

The Strongest Boy

The First Tale from

MULADONA

by Eric Stener Carlson



Tartarus Press

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from *Muladona*
by Eric Stener Carlson

First published by Tartarus Press 2016 at
Coverley House, Carlton-in-Coverdale, Leyburn,
North Yorkshire, DL8 4AY, UK.
☎ and fax: 01969 640399
email: tartarus@pavilion.co.uk
website: <http://tartaruspress.com>

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ISBN 978-1-905784-84-4

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I've been sickly since birth, and the burden has fallen on my mother.

While the other boys run and play, I stay inside my hut. I lie on the dirt floor and look up at the ceiling or through the small gaps in the mud walls. My world is composed of bits and pieces of that larger world mother tells me about. Through the gaps of it, I see fragments of the sun and sky. I glimpse an ankle from a villager running by, the blur of a stone kicked by children's legs, agile and strong.

More than these fragments of images, my world is composed of sounds. Women pounding out roots, whispering to each other. The crackling of early-morning fires. Grunts of men stringing bows, sinew and wood tightening, slaps on arms and legs to warm themselves, getting ready for the hunt. And the cry of the *itsá* marking its territory as it wheels and turns, high in the heavens, and, far away, the haunting sound of the *ndotkahs* calling with their big cat calls to each other in the hills.

I do not go outside into the light, because the dust sickens me even more than the smoke from the fire inside. I cast no shadow. Sometimes, I wonder if I could ever cast one.

I have a constant companion just the same, not one of light or darkness but one of sound. It is the sound of my own breath,

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gurgling and spitting. I have always had it. I am so used to it that if they found some magic way to remove the fluid that constantly fills my lungs, I wouldn't know what to do. It would feel like a death in the family. Lately, I've thought it must have been a burden for my mother to lie with me, night after night, listening to my laboured breathing, my wheezing the only sound save the lice lowering themselves from the roof, creeping down the walls, searching out skin to pierce and suck.

If my mother was annoyed by this she never said so. In fact, she said she liked the noise. She called me her beautiful *Tooh*, which means 'river' in her language, because she comes from the Navajo people, while my father's people are Ndee. (She was taken away from her people when she was very young, but she still speaks their words alone with me.)

Mother said that as she fell asleep, listening to me breathe, she imagined a wide, beautiful river, the light glinting off it like precious rocks, and rainbow trout—hundreds of them—jumping in the sun. She said I was her whole world, that I made her heart happy and light, that she couldn't imagine life without me.

The things she said were beautiful, but it must have been hard for her. Her husband, Kuruk, was the leader of our village. He was a big man, a strong man, like his namesake the bear. He could out-run, out-swim, out-wrestle anyone.

One evening he smoked the pipe and, inspired, chased his animal spirit, the great bear, down the mountain. He ran through the woods in the moonless night, running after the spirit that flew deep into the caves underground, unseen by the rest of us.

He returned at dawn, and I could see from my position on the floor that his feet were bloody and pulverised, with thorns sticking into them. Later that day I heard whispering in the village. They said there was not a scratch on the rest of his body—on his face or arms or chest—because he was a true man, and the spirit had led him safely down the mountain, between branches and over stones.

He died when I was very young, in the hunt for the *wapiti*. There were many stories about how it happened, but it seems that,

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as they closed in with their bows, the beast cornered in a thicket, its massive horns glinting, my father moved in for the kill. A younger warrior, wanting the glory for himself, shot his arrow too quickly and pierced my father's side.

When they brought my father back from the hunt, he was still alive. They laid him next to me on the floor. The shaman who lived alone, way up the mountain, came and said prayers and burned some leaves that made me convulse with coughs. It did not help my father either. For the whole night, all you could hear were the gurgling sounds from both of us, my lungs filling with phlegm, while his filled with blood. By the light of the fire I could see fear in his eyes, a blank, staring look, but I enjoyed the sound he made: it was as if the gurgling brook in my lungs had found a playmate, a twin. I imagined them going outside to kick the stick high into the sky under the hot sun. They would beat the other children with their skill.

When the morning came, chill and quiet, my friend's playmate had gone. My father's body was cold and I wept because my sound and I were alone again.

My father's father was an even stronger man. His name was Nantan Lupan, because his spirit guide was the wolf. He was the first one to go down the mountain and see the strange, hairy men with their shiny, hard skin, who had settled in the pastures below. He was wise and kept his distance because he knew no good would come of us meeting them. Although he chose peace with these new men, he led my people into war against the Navajo, who hate us so much they call us 'apache'. Villagers would spit as they mentioned our enemies and praised my grandfather.

My father told me that I owed my life to Grandfather, who saved all of us, but he died before I was born. I think the one who really saved my life was my mother, because she was the first one to search for the mullein plant and make it into tea.

I have talked about sights and sounds in my world, but more important to me is smell—the smell of the wild flowers, the smell of the land, wet or dry, rich and thick. One smell is more important

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than any other, that of the dried mullein, with its long stalk and its small, precious flowers. Without the mullein, I would have died soon after birth.

My mother would take the dry stalk, pound it with her pestle and make tea that soothed my cough. She would mix the leaves with oils and other herbs she collected on the mountain. With this, she would make a salve and spread it over my chest, massaging my painful, contracted muscles. She started by rubbing the soles of my feet, cracking each toe, tenderly and sweetly. Then she'd rub my useless, twisted legs, heat them with the palms of her hands rubbed together until they would relax, and she would bend my knees slowly to my chest. She would do the same with my arms and fingers, relaxing me, cracking the joints that wouldn't give. Then she would roll me on my side, massage my back and chest, giving slight taps, then more intense ones, slapping my back, forcing the phlegm to my upper chest, forcing me to breathe in the smoke from the burning mullein leaves. It would feel like drowning, but she would sway over me, rubbing my back in a circular motion, and sing to me a lullaby. This is how I came to associate drowning with tenderness.

Just as I thought I would die in the sea of my own fluids, my body heaved—its greatest activity of the day—shuddering and gasping, until I finally vomited up the contents of my lungs onto the ground. As I sucked in air my lungs would fill with the fresh, sweet, soothing smell, and my mother would wipe the sweat from my face with her long, black hair. She held me until I stopped trembling, until we—moving as one, breathing as one—in our unity became a single person.

I would fall asleep in her arms and dream the most beautiful dream in the entire world. . . . I was a sailor on an enormous raft the size of my village, with a huge mullein stalk as my mast. And I was huge, too, and muscular. I was the strongest boy in the world, rowing with my hands, cupping them like great pots and hopping from island to island in search of adventure. Because I was so strong and moved through the waters with such ease, a great water snake

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became jealous and attacked my raft. It tore it to pieces with its tail. Then it knocked me into the sea and coiled its massive body about me.

But I would not die so easily, because I was the mighty Tooh, son of Kuruk, grandson of Nantan Lupan, and I fought the great sea serpent with my bare hands, squeezing the life out of every coil. Finally, the snake loosened its grip. Its eyes pleaded with me to let it go. With no more air in my lungs, I was faced with a terrible decision: to kill the creature and risk sinking down with it into the depths, or let it survive so that I would fly up to the surface and continue on my journey in glory. But I was a warrior, and it would have been cowardice to leave my prey like that.

So I squeezed and I squeezed and I killed the creature. In doing so I killed myself, my lungs filling up with the sea.

It was such a pleasant feeling, to drown, to die. . . .

Then I'd awake from my dream, drenched in sweat, hacking, coughing. My mother would be there, hovering above me, and she would begin my treatment over again. . . .

Life went on much like this for a long, long time after my father died. Until the day when the 'replacement men' entered the village.

As I said before, I only see the outside world in fragments. That's why my understanding of what happened next is confused and full of gaps.

One morning, I heard the men readying themselves for the hunt, but this time the sounds they made were different. Instead of being joyous or boastful, they seemed serious, perhaps even worried. They were hunting less and less often, because the *wapiti* was scarcer than it once was, because the men with the shiny, hard skin were killing them, more than they could eat. So our men had to go beyond our boundaries into the land of the Navajo.

My mother was the same as usual. She massaged me and induced the choking feeling. She rid my body of its fluids. The village was almost completely silent. No children played. The women whispered more quietly than usual.

Then night came, and the men returned.

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But they were not our men.

I heard the whoops and cries the women usually made when the men came back from the hunt, the scurry of children to meet their fathers and the women busying themselves to attend to them. But their cries turned into screams. I heard the children scattering, as if they were a flock of birds trying to escape a net.

There were sounds of struggle and cries of pain, and the noises outside mingled with my gasps for air. I tried to drag myself along the floor towards the entrance so I could see what was going on, but I only succeeded in breaking some fingernails. I sucked my bleeding fingertips, trying to lessen the pain.

My mother ran into the hut. Right on her heels I saw the muscular calves of a man who was not my father. I saw fragments of their bodies as they fought. Then my mother cried out, as if the man had twisted her arm, but all I could do was lie on the floor and watch these wisps of action—unmoving, wheezing.

She cried out in the language of the Navajo, ‘All right, all right, but let me move my son. He’s sick, and I don’t want him to see this.’

‘If this is a trick. . . .’ the man growled in the same language, but the words sounded funny coming from his mouth.

‘No trick, no trick,’ my mother said softly, and I could hear she was trying to control her breathing. ‘I’m just going to move him now . . . see?’

With this, she grabbed me by the ankles and spun me around so I was facing the wall. Then she whispered quickly to me, ‘Plug your ears, my little river!’

She went back to the man and I heard them grunting and groaning, but it didn’t sound like fighting any more. I thought back to when I was very young. I remembered those sounds from when my father was still alive. After a while, I heard the groaning and slobbering of the man as he fell asleep. My mother came to me and prepared the salve and spread it over my body as she always did. She massaged me and dried the sweat from my face, and I felt refreshed. But as she leaned in close after I had vomited on the

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floor, it no longer felt like we were one person. Overpowering the smell of mullein, she stank of him.

That night I dreamed I was sinking into the sea again. But this time it was not the great sea serpent I choked to death, but the replacement man. . . .

Things went on like this for many days—the fighting, the groaning. From what I could hear, it was the same in the nearby huts. The whispers of the women in the village were replaced by lamentations. Soon, though, things began to go back to normal, and the ‘replacement men’ got up early to hunt, just like the original men. The women cooked for them and stitched their clothes. Children even came out of the huts and began to play again.

It was strange no one talked about the men who’d gone away hunting and had never come back, and no one asked where these new men had come from. There were so many things I didn’t understand in the world beyond my hut—this was just one more.

Perhaps my life would have continued like this if it weren’t for one night when my replacement father stumbled into the hut. Beyond his regular stink, he smelt of something else, some pungent water. I knew from experience it would be a bad night. He yelled at my mother, ‘Take this thing out of here. I want to be alone with you tonight, woman.’

‘That *thing* is my son. He’s sick. I must take care of him.’

‘I say take it out to the woods and let it die. I can’t stand its wheezing and coughing. In my tribe, we would have killed a thing like that right out of the womb.’

‘I’ll do whatever you want,’ she pleaded, ‘but leave my son alone.’

‘I’ll leave him alone all right—alone with the gods,’ and with that the man gave me a swift kick right to my ribs, breaking many of them, winding me, sending me into a paroxysm of pain. I had less space to breathe than ever before. Trying to cry but unable to make a sound, I struggled for air.

‘No!’ my mother screamed, and she threw herself between me and the man, taking the kicks for me. ‘Worthless dog, worthless

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woman!’ he bellowed. When he had tired of kicking her he stumbled out the door, shouting, ‘I’ll be back, and I’ll kill that thing yet!’

My mother straightened up, breathed a few deep breaths and carefully felt my side where I’d been kicked. ‘Don’t worry. Don’t worry. I promise you,’ she said, in a very calm voice I had never heard from her before. As she bound my side with a bunch of old rags, she continued ‘That man is dead. They are all dead. They will never hurt my precious Tooh again.’

After she rubbed me down and emptied out my lungs, for the first time since I was a small boy, she left me all alone in the hut. I was worried for her, straining my ears, hoping to hear her voice talking to the women. I also worried the drunken man would return and hurt me again, because I could not move and defend myself. But nothing happened all night long.

Just before dawn, I stirred at the sound of someone entering the hut, and I was afraid it was my replacement father. Then I saw it was my mother. I could just see her beautiful feet, but they were torn and bloody now, just like my father’s after he had run down the mountain in search of his bear spirit.

I looked up at her, straining my neck to see her face, my breath excited at her arrival. She said, ‘There, there, my little babbling brook. Do not worry. I went to the shaman, and he has shown me the way. He told me the hairy men in the pastures below have a curse, and it will kill the replacement men.’

‘Last night, I went down the mountain and stole a part of this curse from their village, and I will make things right now.’

‘What . . .’ I wheezed, ‘was the strange men’s village like?’

‘It was much like ours,’ she said, as she stroked my back, ‘with huts, but made out of cloth and sticks. But they are lazy and barely stir. I think that is part of their curse. And the women they have taken to serve them are lazy, too. They barely get up to search for water. But in the middle of their village I could see they had planted a tree, a beautiful tall tree that shone in the sun. There was one piece that went straight up and down, and another across it like the arms of a thin man. The men lay about in groups in front of it with

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blankets on their heads, making strange signs with their hands, holding cords with small beads and whispering and kissing them. One man especially, who had no hair on the very top of his head, and who wore a heavy brown cloak, whispered the most.

‘I knew he was the one to give me the curse, just like the holy man said. So I went with him and took a piece.’

‘What did you do, mother?’ I asked, because I didn’t understand.

‘Shhh, shhh,’ she said. ‘You will see. It will save us from these men and no one will ever hurt you ever again. It will bring peace to the village again and honour to our name.’

Some time later I smelled the replacement man approaching. Mother met him at the doorway.

‘So,’ he said, ‘are you going to drown this ugly pup, or shall I do it?’

My mother said soothingly in reply, ‘I should not have angered you. You are strong and powerful and that is why you cannot understand my weakness for my son. I am sorry I have offended you. I have brought you this gift, a blanket to keep you warm. Please let me put it around your strong shoulders.’

‘There, there, *that* is the respect a warrior deserves,’ my replacement father said. ‘Now, come lie with me,’ he commanded, and the groaning began. Even though I was pointed in their direction, I could not see what was going on, because they were covered by the blanket.

Days passed and nothing happened. I thought this was slow magic indeed.

On the third day, when my mother rubbed me down, I noticed spots on her face and arms. ‘What’s that?’ I asked my mother, and she replied, ‘Nothing. It is a sign the curse is working, but the shaman said it will not kill us, because we are good, and the men are bad.’

Indeed, the magic had begun.

That same day, the man stumbled into our hut, but he did not stink of drink. He fell down on his knees and lay down with a thud.

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The small patch of skin I could see along his leg had the same spots as my mother, but many more, like bites from many red ants.

‘Do you want me to lie with you, man?’ my mother asked pleasantly.

‘No, woman,’ he growled. ‘It does not please me. Go and fetch me some water.’

‘Yes, my master,’ my mother said, and even though I could not see her face, I knew she was smiling.

He drank water, and he drank more, but it did not help. ‘I’m burning,’ he screamed. ‘You have put fire in this bottle and not water.’ After that, he said many things, lying on the floor, but I could not understand them. By afternoon he still had not moved, and from the beads of sweat on his skin, I could tell the fever had set in. Then he began to wheeze and gasp, and there I was once more, lying next to a dying father. But this time I imagined we were two long-distance runners, competitors, running to glory, running down the mountain. Like my father, like my mother.

As he wheezed, I wheezed. As he coughed, I coughed. We were neck and neck, running through the woods, our cheeks grazed by the low-lying branches, the backs of our thighs stinging from the long grass. Soon he wheezed more than I. Soon he shuddered more than I’d ever done. I imagined myself outpacing him, lengthening my strides, feeling my spirit rise before me as I sped along the dirt path.

By nightfall, the man gasped his last breath and his chest stopped heaving. I lay there agitated, my lungs full, suddenly aware I was back in the hut. I wondered why my mother, who was lying close by, did not help me. After a long time she moved towards me slowly. She crushed the leaves of the mullein plant, added the oils and herbs. But all of this was so slow, like things in a dream, and she moved like her limbs were not her own.

She began to massage me, but with difficulty. She tried to rub my tensest muscles, but her fingers failed her. She stopped and sat next to me, breathing heavily, like my replacement father. Then she rolled me over, and roughly, awkwardly, she pounded my back

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until I vomited. As she pressed her body next to me, I felt the edges of her sores against my cheek.

Then, holding me tightly, the last thing she said was, 'You see, my little Tooh? We have had our revenge. Tomorrow, when I am rested, I shall take you out into the light. I will put you on my shoulders and carry you in victory through the village. The holy man was right.'

She rubbed my face dry as tenderly as she could with her beautiful hair, and fell asleep. Late at night, when the air grew cold, I felt when she died. She was still holding me, her hair still smelt of mullein, and I fell asleep dreaming of her.

The morning began with a chorus of coughing and hacking, a village full of sickness. The sounds of running, jumping and playing games died away. From the feeble voices that reached my hut, it seemed the ones who had been the strongest died the fastest. I smiled—they, who knew the *wapiti's* tricks and where he would double-back along the trail—they, who knew which roots caused pleasure and pain—they were all smart and strong, but, in the world of the sick, they were novices, and I was master.

I know when the fever rises and rises and reaches its peak, and, just before you pass out, it will lower. I can tell when the liquid fills my chest, and there are several seconds more before I begin to gag and thrash. They knew none of this. They died quickly and fearfully and without a fight.

Today when I awoke, I heard no more sounds of the replacement men, or the villagers, or the children. No groans, no hacking coughs, no lamentations, prayers or curses. Today when I awoke, I heard only the rustling of the trees. By mid-day the animals lost their apprehensiveness. They began their scratching and calling and entered the village common area. They became bolder still, and I could hear them licking the pots for leftover food. Soon, over the sound of buzzing flies, I heard their growling and yelping as they began to fight over the corpses.

If I could only lift my body up and crawl to the entrance of the hut—something I've never been able to do—I'm sure I would see

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the grass growing tall in the common area, the corpses strewn here and there, skeletons gnawed clean, still dressed in rags. The shiny stones and dolls, the ball made of leather scraps, the wooden pestle for pounding roots, all of them are still and untouched, showing the first signs of rot.

My mother's love for me had been so strong, so consuming, she had succeeded in killing each and every living person in the village, original or replacement. As I turned to her corpse I kissed her sweet-smelling hair and said, 'Thank-you'.



The voice turned into a gurgle and then transformed itself into a death rattle. Each word was half-submerged in a sea of phlegm, clinging to the end of each rounded syllable for life, as it said, 'I . . . had . . . finally . . . beaten . . . all . . . of . . . them . . . I . . . had . . . proved . . . I was . . . the . . . strongest boy in the world.'

MULADONA



Eric Stener Carlson

1918. In the dying days of World War I, the Spanish Flu devastates the small town of Incarnation, Texas. The sheriff closes the church and quarantines the dying in the schoolhouse. The townsfolk huddle alone in their houses to avoid infection. Each new day brings fresh corpses.

But something worse than the flu is coming.

Verge Strömberg, son of the domineering town pastor, is a sickly boy who lives in a world of books. His mother disappeared when he was seven, his older brother ran away. Now his father leaves him to tend a church in another county.

That's when the *Muladona* begins to visit him.

Every night, the *Muladona*, a doomed soul transformed into the Devil's mule, visits Verge and forces him to listen to a horrific tale. Each night, as Verge huddles under his bed sheets, the monster's supernatural tales tear his soul apart.

Verge's search for the demonic creature's true identity leads him through the dark history of Incarnation, from the murder of the Indians by the Spanish settlers, to the disappearance of his mother.

In the end, Verge will have to confront the *Muladona* alone to rescue the memory of his mother and to save his immortal soul.

TARTARUS PRESS

Coverley House, Carlton-in-Coverdale, Leyburn
North Yorkshire, DL8 4AY

☎ and fax: 01969 640399

email: tartarus@pavilion.co.uk

www.tartaruspress.com