to the river. It remained, and along with it any sense of meaning and feeling in life.

By Timothy Neal