"WEIRDER THAN WEIRD"
18 Bizarre Tales From A Disturbed Mind

By FRANCIS BURGER

“For my brothers and sisters”
(Pax vobiscum)

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INTRODUCTION

If you’re like me you love the short story. A few years ago, for whatever reason, I had a bunch of crazy stories flow into my head, from God knows where, and get stuck there like some log jammed river. The pressure begged release and in an attempt to
save some semblance of my sanity (what little I had) I finally decided to get them down on paper. “WEIRDER THAN WEIRD” is the result.

As a kid, I loved the classic TV shows such as: The Twilight Zone, The Outer Limits and The Night Gallery. I was totally hooked on their semi-dark themes and quirky nature. I suppose this is where my strange taste in stories originates from.

I don’t quite know how to describe my own stories other than to say they are like camp fire stories for adults. For the most part, this collection leans toward the dark and creepy but there are also a few goofy tales of fantasy interspersed within that I think help to take the edge off.

You won’t find the standard fare of Vampire, Zombie or Wolfman here, nor will you find my stories riddled with blood and gore and all the other cliché artifices. (Ok, maybe one or two are a tiny bit bloody but you’ll hardly even notice.) For me, these stories are really just an exercise in imagination. My intentions are only to bring to you, the reader, something truly original and hopefully entertaining. I’ll leave that determination up to you. By the way... I’ve added one more story to this collection at the last minute, so you’ll be getting nineteen stories in all. I mention this because the book cover reads eighteen. I didn’t want you to think I counted wrong, it’s just that, in all honesty, I’m too lazy to redo the book cover.

So without further adieu...I leave you to your reading, and a few timeless and appropriate words from Monty Python...

“NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT!”

A SPECIAL WEDDING GIFT

It was the typical wedding ceremony followed by the typical reception, only, what would transpire in the next few minutes, no sane person would ever dare call typical.

The bride and groom decided, at the last second, to open the wedding gifts before leaving for their much anticipated honeymoon vacation in Hawaii. A most unusual box among a multitude of others heaped upon the gift table caught the bride’s eye. It was decorated in silver-white moon shapes and blue stars and had a number of odd, indecipherable phrases written on it that looked to be Greek or Latin or some other obscure and pompous language. She read the small tag on the top of the box and a happy smile radiated across her pretty young face. “It’s from Aunt Sophie!” she exclaimed to the drunken guests who now crowded around the table to watch the unveiling.

Standing close by, the mother of the bride rolled her eyes then turned to her best friend who was eagerly sucking on a sloe gin fizz.

“No telling what could be in that box.” She commented with a slight slur. “That damn sister of mine just couldn’t take a few precious minutes out of her busy schedule...
to make it to her own niece's wedding. Oh, no, that would be far too bothersome for her majesty, the witch queen! She's probably, at this very moment, in some remote part of the world tracking down some...some bat wing or God knows what weird ingredient for one of her whacky potions.”

The woman paused and took a long swallow of something green in a tall glass, then burped.

“More likely, she's getting cuddly with a local witch doctor somewhere, trading incantations and... God knows what else.” This made her laugh. “Am I right Belinda or am I right?”

Her friend returned a nod in solidarity and mumbled something that sounded like witch, but wasn't, then refocused once again on her drink.

The bride removed the lid from the box and pulled out, of all things, a long stemmed silver chalice. It was richly engraved in nude figures and mystic symbols and encircled at the top with green and red gems. A few people laughed out loud at the sight of what they thought was a foolish and impractical gift. “Now there's something you don't see every day!” said the groom with a smile, trying in his own way not to seem too impolite. Inside the goblet was a rolled up note that the bride proceeded to read to the crowd.

“It says... Dear Niece, this magical gift is specially made for you. Be wise in your choosing, for it allows one wish to be fulfilled and one wish only. Just state your desire then immediately drink from the cup. Aunt Sophie.”

The bride turned to the groom and shrugged her shoulders. “Why not give it a whirl,” he said with a wink, “what's to lose?” The guests shouted their approval. With that, the groom popped open another bottle of champagne. The cork rocketed into the crowd and a few game drunks immediately clamored for its retrieval, comically falling over one another as though it was a second wedding bouquet being tossed by the bride. Everyone laughed. The groom poured the champagne into the chalice, filling it halfway then presented it to his bride with a slight bow.

“Here's your chalice my lady. Your wish awaits.”

The bride took the chalice in hand with a giggle then turned toward the eager faces. “If I could have just one wish...I...ah...” She paused before going on and her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “If I could have just...one wish, it would be that my father could be here to share this very special day with me.” She then drank from the cup.

There was a collective sigh acknowledging the beauty of the sentiment and a few snifflies could be heard, but a few seconds later a raucous crashing of dishes suddenly exploded from somewhere in back causing everyone to jump. All eyes focused upon the kitchen from where a number of blood curdling screams now issued forth. The double doors swung open. A black and moldering figure in a wrinkled suit and tie stepped through and ambled its way on unsteady legs toward the bride. The reek of decaying flesh hung heavy in the air as the figure raised both arms to embrace the terror stricken bride.

“Hello, Princessssss...” came a whisper from its cadaverous mouth; the weakened words, barely audible as foul air escaped through its worm-bored lungs. A
stream of wriggling maggots dribbled from its nose and mouth, cascading to the floor in a gruesome pantomime of wedding rice. The utter horror of it all momentarily quieted the guests and in those few brief moments of silence, the bride’s eyes softened with sudden recognition. She yelled out in a most tender and loving voice, “DADDY!”

THE PRICE OF AN ACQUIRED TASTE

“The doctor will see you now, Ms. Williams,” said the receptionist, not looking up from her paperwork. “Just go right in.”

A heavyset woman gave an audible grunt and with much difficulty got up from where she was sitting and waddled her way through the office door. Once on the other side, she was struck in the face by the sudden rise in temperature.

“Please have a seat, Ms. Williams. I’ll be with you in a moment,” came a deep voice behind a chair facing the opposite wall.

The woman shuffled her way to the couch and plopped her hefty frame down hard upon the leather cushion; the air forced out by the impact made a sound as if a large animal in the throes of death had expelled its final breath. The woman looked around the room and batted away beads of sweat from her meaty face.

The office was modern in appearance but the room was dimly lit; the only light coming from two ornate wall sconces that held solitary candles on either side of a large round wall clock. It was exactly one p.m. and in her mind she congratulated herself for being on time. It was a rare occasion that someone wasn’t waiting impatiently for her to arrive somewhere. She sniffed the air and thought, “Something smells just like…”

“Sorry to keep you waiting Ms. Williams, let’s get right into it shall we?” the doctor said, spinning his chair around to face her. A thin elderly man stared back at her with dark penetrating eyes, his features held a grimly pallor, fully lacking in color and unencumbered by the slightest bit of hair except for a dark goatee that jutted pointedly from his chin.

“Now what seems to be your problem Ms. Williams?” he asked perfunctorily as he scribbled something into an open folder.

“Well...to be quite honest...” She stopped suddenly and gave a quizzical look.

“Am I supposed to be lying down or something?”

The doctor glared back at her and, with a tinge of annoyance in his voice, replied, “Whatever makes you more comfortable, Ms. Williams.”

She maneuvered her enormous frame like an animal mired in mud but eventually gained a reclining position. Satisfied, she crossed her arms upon her chest and let out a deep sigh from her efforts.

“Comfy now, are we, Ms. Williams? Good!” the doctor said, not giving her time to respond. “I must tell you that I am an extremely busy man. I think it will make things easier on us both if we can get to the crux of your problem right away.” He then glanced at the folder on his desk, “It says here that you’ve been having trouble sleeping at night.” He paused and looked over at her, “Let me be blunt, Ms. Williams... I think your problem really lies in the fact that you are hiding a terrible secret from
The rest of the world... the likes of which are gnawing away at your very soul, thereby
causing this annoying lack of sleep. Am I correct in this assumption?”

The woman couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Now see here, doctor!”

“Please tell me where I’m wrong, my dear lady!” he interjected, cutting her
off. He stared back at her with a mischievous grin awaiting her reply but she seemed
frozen by his words, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, void of
any response partly because of her anger and partly because of his not-so-wrong
assessment. “Right!” he shouted once again, forcefully slamming his hand down hard
upon his desk. “Ms. Williams... since time is a factor, let me tell you a bit of what I do
know about you...

“When you were about nine years of age and just a mere shadow of your
present monstrosity you found yourself at the doorstep of a most uniquely disturbed
individual, your Aunt Martha. Your mother, who was obviously the epitome of womanly
virtue, left you with her just before she ran off with a traveling vacuum salesman.
Your Aunt was certainly poor by any definition but not without means when it came to
providing sustenance for you. On occasion, she procured from a number of sources a
most abhorrent and morally repugnant form of food for you both to partake in, one in
which you quickly found an addiction for... wouldn’t you say, Ms. Williams?”

The doctor looked over at her but she remained deathly quiet.

“Now let me see... as I remember, you couldn’t quite get enough of that divine
and succulent delicacy, you would beseech that poor unbalanced woman at all times of
the day for the dish that you had become so enamored with, the taste that... shall we
say... drove you mad with desire!

“Of course, in the beginning you were certainly not aware of what it was you
were ingesting, at least not at first. You did, however, have an opportunity for
redemption and could have fled that charnel nightmare of a house once you
discovered its true nature but that wasn’t to be, in fact, you accepted your discovery
with a kind of indifference, I think it’s fair to say. Do you remember coming home
early from school on that particular day, Ms. Williams? Your Aunt must have been
running errands because she was nowhere to be found, but that familiar heavenly
aroma wafted throughout the house and once again your mouth began to water
uncontrollably. You made your way to the kitchen and peered into the oven. The thing
roasting away inside was... well... let’s just say it wasn’t chicken!”

The doctor laughed out loud and paused once again to check the woman’s
reaction, but she was still unresponsive, her face only held the same blank stare that
he was all too familiar with.

“It would, of course, be reasonable to assume that most normal people would
have reacted in a repulsive fashion after seeing such a sight but you my dear lady only
shrugged your young shoulders and didn’t give it another thought. I suppose that in the
back of your mind you probably suspected what the mystery meat was all along since
every so often you would find a tiny knitted booty or small blanket disposed of in the
trash. As for the rest of your adult life... well, I must say Ms. Williams, I am quite
impressed by the fact that you have been able to keep your exotic tastes a secret all
these years and your resourcefulness at acquiring such delicacies is quite impressive to
say the least. You were obviously taught very well! I would go into detail but there
really is no point, besides, to be honest with you... I am quite bored by it all!”

He closed the folder and tossed it on the couch with her.

“I’m afraid your session is now over, my dear...after all these years...payment
has finally come due!”

“Pure gibberish!” she managed to blurt out, finally awakening from her
shocked induced stupor. “How dare you! What kind of doctor are you anyway, making those... those ... horrible accusations! I’ll see to it that you are disbarred or whatever it is they do to rid people of quacks like you!”

She looked up at the clock on the wall; only five minutes had passed since she first came into the office. She struggled to sit upright but was as helpless as a beached whale.

“And another thing!” she added angrily, “I’ll be damned if I pay one cent for this farce of a session! Doctor indeed!”

He shook his head and smiled. “Yes, Ms. Williams, you most certainly will pay... and as for your being damned...”

At that moment, the couch that she was lying upon began sinking slowly downward.

“What the hell is going on!” she screamed, her fingers clinching tight to the cushion in a vise like grip.

“Exactly, Ms. Williams!” laughed the doctor. “You certainly have hit the nail on the head!”

The dark shadows of the office walls disappeared and were now aglow with the burning hues of yellow, red, and orange as flames licked and curled their way around the sides of the couch. A legion of charred and broken hands appeared from the depths and clawed at the elephantine figure helplessly reposed there. Her face was contorted in a fantastic arrangement of horror and in one last desperate plea she managed to shout out, “But... but... I still have 55 minutes left!” before she disappeared into the abyss.

Ten minutes had passed and once again a new patient entered the doctor’s office. A wiry tattooed figure stepped through the door and looked around.

“Take a seat, Mr. Kupchak,” came a voice behind a turned office chair.

The man sat down on the couch and immediately raised his hands, the leather for some reason was uncomfortably hot to touch and he could detect a lingering hint of sulfur in the air. A moment later the office chair spun around and the old man sitting there began to write into an open folder. What appeared to be a wisp of smoke rose from his head as he looked up with a most diabolical grin and said, “Now Mr. Kupchak, time is running short today... what say we just cut to the chase shall we? So... just how many people did you actually murder last Friday?”

The man’s fingers nervously found their way to his shirt collar, he stretched it out and swallowed hard.

THE T. T. SOCIETY

A door at the back of the lecture hall opened; a man wearing a trench coat and an overly large Fedora hat quietly stepped inside and took a seat by the back wall. At first glance, the occasion could have easily been construed as a gathering of bankers or maybe a board meeting simply by the appearance of the gentlemen present; all were quite distinguished looking and well-dressed but instead of a reserved and stodgy nature that one might associate with such a group, these gentlemen were most jovial and childlike, their conversations loud and interspersed with the occasional peal of buoyant laughter. There were eighteen of these well-seasoned souls all sitting in
high back leather chairs forming a semicircle and directly in front of them was a thin
bald gentleman standing at a podium.

The man banged his gavel twice. “Order! Order!” he declared, and after a few
moments the group quieted.

“It’s very nice to see that everyone could make it today... by the grace of God
there’s not an empty chair to mourn over this month!” This was followed by a murmur
of agreement.

“Now then, who will start the session off?”

One of the old men stood and walked over to the podium among a scattering of
applause. He adjusted the microphone and cleared his throat. “I don’t know about you
gentleman, but my first business venture was an inauspicious one and came to me
when I was just ten years of age. At the time I was totally enamored with comic books
and did whatever I could to earn enough money in order to buy the latest edition of
Superman, Dick Tracy or whatever struck my fancy that particular month. Now, you
may recall yourself that in the back pages of those comics were various
advertisements that made extraordinary claims, like for instance, X ray Glasses...
remember those?”

A few laughs and shouts came up from the group.

“Remember how exciting it was for us young lads to have the ability to look
right through a woman’s dress straight to her undergarments... and all for a mere buck
twenty five!”

They all laughed.

“Of course... as you know, these items never did pan out as advertised, I speak
with first-hand knowledge because I purchased just about every product ever
displayed in those books at one time or another but I must say... one advertisement did
finally deliver on its promise and I was sure at the time that it would make me very,
very rich!

“As it was, I placed an order for this particular product and was on pins and
needles for the next few weeks as I eagerly awaited the arrival of my package. When
it finally came I ran with it to the backyard, plopped down upon the ground and tore
open the box. There inside, under a wad of newspaper, was a large envelope with the
words “PUPPY SEEDS” marked in bold black letters. My heart jumped! Two weeks prior
I had painstakingly prepared a small plot of soil in our back yard to receive these
magical seeds, I carefully followed the instructions and, sure enough, within the next
week or so I could see the sprouting of a most unusual type of plant. As they matured
over the following days, each plant grew a thick rigid stalk and numerous pod- like
structures poked out in all directions. Between school and my chores at home, I still
managed to find time to lovingly nurse my plants to maturity and, to my great joy, it
wasn’t long before they bore their promised fruit.

“That night, I was asleep in my bedroom. It was very warm so I had the window
open and at some point I heard a small squeak of a noise coming from outside my
window. I immediately realized what it was and flew from the house with flashlight in
hand. Sure enough, when I reached the garden, I could see a tiny figure squirming in
the dark. With great joy I scooped a tiny puppy into my hand and heartily welcomed
the little fellow into the world, but a second later I heard a slight thump as something
hit the ground nearby which was simultaneously accompanied by a tiny yelp. I pointed
my light in the direction of the sound and goodness me, wouldn’t you know, it was
another puppy! I watched in amazement as a number of the pods slowly opened and
invariably a little puppy would slide out and hit the ground causing a small yelp to
erupt. I was overjoyed not only by the number being born in such a magical way but
also by the variety the plants had to offer. There were Collies, Dobermans, Golden Retrievers, Saint Bernards, Basset Hounds, and just about every breed imaginable. As soon as one would blossom out, I would pick it up and place it in a pen that I had built just for the occasion.

“I was quite proud of the fact that I had planned every step in advance but it soon became obvious that the pen was inadequate to hold all of my little money makers since they arrived at such a hurried pace, so I hastily fashioned another pen out of old cinder blocks and chicken wire, but that too quickly filled to capacity. I was astonished by the prolific nature of the plants and it became clear that I would never be able to fully contain all of my little darlings. Our backyard was soon overwhelmed, then the front yard, then the sidewalk, and before I knew it, puppies were swarming over the entirety of our neighborhood in a cacophony of tiny squeaks and whimpers!

“My neighbors were horrified by the never ending parade of puppies that encroached upon their perfectly manicured lawns and walkways and were so incensed that some of them threatened legal action against me if I didn’t put an end to this so called “Puppy Pollution.” I must admit that I was frightened stiff at the prospect of spending my promising youth in a jail cell. My parents were also on the verge of disowning me if I didn’t find some way to correct the situation... and fast!

I ran back to the box that the seeds had come in and pored over the instructions once again, hoping to glean some answer to my predicament but I discovered nothing useful. I was contemplating running away from home when just by chance I spotted another envelope taped to the inside of the box, with the words, ‘OPEN IN CASE OF EMERGENCY’ written on it. I quickly tore open the envelope and breathed a sigh of relief, for I was now holding a smaller envelope with the words, ‘DOG CATCHER SEEDS.”

The old man smiled and gave a salute as the other members roared with laughter. He took his seat as the bald gentleman stepped back up to the podium with a chuckle.

“Thank you, William, for that most unusual tale... now, who will...” He stopped suddenly as he noticed an unfamiliar man in the back of the room stand and make his way towards the exit.

“Ah... Sir... I don’t believe we have had the pleasure!” the bald man shouted. All the members craned their necks to see who he was addressing.

The man in the trench coat and Fedora hat turned back in embarrassment with large jowls and a face full of sagging skin. “Oh...I must apologize,” he said. “I just caught sight of your banner on the far wall...you gentleman of course belong to the ‘TALL TALE SOCIETY.’ I must have gotten the wrong room. Somewhere in this building, according to my pamphlet here, is a lecture on Genetic Experimentation and I am to be one of its guest speakers... please forgive my intrusion.”

He turned to leave but the man at the podium yelled out, “But Sir!... we always appreciate and welcome having guest speakers ourselves!”

“Hear! Hear!” came a number of voices from the group.

“Would you not like to share a tale with us before you leave?”

At hearing this, the man threw his head back and howled with laughter. “Sir, if you only knew the absolute irony behind what you have just said!” At that moment, the pamphlet dropped from the man’s hand and he bent over to pick it up, but as he did his hat fell off and two long floppy ears came tumbling down around his face and a stiff fuzzy white tail sprang freely from the back of his coat.

There was an audible gasp from the group and a moment later, a gavel was pounding out order once again. “Now then...” said the bald man, turning back towards
Deep in the forest of Greyshire, a dark and forlorn figure could be seen wandering its long forgotten road in search of shelter. The gloom of night descended quickly and with it a shroud of mist layered the trees and roadway like a gathering of spirits. Yet up ahead, peeking out from behind a small copse of trees, a pale yellow light seemed to beckon the traveler, a most welcomed sight considering his present circumstance. As he moved closer, he could see more clearly the outline of a large log cabin and upon arrival a great wooden sign hung prominently from the top of its doorway, it read “TELL A TALE TAVERN & INN.” The words seemed to be freshly painted and covering up a different name underneath but he couldn’t quite discern exactly what it was because of the poor lighting. An uneasiness crept over him as he stepped to one side and peered through the window.

A fireplace was brightly ablaze on the far end of the room and a few tattered deer heads hung from its darkened walls. There were also a number of roughly hewn wooden tables and chairs dotting its inside but not much more could be seen from the window. “Such a dismal décor,” he thought to himself as he started to make his way inside. He wrenched the rusty door handle with great effort and the heavy wooden door slowly swung open with a moanful creak. Aside from the crackling of the fire, the room was deathly quiet and void of any presence. His eyes scanned the interior. A row of vintage oil lamps hung from a grey wooden beam that ran down the center of the room and to his left was a large slab of gnarled and unfinished wood sitting upon notched logs. Behind this he saw shelves filled with sand colored bottles, all corked and of myriad shapes and sizes. On one side of the counter rested a wooden ladder that rose to a darkened loft and on the other, a door to an unseen room.

Despite the odd surroundings he was certainly thankful to be out of the cold. He turned to close the door and as he turned again, a figure now stood before him. This sudden appearance startled him and he fell back against the door with a gasp.

“Oh my! Beggin’ your pardon stranger, I didn’t mean to frighten you so!” Before him stood a plump old fellow whose slack face looked to be fully drained of color. “I’m the barkeep here, Old Tom they call me,” he wiped his hand across a stained apron and held it out in common gesture. The man instinctively took hold but a stingy cold instantly penetrated his flesh and coursed quickly to the bone.

The old man gave him a wink. “Now you just shake off that chill over there by the fire and old Tom’ll get you some grub right away… they’ll be plenty of time for story tellin!” He then turned and disappeared behind the counter door.

Still a bit shaken, the man rubbed his hands and walked over to the fire. Within a few minutes the old man returned, carrying a large wooden platter filled with small loves of fresh bread, slabs of cheese and two large steins of beer. He sat the platter down upon the table and gestured for the man to have a seat.

“Now then, stranger, why is such a man as yourself out on a night like this?” the old man asked, eyeing him from top to bottom. “We certainly don’t get many borders these days.”

“Well, it just so happens that I got lost somehow,” the man replied. “You see, I’ve been surveying these parts for about a week now and I must have gotten
confused, I mean, it’s the damndest thing, one minute I’m standing on a hill just
taking notes when, for some inexplicable reason, I look up and everything was ...
mmm... different!”

“Different you say?”
“Why yes, I know that it sounds crazy but all my surroundings were changed
somehow. Come to think of it, I remember seeing a very odd flash of light out the
corner of my eye, then as I say, everything was different. For the life of me I can’t
fathom how it all happened but I found myself walking on a dirt road for what seemed
hours looking for my car.” He paused. “Now that I think of it, I did come across a man
on horseback but when I yelled out to him he wouldn’t even look in my direction,
which I thought very peculiar.”

There was a knowing glint in the eye of the old man but he remained silent, his
face only gesturing in a feign mask of sympathy. Realizing how parched he had
become, the man fully drained his drink in one long breath and wiped his sleeve across
his face.

“Thank God I finally saw your light, barkeep!”
“Yes, the good Lord be praised alright, but don’t you worry none lad, you’re in
good hands now; this is the best Inn this side of Barstone and after a good night’s rest
I’m sure that...ah... that thing of yours will turn up.”

“My car you mean?”
“Yes, yes that’s it!”

The moment was interrupted by the sound of a hatchet striking down hard at
the opposite end of the room and a momentary flutter of white filled the air then
became motionless. Startled, the stranger jumped in his seat. On one end of the
counter stood an elderly man of diminutive stature and as thin as a stalk of grain. He
was holding a hatchet in one hand and a freshly decapitated chicken in the other. The
blood oozed over the counter and dripped steadily to the floor below.

The old man gave a look of exasperation then turned to the stranger. “Beggin’
your pardon, Sir, ol’ Pete over there has never been one for manners, what say I get us
a few more drafts and I’ll have a bit of word with him.”

“How strange all this is!” the man thought to himself as he looked around the
room, from the rustic interior to the food that was served him, and there was also the
archaic manner of dress the two men sported, especially the barkeep who wore a shirt
with a thick ruffled collar that was buttoned high to the jaw line. “That has to be
terribly uncomfortable!” he thought, but of course everything appeared peculiar and
out of place.

Within a few minutes, the barkeep returned to the table with two more drinks.
The man pulled out his wallet from his coat pocket and inspected its contents. “I
should ask if you accept credit cards, I hope you understand that I wasn’t expecting all
this to happen to me so I’m a little short on cash but I do think that I have a gold card
here somewhere.”

The old man looked perplexed at the question but the light of understanding
soon swept over him, “Oh no... no Sir! We have no use for your gold or silver!” He
laughed out loud. “What we want from you is a good tale!”

The stranger gave a befuddled look. “A good tale you say? I don’t understand.”

“It’s like this,” said the old man. “Unfortunately we don’t get many visitors
these days and me and ol’ Pete just love to hear a good frightening tale, the scarier
the better. Of course, the story must be based in truth or else it loses its flavor... if you
get my meanin’ Sir. So what say you, stranger... got a good tale for us?” The fat
bartender leaned in with childlike enthusiasm as did old Pete who swept his way closer
The man thought the request quite insane but he was contentedly warm once again and quite relaxed as a result of a strong fire and an even stronger drink. He looked at the two morbid figures with curiosity, a loneliness exuded from them both and the better part of him relented, he would give them what they wanted.

“A tale you say, based in fact nonetheless.”

“Yes! Yes! And scary!” added the barkeep.

“Well, it seems to me that I do recall something that happened to me when I was a boy that quite frankly I cannot explain, even to this day. I was probably just nine years old at the time. My family lived in a modest house at the end of a winding gravel road and my maternal grandparents lived close by in an old two story vine draped home. Every day I would have to pass by their house on my way to school which always caused me great anxiety, for the house itself was frightening enough because of a dark aura that seemed to be imposed there but more importantly, I was deathly afraid of my grandmother. I had many a dream where I would see her staring at me from the second floor window as I passed by, a solitary figure with no movement or smile, just and evil stare attempting it seemed to destroy a small boy's sanity. I would often redirect my route across a nearby gully that was rife with snakes and other creeping nasties just to avoid passing by that interminable nightmare of a house.

“My grandfather was a rotund and jolly sort of fellow. I remember him as being great fun to be around but as for my grandmother, truth be told, she always reminded me of a living spook! She elicited in me a fear that I could never come to terms with. She was a woman of small stature and conservative dress with long hoary hair that was always pinned up tight in the back. My grandfather and her were complete opposites, he was an outgoing and boisterous type of fellow but she was very quiet and sullen. Come to think of it, I don’t even recall what her voice sounded like, perhaps that added to the frightening mystique of the woman.

“But there was one feature of hers above all else that to this day sends a chill down my spine when I think of it…. her eyes! Dark and penetrating were those eyes of hers; they could look right through your very soul and lay all your hidden secrets bare to the world. I came to believe that they were two spheres of evil, originally intended to be bestowed upon an unworldly form, a sinister form, not that of an old woman. I have seen pictures of her in her youth and her eyes were soft and gentle, gleaming the brightest of blue, but somewhere, somehow, they had changed. The light in them was now gone and her maddening glare would continue to haunt my dreams even after they were extinguished forever!

“As it happened, the old woman was diagnosed with cancer and passed away not long after. A great relief came upon me which I was sensible enough to keep to myself. During her short battle with the disease I found excuse not to visit her in the hospital and when she finally died I was overjoyed in thinking that my troubles were now over. Despite my previous manipulations, my mother made certain that I did not squirm out of attending the funeral and before we left for the funeral home that dreary morning both me and my little sister were instructed to bring along a personal keepsake that would be placed in the casket with my grandmother for all eternity. I remember the old woman lying on display in her wooden chamber with a delicate repose as if she was only lost in a deep slumber, soon to awaken at any moment to resume my nightmare. But that of course was pure nonsense, anyone could plainly see that the old broad was stone cold dead!”

“With my mother holding her hand, my little sister bravely placed a small stuffed bear in the casket as tears trickled down her cheeks. My mother gave me a
sympathetic look then they both exited the viewing parlor. I was now all alone with the old woman. I nervously pulled a small bible from my coat pocket. Earlier that morning I scribbled a message on the inside cover that was childishly disrespectful in hindsight but was certainly the way I felt at the time. It read, ‘I'm so glad you're dead! Stay that way old woman!’

“I tossed it into the coffin and was about to turn when I noticed something odd. I took a small step closer and stared at her cold lifeless face. ‘Could it be?’ I thought to myself. ‘yes!’ A chill ran through me as I discerned that her eyelids were only partially closed, there was a small sliver of darkness peeking out from behind them! I was frozen, unable to move or avert my stare. I looked on with horror as I perceived the slightest lifting of the lids as if they were struggling against a great weight. Slowly, very slowly they endeavored to open so that I could glimpse into the dark portals of hell itself! Yes, they were opening, I was certain of it now! My terror was at its peak when suddenly I heard my mother calling out my name which broke the terrifying spell and I ran from the room never to speak of what occurred that day.

“My anxiety lessened as the years passed, as did my nightmares. My grandfather died soon after his wife and their old house remained vacant and unused for years. The shroud of green vine eventually enveloped the entirety of its rotting structure as if attempting to hide its sinister secrets from the rest of the world. After many years, the house was finally scheduled for demolition and I decided to pay it one last visit. My grandfather had always been a voracious reader and over many years he had garnered a huge collection of books that I hoped still remained in the house, I was determined to pick through them to find any treasures there might be.

“I arrived at the house very apprehensive, having not seen or even thought about it in years. Its dilapidated state was a bit mournful to me even in spite of my past history with it. I entered through the front door and made my way to the second floor where my grandfather had kept his collection. The rooms were now in complete disarray and a moldy smell permeated the entire structure. Looters had thoroughly pilfered anything of value in the house and I was saddened to see how the old man’s books were scattered about the place, soggy and rife with mold, totally useless now. Having found nothing of worth, I was about to leave when I realized something that stopped me dead in my tracks. My nightmares were of that very room!

“Not ten feet in front of me was the draped window in which many times I dreamt of seeing my grandmother staring out at me as I passed by the house. That old feeling of panic renewed itself but I somehow found the courage to maintain my composure. ‘After all…I am an adult,’ I thought to myself, ‘and all that terror I experienced was a result of a child’s wild imagination!’ I reasoned it all out in my mind and was quite satisfied with my mature take on it. But a second later I noticed something sitting on the window sill. I walked over and picked it up. It looked strangely familiar, then my stomach began to feel queasy. I turned over the front cover to the book and there upon its first page I saw the words...‘I'm so glad you’re dead! Stay that way old woman!’ I stared in horror because below those words, in a shaky hand was written, ‘WE SHALL SEE MY DEAR ... WE SHALL SEE!’

The old barkeep slapped his knee and a huge grin beamed across his face. “That’s a pure dilly my boy, a pure dilly!” he cried out as he raised his mug in salute. Old Pete nodded his agreement then went back to his sweeping.

“He doesn’t say much, does he?” asked the stranger.

“No sir, he doesn’t,” replied the old man hanging his head. “Not for a very long time now.”
The old man suddenly perked up again. “Well, one good tale deserves another
and ol’ Tom’s in the mood to tell it, so sit back and enjoy your Lager while I regale you
with a tale of a place just like this one many, many years ago…
“There once was a very lively and prosperous Inn situated at the halfway point
between two busy trading towns. The Inn at that time was called ‘THE ROOST’ and it
was frequented by all different character types and vocation of men. Trappers were
the most common but there were gamblers, homesteaders, sailors, traders, salesmen,
and a whole host of others that passed through its doors... mostly folk of ill repute it
could be truthfully said. The Inn keeper there was an honest but stern fellow, he made
it a point to keep the peace in his establishment and he did this with the help of a
blunderbuss he kept hidden behind the bar. The only other employee there was an old
servant who performed most of the cooking and cleaning chores and together over
time they developed quite a reputation for themselves as a place where you could
have a drink and spin a good yarn in confidence. The customers at that time were a
lively bunch, full of spit and vinegar as they say, telling the wildest of tales which
stretched the imagination and oh how the Innkeeper loved to hear their tales!
“But one late evening after everyone had either gone home or bedded down for
the night, a stranger came to the Inn looking to satisfy his thirst. He stumbled through
the door in a drunken state and yelled out for assistance. Within a few moments the
Innkeeper appeared from the back room, bleary eyed and dressed in his night clothes.
He explained that there was a bed available but that drinks were no longer being
served on account of the late hour. The stranger was about to make an uproar when he
realized that he still had a bottle of rum in the pocket of his overcoat. Satisfied with
his discovery, he sat down in front of the fireplace and proceeded to ramble on about
his immoral exploits. The Innkeeper beckoned the servant to prepare a bed for the
stranger as he himself wasted no time in returning to the fire for fear that he might
miss out on some tidbit of fascination. Perhaps it was the monotony of Inn keeping or
just the envy of men who lived dangerously and sought a life of adventure that fed his
need to absorb their tales, whatever it was he could hardly contain his eagerness for a
new story.
“The stranger boasted many a villainous act but he became most lively when
he talked of an evil conquest that took place that very evening. As it was, he and
three other men were sailors from the ship ‘Maytu Queen’ that lay anchored in nearby
Oak Harbor. It was resupplying itself and was scheduled to set sail by weeks’ end for
the long voyage to the Marianas. The crew, however, was on the verge of mutiny as a
result of ill treatment by the Captain and his officers. The four hastily hatched a plot
to relieve the ship of her gold stores, but when the deed was underway a deck officer
walked in on the theft and they had no choice but to soundly slice him to pieces. They
managed to make off with a small chest of bullion and when they were far enough
away they decided to hide the treasure in an old abandoned barn on the outskirts of
Barstone.
“On a fortnight, after all the commotion had settled, they would again rejoin
forces and divvy up the treasure. Men, of course, can never be trusted to stay loyal to
one another and sailors are no exception to this; only these fellows were bound to
fidelity by an ancient blood oath. As they became brothers with the mixing of their
blood, one of them read from a small parchment that applied a most potent curse
upon any of which broke its contract. The men were not even to speak a syllable of
what had occurred or the curse would wreak havoc upon the unfaithful.
“All of a sudden, the stranger stopped speaking and stared as if in shock. His
eyes were wide and all blood seemed to be drained from his face as he fully realized
what he had done. In telling the story he had broken the contract he made earlier. In an act of desperation and part confusion he jumped to his feet and pulled his long saber from its sheath. The blade sang through the air and made fierce contact with the Innkeepers throat. His meaty head separated from his body in a splash of red and thumped loudly against the wooden floor.”

“A wildness was now aflame in the sailor’s eyes as he turned and spotted the old servant cowering behind the bar. He rushed over, grabbed the servant by the jowls and forced a small dagger into the mouth of the trembling old man thereby relieving him of his tongue. Satisfied now that there would be no one to speak of the night’s atrocity, the sailor grabbed a bottle of rum from behind the counter and made his way to the door for his escape but he stopped suddenly when he heard sounds coming from the loft above. Looking up, he saw faces staring down at him and spewing obscenities, he then realized that there were more witnesses to be dealt with. He looked around and latched on to one of the oil lamps, carrying it to the door then turned and smashed the bottle of rum upon the floor. In one last gesture of evil, he threw down the lamp which burst into flames and soon the entire structure became a raging inferno.

“Needless to say... no one inside the building escaped that night. As for the sailor... In breaking his sworn oath, he was cursed to wander the Barstone road for all eternity and on the anniversary of that fateful night he must relive the horrible deed that saw the bitter demise of ‘THE ROOST.’ I’m afraid my lad... the anniversary... is this very night!”

“Bravo, bravo!” shouted the stranger. “I must say that you had me on the edge of my seat, barkeep, and our ghostly surroundings certainly added to the effect!” He laughed. “It was, of course, very frightening and great fun but one thing does bother me...”

The old man looked puzzled. “What might that be, stranger?”

“Well, your stipulation of course. Are not our stories to be based in fact? That was one doozy of a yarn but it could hardly be taken seriously. Still, I applaud you for a great story!”

“Is that so!” said the barkeep giving a quick wink to old Pete who was anxiously standing by. “Perhaps then,” his words were slow and deliberate, “this will suffice in lending some credence to my story!”

The old man then latched on to a handful of his own hair and gave a swift tug upward. His head instantly separated from his body and remained dangling in the air as a sinister laugh poured forth from the ghastly figure. The old servant Pete joined the hysterics with guttural noises emanating from where his tongue used to be. The stranger fell from his chair in complete horror and made his way half crawling to the door. The laughter resonated even louder as a band of ghoulish figures joined in from the loft area. The stranger managed to make his way outside and ran blindly down the old dirt road.

Within seconds, an orange glow lit his way from behind and when he looked back he could see that the Inn was fully engulfed in flame. At that moment, a man on a horse galloped furiously passed him and a second later a flash of light temporarily blinded him. He miraculously found himself on the same hill he was taking notes the day before and his car was exactly where he left it. Wasting no time, he was soon miles away.

As he drove on, the first of morning light came peaking over the hills and he contemplated what to do next. He knew that in most stories like this, the victim would attempt to bring a companion back to try and verify the story in some way. They
would probably stop to ask one of the locals about the place in question only to be told that it hasn’t existed in years, if at all. He just shook his head, deciding that the best course of action would be to do what most of us have done when confronted with a gruesome memory from our past. Just tuck it away forever!

THE LEGEND OF JEDIDIAH CRANE

The last rays of red and orange painted the distant horizon and finally settled into darkness. Another hot and dusty day on the trail had finally come to a close. A noisy clump of cattle stood nearby grazing on sparse desert grass as two tired cowboys prepared to bunk down for the night. Mike stretched out on his bed roll and stared up at the star filled sky while Buster stirred away at a pan of beans. A wolf’s howl could be heard in the distance, which got Buster thinking about what had happened earlier that day.

“Mike…” Buster took a long pause then shook his head. “Ah, never mind…it’s probably just the heat gettin to me.”

Mike rolled over onto his side. “Spit it out, Buster…we ain’t got nothin but time. What’s on your mind?”

The cowboy stopped his stirring and shrugged. “Well...did you happen to hear anything strange on the trail today, Mike? Kinda like laughter maybe? I mean, I coulda swore that I heard someone laughing, you know, a crazy sort of laugh, but I couldn’t for the life of me figure where it was comin’ from.”

There was a long silence as Mike considered what Buster had said then a moment later he blurted out the name “JEDIDIAH!”

Buster looked up from his beans. “What’d you say?”

“The laughter you heard...more than likely that was old Jedidiah! You ain’t never heard of the legend of Jedidiah Crane?”

Mike suddenly remembered that Buster had only worked for the ranch a few short months and wasn’t familiar with the territory or its history. Mike sat up and plucked a blade of grass from the ground and set it between his teeth. “Well then my friend, let me acquaint you with some of our colorful folk lore... it’ll make good story telling for your grand kiddies someday.”

Mike settled back against a large rock. “You see Buster, back in ‘49, it was said that gold had been discovered in these here parts. Folks poured in from all over the country in hopes of finding their fortune, they came to our small town of Shilo like ants stirred out of a hole in the ground, thousands of em, in all manner of privation, some with only a shovel and the very clothes on their back. At the time, Shilo could only boast a handful of folks and a few old buildings but after the gold fever hit, well sir, the town split its britches seemed like overnight and became a thriving community...boom town they called it. But the truth is, not much gold was ever found; turned out to be more rumor than fact. Once folks caught wind, most of em pulled up stakes and headed up to Alaska where a big strike was said to have taken place. All that remained in town at that point were a bunch of gunslingers, gamblers, and thieves and it didn’t take long for the town to turn into a haven of lawlessness. Most prospectors who had any sense went off in search of greener pastures but of course there were a few stubborn old goats that still insisted on playing out their hand. One
of these was Jedidiah Crane.

“Now Jedidiah staked a claim for himself early on and stayed put, he tunneled deep into the side of one of these hills, but after two long years of backbreaking work he was no closer to striking it rich than the day he started. Tattered clothes and an old worn out mule was about all he had left to his name and to make matters worse he was slowly starving to death. He no longer made his monthly ride into town for supplies since he had no money to speak of and besides, it seemed that he owed everyone this side of the Pecos. A trip into town more than likely would cost him his life. Yes sir, it couldn’t have been more hopeless for old Jedidiah but little did he realize that his life was about to change in a most unexpected way… once of course he met the man in black! That night, Jedidiah sat by his camp fire brooding over his misfortunes when, out of frustration, he yelled into the darkness. ‘It ain’t like I’m a greedy man! I ain’t askin for a wagon full of gold or nothin!’ He brought his cupped hands up to his face and stared at them for a long while. His voice faded to a teary whisper. ‘I... I’d give anything for just two hands full of gold... just anything!’

“Suddenly, out of the night came a deep unsettling voice. ‘Anything, Jedidiah?’

“The words startled the old man and he fell off the log he was sitting on, he looked up and saw a tall figure standing on the other side of the fire dressed in a black suit and holding a long golden cane. The man’s eyes were black as coal and sparkled fiercely as they reflected the flame from the fire. Jedidiah pulled himself off the ground, ‘By cracky!’ he screamed, ‘Where in tarnations do a feller get his manners, sneakin up on a pore soul like that! Why... why you gave me enough fright so’s to stop my ticker for good!’

“The man laughed and licked at his lips. ‘Yes...I seem to have that effect on most everyone I meet! Now then, Jedidiah...I thought I overheard you say that you would give anything for two hands full of gold? Have I quoted you correctly, old timer?’

“An unknown fear crept into the old man but he was still angry about the sudden intrusion upon his property. ‘First off, how in tarnations had you come to know my name?’ he asked defiantly.

‘Now, now, Mr. Crane, simmer down or most surely your heart will fail you. All your questions will be answered in due course, but for now I must know if you meant what you said about giving anything for two hands full of gold.’

“Jedidiah looked at the stranger and it seemed that all the hardships of the last few years came flooding back to his mind all at once. ‘Mister, you have any idea how long I’ve been bustin’ my back on this here God forsaken chunk’o land? It’s wore a feller clean out and I’m damn near close to starving to death! Darn tootin I meant what I said, there ain’t nothin I wouldn’t give at this point for two hands full of gold and that’s a fact!’

‘At hearing this a broad smile stretched across the man’s face exposing rows of razor sharp teeth. ‘Fair enough, Jedidiah Crane, by your own words a deal has been struck between us this very night!’

“The stranger thrust the tip of his cane into the fire and kicked up a shower of sparks and burning embers high into the air. Jedidiah shielded his eyes and when he lowered his arm a few seconds later the man had completely disappeared. The old man stood shaking with fright and it was many hours before the patter of his heart would slow enough to allow him a few hours of much needed sleep.

“The next morning, the sun rose bright and warm as usual and the old man stirred upon the ground. He blinked at the light that pierced his tired eyes and raised a hand to block the glare but at that instant it became clear that something was terribly wrong. His hand, as a matter of fact, both hands felt as though they were
weighted down by lead, he slowly lifted them to his face and stared in disbelief. Both gleamed a brilliant gold in the morning sunlight as though they had somehow been dipped into a liquid vat of the precious metal.

‘Well I’ll be dagged!’ Jedidiah cried out, not understanding what had happened but it wasn’t long before he realized that the stranger the night before must have been Old Nick himself and, although he had been thoroughly snookered by the Devil, he had to laugh out loud at the craftiness of the old fellow. He certainly got what he had wished for... his two hands were without a doubt full of gold!

“A rumbling suddenly came from deep inside the old man’s stomach, interrupting his thoughts. He was reminded once again of his most immediate concern, his dire need for food. He again stared down at his hands. By some blessing, he could still move his fingers but he had no feeling in them at all, which as it turned out was also a blessing. He had an idea. He picked up a small chisel and gouged at one of his fingers. The hardened steel made a large indentation but with no accompanying pain. A few minutes later, he was holding a finger in one hand and a hack saw in the other. He then took a hammer to the finger and pounded out its recognizable shape until it looked to be an ordinary clump of gold. He smiled at his cleverness. He would ride into town, afterall, for some much needed supplies.

“Wearing a pair of work gloves to hide his abnormalities, he quickly made his purchases and left as quietly as possible, trying not to attract too much attention. That afternoon, back at the camp, he feasted like a king for the first time in many years. He was about to stretch out for a nap when a group of riders suddenly thundered into camp in a cloud of desert dust. The old man recognized some of the faces and quickly hid his hands inside his pockets. The riders dismounted and proceeded to turn the campsite inside out searching for the gold.

“One of them walked over to the old man. ‘Say it ain’t so Jedidiah... you comin’ into town after all this time and not stoppin’ in to say hello!’ He grabbed the old man by the throat and his demeanor turned downright nasty. ‘Seems you been holdin’ out on us, old timer... word is that you done struck it rich and you ain’t got the common decency to stop round and pay your outstanding debts! Where is it old man? Where you hidin’ that gold?’

“The man sported a scowl that could have curdled milk and immediately raised a tightened fist as if to strike, Jedidiah instinctively brought his arms up to shield himself and something flashed brilliantly in the sunlight, catching everyone’s attention. For a moment, the men were stunned at the sight but a second later all hell broke loose as they began pawing away at the old man’s hands trying in vain to somehow detach them.

“One of the desperados managed to find the hacksaw that Jedidiah had used earlier and a short time later Jedidiah had been relieved of both his hands. He stared mournfully at the two gold tinged stumps at the end of his arms. The riders got what they came for and left in a whirl of dust and mocking laughter. The old man suddenly burned with rage. He looked around for some way to vent his anger and finally kicked a bucket with all his might into the side of the hill. The impact disturbed the soil and what was exposed caught the old man’s eye. He walked over and knelt down for a closer look. What he had labored for so long was finally staring him in the face. The rock underneath was streaked with a multitude of gleaming yellow nuggets!

“He let out a shout. ‘Yahoo! I’m rich! By cracky, I finally hit the mother lode!’

“He stomped his feet and did a jig but a moment later a cruel realization settled him into quietness. He stared down at his newly discovered gold then looked over at the pick axe that lay nearby then his eyes moved sadly back to his dangling
useless stumps. A moment later a small laugh escaped his lips then grew in intensity. What scarce remnants of sanity he possessed after all these years quickly left him as he bellowed forth in a never ending strain of insensible laughter which echoed throughout the canyon and remained on the desert winds for all to hear, so they say, forever and ever.”

Buster looked over at Mike and rolled his eyes. Mike just chuckled. “That was one hell of a crazy story, partner, but all the same, I just think the heat got to me today, that’s all. I’ll tell you one thing though, me and Jedidiah have something in common ... he was and I am starving!” Buster scooped up a plateful of beans and handed it to Mike then loaded his own plate.

“You know what would go great with these beans right now Buster?” Mike said wiping bean juice from his chin. “A nice frosty mug of beer! Mmm... I’d give just about anything for a cold beer about now. How a’bout you, pard?”

“Amen to that!” replied Mike, but all of a sudden out of the warm night air came a distinct clinking of glasses which was followed by a deep unsettling voice that asked... “Anything, fellas?”

It’s Under the Ice

When the helicopter carrying the American Repatriation Team crested the costal ridge of Greenland, a dazzling sheet of white burst forth before them like the unfolding of a painter’s canvas. Last month’s jaunt saw the team excavating the remains of a B-29 bomber and its five man crew from deep in the heart of the Burmese jungle. On July, 5, 1945, that particular plane had been on return journey after dropping its payload over a manufacturing plant in Japan and at some point it disappeared off the radar screen. Since then, the mystery behind its location remained unsolved-- that is-- until recently. Following up on a number of leads, the team finally located the wreckage buried under mounds of hardened soil and a tangle of thick green foliage. The team was able to recover what was left of the aircraft and crew for repatriation back to the United States.

This was the type of work they did, year in and year out. It was honorable, over the top, and extremely fulfilling for the four-man team, but today they would be charting new territory and testing their skills in one of the most inhospitable environments on Earth. This particular excavation involved a small Air force search and rescue plane named, Albatross. In 1942 it was caught in a sudden ice storm over Greenland that lasted four days. Although the plane was never recovered, the pilot did manage to transmit their coordinates before they were completely buried and lost to the ages.

The repatriation team was led by Colonel Stu Sutcliff, a grizzled 62-year-old ex-Navy fighter pilot with a shock of grey hair and steely glacier-blue eyes, the kind of eyes that carried with them the wizened look of experience. After numerous adventures together, the other three members came to trust Stu’s instincts and
decision-making skills and from the very beginning they affectionately referred to him as the Skipper.

Following the GPS coordinates on his screen, the helicopter pilot pointed to the ground and gave a thumb’s up to the Skipper who was riding shotgun beside him. The Skipper winked his acknowledgement and the helicopter slowly descended among a blizzard of stirred-up ice particles. The side door slid open and boxes of provisions and equipment were tossed onto the milky carpeting below followed by the four man crew. A dervish of ice and snow rocketed in all directions as the helicopter lifted once again, heading back to the coastal base where more equipment was to be loaded. The team immediately got to work setting up a large, bright orange tent that would be their home for the short time they expected to be there.

The tent was erected quickly and all the supply boxes were neatly stowed away by the time the helicopter returned to the site with the larger pieces of equipment that they would need for the excavation. Among the items dangling precariously from harness straps below the chopper were a bulky hot water pressure washer and a gas powered water pump, both secured to aluminum sleds for transporting in the snow. There were also long coils of rubberized hose hanging below that looked like a tangle of spaghetti swaying in the wind. After the last of the cargo had been unloaded from the chopper, the men adjourned to the tent where the Skipper handed each of them a steaming cup of coffee as they entered.

“The weather looks to be holding out so far, Skipper,” remarked Bill Olsen, a burly hulk of a man who was second in command. He gingerly balanced his cup as he sat down on his cot. The others did likewise.

“What’s with the dour look Skip?” asked one of the other men.

“Ah... it’s nothing.” The Skipper answered, shaking his head. “Guess I’m just overthinking this one. Spose it’s the fact that this is virgin territory for us. We’ve never had to recover anything under the ice before. I know the equipment’s been tested but... what we’re going after... that plane and its crew... could be twenty feet or more below the surface. Any way you look at it, it’s not going to be easy.” The Skipper took a long draught from his cup. “I guess I don’t have to remind you guys that this place has the most unpredictable weather on the planet. If it holds out, I think we’ll be fine and we just might pull this thing off; if not, the whole mission might be scrubbed until...well...God knows when.”

There was a moment of silence, then, a laugh. “Same ol’ Skip,” said Bill. “Just before every outing he’s as gloomy as a dog that just lost his favorite bone!” Everyone laughed.

“Yeah, I spose your right,” chuckled the Skipper, but still not able to hide his look of concern. He held up his cup. “Here’s to those two poor souls that have been interred in that damn frozen meat locker for the past sixty years. We’re comin’ to get you boys... come hell or high water!”

The men clinked their glasses together and rumbled their agreement.

“More like,” added Bill, “come hell or high snow drifts, wouldn’t you say?”

After spending a restless night sleep listening to the frigid winds relentlessly beating the canvas, the men finally emerged from the tent, bleary eyed but in good
spirits, eager to get the mission underway. They stepped out into a bracing cold wind. The sun was just peaking over the distant snowy ridges, its rays of light reflected back a billion tiny diamond-like sparkles upon the frozen surface. A clear blue sky hung thick and expansive over the pristine landscape. The men went right to work and donned their custom made Geiger counters. Each unit consisted of an oversized and elongated pan, which allowed a more generous coverage area than conventional units. Walking four abreast, they crunched their way through the icy snow, making measured and methodical sweeps, listening intently, hoping to detect any signatures of metal that might be below the surface.

After more than three hours of non-stop trudging, the men’s faces were starting to feel a bit frost bitten and the Skipper thought they looked rather fatigued. He was about to suggest they return to the tent for some hot coffee when suddenly, one of them yelled out. “Skipper! It sounds like something big here!” They all came running. The Skipper arrived first and immediately glided his Geiger counter over the spot. The machine responded with a high pitched wail. “Jackpot!” he screamed. “By God, whatever it is it’s certainly bigger than a bread box!” There were smiles all around as the Skipper pulled a walkie-talkie from his coat pocket and informed base camp of their discovery. Within the hour the helicopter was back on the scene. The skipper guided it down with an orange flag held in each hand and the pilot gently sat a five hundred gallon container of glycol onto the ice. By this time, the other men were already back at camp preparing the equipment for transport to the site which was, blessedly, only about two hundred yards away. Even more fortunate was the fact that the sleds carrying the equipment glided over the crystallized surface just as easy as a skater would upon a frozen pond.

Arriving back at the site, they immediately began unrolling rubber hoses and making connections while the Skipper marked the area to be worked on with small orange flags and one large one indicating the site itself. A long hose was dipped into the glycol while the other end was connected to the pressure washer. The burner was lit but the machine itself was stubborn—it took a few minutes of cussing and fiddling before the men could finally get it to chug into life. The Skipper stood stoic and warlike, silhouetted against a pure white backdrop. He held the long stainless steel wand in his hand as though it were a machine gun, ready to blast their icy and obstinate foe to smithereens. A tiny spurt of green glycol ejected itself from the tip of the wand. This was followed by a ribbon of steam, then suddenly, a full-on blast of hot liquid. The Skipper pointed the spray at the ground and the ice immediately evaporated as easily as a hot knife would through butter. The men gave a cheer and the Skipper beamed his surprise at how quickly the heated glycol was eating through the ice. Within minutes, he had already carved out an enormous hole. The men tossed in a hose that was connected to the pump and it began recycling the spent glycol back into the tank with a vigorous slurping sound.

The Skipper kept at it for more than two hours, deepening the hole to at least eighteen feet, when suddenly, the sound of the glycol stream colliding with ice changed dramatically. A dull, hollow reverberation now lifted from the hole and the Skippers heart seemed to kick into overdrive. He concentrated the spray on that
particular area and within seconds, a blue star seemed to materialize right before his very eyes. “IT'S A WING!” he shouted, turning back with a look as if he had just won the lottery. “IT’S A DAMN WING!” The men ran to the edge of the hole and looked down. Sure enough, they had discovered the Albatross on their first attempt. Their shouts of joy echoed across the frigid landscape, scaring a resting flock of black birds nearby back into flight. Hearty congratulations were exchanged all around but there was still plenty of work to be done. The Skipper continued his spraying and after another two hours or so the entirety of the plane was uncovered, like some ancient fossil that Mother Earth finally decided to regurgitate back into the world. The Skipper shut down the pressure washer and the last of the water was pumped from the pit. After securing the equipment, the team gathered at the rim and stared in solemn silence. This was the first time the Albatross had seen the light of day in over six decades and they felt an immense pride, but extricating the Albatross from its frozen tomb and placing it once again on the surface was still going to be a monumental task, one that unfortunately would have to wait until the following day, since the shadows of dusk were already stretching their long, grey fingers across the tundra.

The next morning arrived soon enough and once again the men were restless to get started. A light fall of snow awaited them as they stepped out of the tent. The Skipper radioed base camp the night before and requested that the big Huey meet them at the excavation site at dawn. As they started their short trek to the site, the chopper barreled past them, close to the ground, kicking up a blizzard of white and landing a short distance away. If all went well, it would only be a few hours before they would bring the Albatross to the surface. This next phase of the excavation, however, would be the most dangerous—the Skipper would have to be lowered into the pit to loosen the bottom of the plane from the glacier’s icy grip and to secure the lifting straps. An aluminum ladder was laid across a small section of the pit opening. Attached to the ladder was a battery-operated wench that would lower the Skipper by a thin steel cable. He donned his harness and connected it to the cable. One of the men handed him the spray wand and a few seconds later he was touching down on the aluminum skin of the plane’s fuselage.

The Skipper was about to lower himself over the side when he was struck by a sudden curiosity. He slowly crawled to the front of the plane and leaned over the cockpit window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the inside, but the glass was obscured by frost. He shot a quick burst of spray onto the window, it cracked somewhat but the frost instantly evaporated. He leaned forward once again for another look. Only inches from the window, staring back at him was the pilot. His features held a grisly snapshot in time. His glassy eyes were wide open and his mouth was agape in a twisted and frozen posture of agony that forever captured the last horrible moments of his life. Startled, the Skipper jumped back a few inches. The team above noticed his sudden retreat.

“What’s the matter Skip? What’d you see?” one of them yelled down.

After a few seconds the Skipper glanced up. “The pilot.” There was a slight quiver in his voice. “He’s still strapped in his seat... probably either died on impact or shortly after. Can’t see the navigator... doesn’t look to be up front. Guess we’ll know
everything once we get this bird out’a here.” With that, the Skipper lowered himself to the bottom of the plane and started blasting the ice. The entire section that supported the plane was melted away except for two small mounds underneath. He then called for the nylon lifting straps to be lowered and after much maneuvering he was able to attach them to the plane. This completed his work in the pit. The success of the excavation now rested solely with the skill of the helicopter pilot. As soon as the Skipper was topside, the pilot ran over to warm the helicopter. Bill slapped the Skipper on the back. “Great job, Skip!” He could instantly feel that the Skipper was thoroughly drenched. “You damn better get yourself back to the tent and change out of those clothes before you freeze to death.” The Skipper turned and they could all see that his face held an unwholesome blue tinge and his teeth chattered as though his mouth was running a race. “I’ll go ba…back just as s…s…soon as this old bird is topside. B…by the way, whoever kept whistling that Camp Town Races song better learn a new tune quick, it w…w…was really starting to get on my nerves down th...”

His words were drowned out as the helicopter appeared over the pit. The straps were connected to a hook at the bottom and the chopper slowly made its ascent, pulling the straps taught and stretching them to their very limit. There were a few moments of stalemate--it seemed as though the plane just might win the struggle of the titans, but it suddenly broke free with a ripping sound not unlike some heavy branch splintering from an old tree. The men winced as the Albatross momentarily slammed against the frozen walls, but the pilot was exceptionally skilled and steadily lifted the plane ever so gently out of the pit, sitting it down thirty feet away. The men were overcome with emotion and patted each other on the backs. The Albatross was quickly unhooked and the entire team saluted the pilot who returned the gesture then shot off back to base. The Skipper turned to Bill. “While I’m gone, you g...g...guys give the plane a good shot of glycol and try to get that door open.”

Within the hour, the Skipper came tramping back to the site amidst a bluster of heavy falling snow but looked much better than when he left. As he approached, he could sense that something wasn’t right. The plane door was open but the men were huddled together outside, anxiously discussing something. “What’d you guys find?”

Bill turned to him with a look that had concern written all over it. “Well...you’ll just have to take a look for yourself, Skip.” As he said this, his voice trailed off and his eyes were cast downward. The Skipper felt uneasy but stepped up and into the Albatross’ side door. The first thing he saw was a charred pile of material on the floor. There were remnants of canvas haversack bags and strips of parachute silk partially burned, as if someone had desperately tried to create whatever heat they could. Just to the right was the cockpit. From where the Skipper stood, he could see the back side of the pilot sitting there, a frozen statue of a man in a black leather jacket and an officer’s cap. He stepped closer. The pilot held the same terror-filled grimace that he saw from the window but for the first time, he could see the pilot’s painful blue eyes. No doubt, at one time those eyes sparkled keen and intelligent and probably mesmerized more than a few ladies along the way, but now they only looked like dull,
frozen blue marbles. The Skipper oddly felt as though he was in the presence of some kind of caricature, a wax figure maybe, not a real person. He was about to search the pilot’s jacket for identification when something gruesome caught his eye. The right pant leg of the pilot was ripped open and a large portion of his thigh, down to the bone, had been removed. “My God!” he mumbled under his breath. “How could something like that happen?” There was no obvious damage to the cockpit that could possibly cause a wound like that. The Skipper was puzzled. He turned back toward the rear of the plane and immediately saw a figure slumped in the tail section, draped in parachuting. “So, the navigator is on board after all,” he thought to himself as he moved closer. The face was that of a man with almost boyish looks. Unlike the pilot, who must have spent his final moments in agony, the navigator’s face looked to be the epitome of serenity, as though he had only fallen asleep. What the Skipper saw next didn’t register in his mind right away, but when it did he had to fight the sudden urge not to expel the contents of his stomach. The young man was clutching something reddish brown in his frozen right hand and as far as the Skipper was concerned, there could be no mistake as to what it was. At that moment, the crackle of the walkie-talkie startled the Skipper out of his moment of horror.

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“Base to Colonel Sutcliff... come in Colonel.”

The Skipper pulled from his pocket the walkie-talkie. “Go ahead, base.”

“Colonel, the meteorologist just passed on an advisory of a category four blizzard moving across your area. This is a big one, Colonel. We’ve got to evacuate your men ASAP. A chopper is already in route to your camp site. Just be ready to go. Acknowledge?”

The Skipper had a thousand things running through his mind, but there was no hesitation. He wasn’t the kind of man to jeopardize the lives of his men.

“Acknowledge, base. We’ll be ready.”

There was no time to discuss the horror of the Albatross; the men just made a bee-line for the camp. The snow was falling much heavier now and the wind was climbing to tempest strength. A small helicopter arrived on the scene just as they approached the camp. The men ran over and the Skipper stuck his head through the door.

“What the hell is this? Where’s the Huey?”

The pilot looked stricken. “Sorry Colonel, this is the best we could do. The Huey’s got engine trouble. We just got to try and fit every body in, that’s all.”

The men piled aboard as best they could but the chopper couldn’t manage enough lift.

“Too much weight!” the pilot shouted with an ominous tone.

The Skipper looked him in the eyes. “If I stay behind, will you be able to make another trip back in this soup?”

“You bet, Colonel,” the pilot responded without hesitation. “All the hounds in hell couldn’t stop me from getting back here.”

The Skipper winked. “That’s good enough for me,” he said and stepped out of the chopper.
The men immediately protested, each offering to make the sacrifice, but the Skipper had made his decision. The chopper labored for a few moments but eventually gained altitude and disappeared into a blanket of white.

The Skipper retreated back to the tent. Once inside, he cranked up the kerosene heater and wrapped himself in a blanket. He was surprised at how quickly the temperature had fallen. He began pacing back and forth, trying to maintain the circulation in his feet, when suddenly a gust of wind tore the back side of the tent open with a loud ripping sound and the snow poured through like a sieve. He stepped up to try and staunch the hole but a second later the wind toppled the kerosene heater, splashing its fuel and igniting the tent in a sudden burst of flame. There was nothing he could do but get out quickly. Seconds later he found himself standing alone in the middle of a raging blizzard watching what was left of the tent sizzle to oblivion. He was now without the least bit of shelter and it occurred to him that for the first time in his life he wasn’t going to come out on the good end of this one. But an idea suddenly crossed his mind. “The Albatross! Of course!” He turned and high-tailed it through a blinding torrent of snow and ice and was much relieved when he once again stepped up into the plane. It was as cold as a meat locker inside but he was grateful for the shelter. He knew he wouldn’t have lasted ten more minutes out in that storm. He tried his walkie-talkie but it only returned static. His body shivered uncontrollably and his teeth found their old rhythm once again. He draped the blanket over his head and sat down against the planes bulkhead, trying to get comfortable. The frozen navigator sat across from him not nine feet away but he tried to push the thought out of his mind.

“Mustn’t fall asleep.” He said to himself. “Mustn’t…”

It seemed like only seconds later that his wife was rubbing his tired feet as he lay stretched out on their leather couch at home. The fireplace was glowing bright in the corner of the room and its warmth felt delicious as he sipped a glass of chilled wine.

“That’s how it all happened, dear. I was truly lucky to make it out alive.”

“Oh, you poor thing!” she said as she squeezed some more aloe scented lotion into her hand. “Now you just try to relax while momma pampers her little baby.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I must say that it’s good to be back home again.” He took another long sip of his drink and closed his eyes. “Ahhh...that feels great honey, you’ve certainly got the magic touch.” For some reason, she started whistling something under her breath and it struck him as odd since he could never recall her whistling before. She stopped suddenly.

“You know dear, if you don’t feel up to going out tonight, I can easily fix something myself. As a matter of fact,” she said with a deep guttural laugh that brought goose flesh to his entire body, “I have a little something here that we both can munch on before dinner.”

At that moment he felt an icy cold object being pressed against one of his feet. He looked down and saw that his wife was holding the same frozen slab of flesh that the navigator held! A scream leapt from his throat and he suddenly found himself back inside the Albatross.
“My G...G...God!” he said to himself; his breath exhausting in ghost-like vapors. “Mustn’t fall asleep ag...again.”

“No, you should definitely try to stay awake, Colonel Sutcliff,” came a whispering voice from the tail section of the plane.

The Skipper felt his bladder release its entire contents and cover the inside of his thighs in warm liquid. At the same time, it felt like a jolt of electricity was shooting through his body as he fumbled for the flashlight that was in one of his pockets. He directed a weak beam of light on the face of the young navigator but his frozen countenance had remained unchanged. “G...get a grip, old man,” he said to himself, “You’re only hallucinating b...b...because of the cold.” A second later he began to hear whistling. He lifted the flashlight once again but the light faded to black almost immediately. He smacked it against the palm of his hand.

“You know Colonel, it was most unpleasant how you and your men have disturbed my solitude.”

The voice shook the Skipper to his very core but he kept reminding himself that it was all just the effect of hypothermia. Only, the hallucination continued.

“Young Williams here broke one of the most cardinal of rules. Partaking of human flesh is one of the most egregious sins there is, Colonel. It ranks right up there with shooting the Pope; a sin that will certainly get a person an expedited, first class trip straight to hell. Yes siree... no waiting in line, no long drawn out evaluations, and certainly no comical pleading of one’s case, thank you very much. Just a one way ticket straight to Hades on the red-eye...pardon the pun. This, of course, is where I come in Colonel. Someone audacious enough to commit such an abomination will always receive a personal escort to the nether regions by yours truly, so they won’t... shall we say...get lost along the way. To be honest, Colonel, I felt rather bad for the chap. Such a nice young man, just a victim of circumstance after all, wouldn’t you agree? Of course you would, Colonel. I know you’d answer in the affirmative if only your frozen lips could form the words. It might have also crossed your mind as to why I’m still hanging around in this young man’s frozen corpse. Well, the truth of the matter is, I’m taking a much deserved holiday. You see, Colonel, hell can be a very loud and annoying place, with the never ending screams and the gnashing of teeth and all the rest. As you can probably imagine, after tens of thousands of years, that kind of thing can really get on ones nerves. When I came for young Williams here, I was taken with the place. The exquisite darkness, the deafening silence...yes, the whole ambience very much appealed to me. So, I decided to return for a little vacation. That is, until the master calls me back. Can you really blame me? Once again, don’t bother trying to speak, your chattering teeth alone speak volumes. By the way, I must admit that your pathetic display amuses me. You humans certainly have no conception of what cold truly is. I’m speaking of a cold so penetrating that it scars the very soul. Hell, after all, my dear Colonel, isn’t a fiery pit of searing heat and caustic smoke, like so colorfully portrayed by your ignorant clergy. On the contrary, it’s actually a dark and frigid wasteland void of any heat what-so-ever. Come to think of it--this place is quite balmy by comparison. Now let us, for amusement sake, consider the terrain found there... it is mainly composed of razor sharp rock that...”
At that moment, there came the whomp, whomp, whomp sound of two large blades slicing through the night air. “Well now, I do believe your chariot has arrived, Colonel!” Hearing the sound of the chopper, the Skipper felt relief in thinking his nightmare was about to come to an end, but another problem quickly reared its ugly head....the urine had frozen him fast to his seat! As he struggled to free himself, he heard a slight rustling sound; this was accompanied by something that can only be described as the crackling and stretching of frozen cartilage. When he looked up, he saw two red points of diabolical light glowing back at him from the shadows.

Outside, the helicopter pilot could no longer find any trace of the tent; he only hoped that the Skipper sought refuge in the Albatross. A few seconds later the chopper was hovering precariously outside its door. The wind was buffeting the chopper like a toy model but the pilot decided to remain aloft since there was a possibility that the chopper’s metal skids would stick to the ice if he landed. He would remain outside the plane for only another minute then head back to base. A longer delay, he thought, would only be suicidal.

“Sorry, Colonel,” he finally said under his breath, “I gave it my best shot.”

He was about to leave when he noticed movement out the corner of his eye. The side door to the plane swung open, a figure draped in a blanket exited and stiffly made its way over. A short time later they were aloft and headed back to base. The pilot turned to his passenger.

“Thank God you’re still alive, Colonel! I don’t mind telling you that I was taking a big risk coming back here and I’m not gonna lie...it’ll be nothing short of a miracle if we make it back alive.”

There was a strange silence from the man next to him and for a moment he thought that the Colonel might have died. The pilot reached over to give him a shake when suddenly there came a whistling from beneath the blanket. The air inside the cabin became foul with the stench of death and decay. “Oh, God! What the hell is that smell!” the pilot screamed.

An animal-like voice beneath the blanket croaked, “It’s not so bad Captain, after a couple thousand years you become quite accustomed to it. By the way, am I correct to assume that you don’t serve in-flight meals on this conveyance? Not to worry... as luck would have it, I brought my own.”

An arm appeared from beneath the blanket and in its hand was a gelatinous piece of rank and putrid meat, dripping with blood. The thing turned its head; the brazier points of red fire in the demon’s eyes were the last thing in life that the pilot ever saw; his face was stricken with terror and he lost all command of the helicopter.

“Oh, dear me... where are my manners,” said the beast as they plummeted toward the frozen tundra. “I’d be most happy to share my portion with you, Captain, that is... if you have the stomach for it.”

EPILOGUE
After three days, the storm abated enough to send forth a number of search teams, but mysteriously, no trace was ever found of either the helicopter or the Albatross. Before the Repatriation Team returned back to the States, they conducted a memorial service for the Skipper at the excavation site, or what they thought was the excavation site, since there was no sign of the Albatross or the twenty-five foot deep hole that was once her home. There only remained a solitary orange flag poking out of the snow, flapping forlornly in the frigid Greenland wind, proving, at least to themselves, that it hadn’t all just been a bad dream.

It is interesting to note that to this very day, all three men swear to the fact that as they were leaving the Skippers memorial, they heard a soft and muffled whistling at their feet. They got down on their hands and knees to listen. To a man, they would forever insist that the sound was coming from somewhere under the ice.

THE HAUNTED WOODS OF PAWPAW COUNTY

A cloud of dust billowed its way down the road and soon a motorcycle pulled up to a small weathered shack where an old man sat rocking on its front porch. The rider shut down his machine, hopped off, and gestured a greeting to the old man.

“Sorry for the dust, mister,” he said, slapping at his powdered covered jeans. “I’ve been choking on this God forsaken stuff for the past three days now.” He stepped onto the porch and held out his hand. “My name’s Burt Nyland. You must be Thaddeus Olsen.”

The old man took his hand. “That surely be my name, young feller,” he said, eyeing the rider from top to bottom. “Don’t get many folks a’comin round these day’s but it’s nice to make yer acquaintance all the same.”

“Likewise, Mr. Olsen,” replied the young man as he removed a bandana that was tied around his neck and patted away the sweat from his face.

“I’m sure you’re probably wondering why I came by to see you today. The truth is, I’m in the process of writing a book and have spent the last four month’s traveling the country trying to track down some stories.”

The old man raised an eyebrow. “Stories? Well now, that makes me a tad nervous why someone would come to see me about such things. Just what kinda’ stories we talkin’ about here?”

The young man laughed and sat down on the porch step. “Not to worry Mr. Olsen, I’m not investigating anyone. It’s just that I’ve been attempting to follow up on some ghost stories that I’ve been researching for quite a while now. I’ve made my way from Pennsylvania all the way up to Maine and down the entire Eastern seaboard. I’ve heard some great tales along the way but since the very beginning I’ve been anxious to get here. You see, I’ve been hearing rumors of PawPaw County’s haunted woods for years and the folks in town said that if anyone could explain its mysteries it would be Thaddeus Olsen. I was hoping that you’d be willing to share some of its secrets with me.”

The old man turned his head and skillfully spat a stream of tobacco juice into a
can next to his chair. “There’s no real secret to it at all, young feller,” he said, wiping his chin with his sleeve. “The hills and surroundin’ woods is haunted, plain and simple!” He pointed to a nearby hill blanketed in a thick pine canopy. “Ya see that ridge over yonder? Well, son, up there aways used to stand an old mansion that was part of a working plantation back in the early eighteen hundreds; there’s still pieces of the main house along with some splinters of wood from a number of slave shacks up on that ridge if’a person would wanna take a looksee. The plantation grave yard is also up there behind the house aways but folks round these parts have good sense not to go up there at night ‘cause that’s when the spirits of them dead people roam the grounds as if they was still alive!”

The young man became noticeably excited and quickly retrieved a note book from his vest pocket.

“Now it’s perfectly fine to be up there when the sun’s up,” continued the old man, “but when it starts a gettin’ dark then a soul better skedaddle quick from them woods!”

After a short while, the young man looked up from his writing. “Could you tell me of any particular encounters that people have had with these, um…spirits, maybe even something that you have experienced yourself, Mr. Olsen?”

The old man considered the question then leaned forward in his rocker and spoke in a low tone as if to disclose the most confidential of information.

“My pappy seen them spooks on many occasion, right out yonder,” he said, pointing to the field that spread out wide from his shack and ran to the base of the hills. “Ya see, them folks musta planted the fields out there before the trees took over the land ‘cause I found many a broken spade and shovel in that ground. My old pappy used to tell me stories about walkin’ home from work and seein’ these workers, black they was, from time to time bent over and doin’ some kinda work with the soil. The first time he saw ‘em it nearly scared the bejesus out of him. He hollered out to get their attention but they just ignored his calls. This irritated my old man and he walked up to ‘em so’s he could give ‘em a little of what fer, but when he got close, well sir…they just disappeared right before his eyes! Course, after a time he got used to seein’ ‘em and just let ‘em be. Truth is, I seen ‘em myself every now and then. They’s harmless down here in the valley, but like I said, don’t nobody stay up on that there hill after sunset, ain’t safe by a long shot!”

The young man stopped writing and turned to the old man. “This is such a great story, Mr. Olsen…it might even turn out to be the best story of my entire book!” He stood and glanced out towards the woods.

“I certainly appreciate your warnings, but now that I think about it, I’d better spend the night up on that ridge just to see for myself what’s really going on.”

The old man’s jaw dropped and the color seemed to drain from his face. “Don’t you be a damn fool now, son, you take a ride up there and look around a bit, but if yer life means anything, ya best leave before dark!”

The young man laughed under his breath, “I gotta tell you, Mr. Olsen, I’ve seen some mighty strange things these past few months but I didn’t come all this way just to scratch the surface of what could be my book’s most entertaining story.”

The young man eagerly nodded his interest and sat back down.

The old man shook his head. “Well, son…I spose your mind’s made up on the point but before you go, there’s a story that you might wanna hear…it’s about what happened to a boy that went up in those woods a long time ago.”

The young man eagerly nodded his interest and sat back down.

The old man turned his head and spit once more into the can. “Ya see…rabbits was as thick as grass round these parts at one time, and the boy found himself up on
that ridge just after sundown still a’huntin them rabbits. Well sir, he knew not to be there after dark but he was needin’ to get just one more for the pot back home and he musta lost track of time. The darkness crept up on him and before he knew it, it was black as pitch outside. He finally decided it best to start back toward the main road but all of a sudden, he heard the bark of some old hound dogs in the distance and what looked like lights a’dancin through the trees and comin’ closer.”

“He had the idea that the whole thing was some kinda searchin’ party that his folks had sent out to find him, so he stayed put and hollered out to get their attention. Well sir, it was a searchin’ party alright but not what he was expectin’! A group of men broke into the clearing carryin’ torches and leading them was a bunch of snarling dogs at the end of long chains. One of the men hollered out in an angry voice, ‘There he is!’ and proceeded to surround that poor frightened boy. A tall feller dressed in strange clothing came over to the boy and struck him square in the face with the end of what looked to be an old musket type rifle, the blow caused the boy to lose his senses and the next thing he knew he woke up some where’s else after bein’ doused head to toe with a bucket of cold water.

“He laid fer awhile on his back a’chokin out that water til two other mean lookin’ fellers yanked him off the ground and held him firm on either side. He could see a number of black folks standin’ round him, some holdin’ torches whilst others were weepin’ away as if someone had just died. The tall feller came up to him again, only this time he was holdin’ a large wood cutting axe in one of his hands. An old woman latched ahold of this feller’s legs and begged mercy for the boy, but he just threw her to the ground and shot her an evil look, then turned to the boy again and said, ‘Boy! This is the last time yer ever gonna be able to run from us!’ and with one mighty swing, he chopped off the end of that boy’s foot!”

“There came at once blood curdling screams from the black folk and a few of ‘em fainted dead away. The old woman and some others started right off bandaging the boy’s foot as he laid there on the ground. This was the last thing he remembered before he passed out from the pain. He woke up next morning midst them grave markers all by himself. He thought for a moment that it was all just a bad dream till he felt a sharp pain comin’ from his foot. When he looked down, he saw the bloody bandages. That morning, he crawled his way back down that hill and swore that he would never return to those woods again after dark!”

The young man was smiling from ear to ear and frantically trying to get what he had just heard down on paper. “Fantastic stuff, Mr. Olsen!” he said with a wry smile. It was obvious that the old man had just spun one doozy of a yarn, but still, he would have no qualms about including such a flavorful tale in his book. He looked at his watch. “You know Mr. Olsen, I’ve only got an hour or so left of daylight and it just occurred to me that I should get some pictures taken of the remnants up there.” He got up and shook the old man’s hand once again. “I’d really like to stop back tomorrow sometime if you don’t mind so we can finish our talk. I’d certainly be interested in knowing where I can find the boy whose story you just told, that is, if he’s still around.”

“Oh, he’s still around, alright,” replied the old man. “You just remember what I said about getting out of them woods by dark.” There was a steely seriousness now to the old man’s voice.

“I’ll remember, Mr. Olsen, and I’ll make it a point to see you tomorrow.”

The young man hopped onto his motorcycle and started up the old dirt road, kicking up a blanket of dust. The old man watched as the cloud disappeared into the thicket of trees at the base of the hill.
Sometime that night, the old man was awakened by the hauntingly familiar sound of dogs barking in the distance. He lifted himself up on one arm and peered out the corner of the window beside his bed. He could see small points of light between the trees on the hill where the old cemetery would be. He realized that he had not heard the roar of the young man’s motorcycle coming down the hill all evening long. A moment later, a distant shot rang out and echoed its way down to his shack; a second one soon followed. The old man felt an icy shiver go through him as he eased himself back down onto his bed and stared blankly into the darkness.

“Poor young fool,” he said to himself and immediately the memory of his childhood trauma came flooding back to him as if it had just occurred; his foot responded by throbbing with a pain he had spent a lifetime desperately trying to forget.

**REVENGE IS VERY SWEET**

His name is Sal Berringer, aka “Sal the Bug Man.” In fact, that very title is boldly stated in faded burgundy letters on the side of a rusty heap of a van, one that groaningly transports his ponderous frame one infestation to the next. You see, Sal had found his life’s calling more than thirty years ago as a result of a … well… an unexpected event.

As it was, the enchantment of a nine-year-old’s birthday was forever ruined as an army of voracious black ants milled about in a playground of Marzipan that was intended to be a special birthday cake... for a special boy... on his special day.

He can still remember looking on with utter dejection as his mother scraped the ravaged remnants into the trash with the empty consolation, “Don’t you worry Sal, there will be other birthdays.”

Most of us would be hard pressed to ascribe one instance in our lives that was the impetus for a true life changing event, especially one so seemingly insignificant, but for Sal this was it.

It can honestly be said that two life-long obsessions were formed that day as a result of his birthday trauma, for one, he would forever associate himself with sugary concoctions... pies, cakes, candies, virtually anything sweet. For this unhealthy indulgence psychologists would use the phrase “over compensating” and Sal certainly did that, in fact, he would eventually overcompensate himself past the three hundred pound mark.

As for the other obsession, simply put, he hated bugs! Hate was even too mild a word to describe how he felt, he actually despised them, all of them, not just the black ants that ruined his day many years ago, he developed a deep loathing and aversion for any and all of God’s creepy crawlers. But of course, as sometimes happens, an obsession can be transformed into something useful and maybe even profitable. This is what ultimately happened to Sal.

Out of his bug hatred was born a very prosperous exterminating business. For years he enjoyed all the work he could handle and received high praise from his clients for his bug killing prowess. He once even received a plaque from the mayor’s office thanking him for his efforts in eliminating the Great Cockroach Infestation of ‘89 at the courthouse.
Yes, Sal was on top of his game for many years but unfortunately over time, the constant snacking and exposure to the toxic fumes he worked with took its toll on the old boy and now a’days he found himself working less and less. In his progressive lethargy, he became exceedingly careless and on this particular day he arrived home not feeling well. As it turns out, it totally slipped his mind to change the filters in his gas mask and that old familiar tingly feeling was coursing through his body once again. Only this time the effects were much more pronounced. He had become somewhat disoriented and increasingly unsteady upon his feet. His solution for feeling better however had always been the same... PANCAKES!

He got to work whipping up his favorite dish and in no time was holding a fluffy stack of “mouthwatering magic,” as he liked to call it. He poured close to a whole bottle of syrup upon the dish as he smacked his meaty lips in anticipation. He made his way to the table but after a few steps a faintness suddenly overtook him and he began to swoon. He grabbed for something to steady his house size frame but it was too late. Sal the bug man hit the floor with an Earth shattering explosion.

He lie there upon the floor among a scattering of cakes and broken plate, his left foot and leg covered in a sticky syrupy mess. After a few moments of regaining his senses, he took inventory of his person. “Nothing feels broken,” he thought to himself. “As a matter of fact...” An unsettling realization suddenly crossed his mind. “I can’t feel a thing... I can’t even move!” He broke into a cold sweat. “I think... I must have broken my neck!”

The thunderous vibration from his fall caught the attention of the tiny inhabitants of the house and they came running to see what had caused the sizable earthquake. Sal looked on with horror as a stream of red ants made their way across the kitchen floor. The golden brown nectar seemed to send them into a wild frenzy and soon there were thousands of tiny eating machines pouring out from every crack and crevice imaginable. In no time his leg was fully engulfed by the swarming mass and he let out a scream in desperation.

“Oh, that’s just great!” came a tiny voice, seemingly out of nowhere. “Sal the bug man, the great Sal... King of the Exterminators cries out like a little girl!”

“What? Who’s there?” asked Sal, rolling his eyes trying to see who was talking, “Please go get some help,” he implored the voice. “I think I broke my neck!”

“Is that so, fat boy!” came a sarcastic reply.

Sal frantically rolled his eyes once more.

“No Shamu, down here! Look down, you big bag of cookie dough!”

Sitting upon his chest was a large black ant intently staring him in the face.

“That’s right, I’m talking to you, bug killer!”

Sal focused his attention on the little creature. “No!” he said to himself, “this can’t be... I must be dreaming!”

“You think so, do you tubby? What do you guys think?” the ant cried out as it looked around the room. “Is this a dream my friends?”

A clamor of small voices immediately broke out and soon fell into a steady chant of “BUG KILLER! BUG KILLER! BUG KILLER!”

The entire room was awash with ants, grasshoppers, crickets, cockroaches, spiders and every type of insect imaginable, their families all having felt the merciless sting of Sal’s vile methods. The ant raised one of its legs and the crowd soon quieted. “Damn all of you creepy slinkers!” Sal screamed in protest, his face reddening, “If I could move I would squash each and every one of you into oblivion!”

They all laughed mockingly at the impotent bug killer.

The ant moved a little closer to Sal’s face. “Kind of plucky for a motionless fat
man, don’t you think? How horrible it must be for you to be at the mercy of the tiniest of creatures!”

Sal responded by attempting to blow the ant from his chest, only he was soon panting from his efforts.

The ant laughed out loud. “How truly pathetic you are, old boy!” It turned to the crowd once again. “What do you guys think we should do with this beached whale of a bug killer?”

“EAT HIM!” came a singular shout from the kitchen counter. The rest of them picked up on the words and a resounding chant was intoned once again. “EAT HIM! EAT HIM! EAT HIM!”

The ant again turned to Sal, “We hold all the cards now, Sal! How does it feel, old boy? The shoe’s on the other foot now, isn’t it? Oh, that’s right!” said the ant, followed by a maniacal laugh, “My mistake… you don’t have a foot!”

It then looked back at Sal’s foot and Sal followed its gaze. A grizzled look of horror suddenly flashed on Sal’s face. The ants had thoroughly picked his flesh clean and only a skeletal foot remained. He then let forth the mother of all screams… “AAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“Calm down Mr. Berringer,” said a soft and soothing voice floating on the periphery of his senses. “Please, just relax sir, you’re in the hospital and we’re taking good care of you.”

Sal groggily awoke to a figure standing over him wearing a cap, mask and gown. “What… what happened? I can hardly see a thing!”

“Are you having difficulty focusing, Mr. Berringer?” asked the nurse bending closer.

“Yeah… you’re all blurry, what’s going on here?”

“Well sir, your neighbor spotted you lying on your kitchen floor in a pool of blood and fortunately for you called an ambulance.”

Sal tentatively wriggled his fingers and lifted his arms, a look of relief passed over his face.

“The doctor is pulling pieces of a plate from your foot right now.”

Sal glanced down and a second later saw a masked face pop up from behind a tented apparatus at his feet.

“Good to have you back with us, Mr. Berringer! I’m Doctor Tapinoma, I’m just taking out some plate slivers from your foot… it’s quite a mess down here. I’ve given you a local anesthetic so you shouldn’t feel a thing. You’ve lost quite a bit of blood, but you’ll be fine. As for your impaired vision and any paralysis you may have experienced… well… it’s the result of an overexposure of the chemicals you use in your work. Perhaps you should consider another line of work, sir!” The doctor’s voice had suddenly changed, sounding quite serious and judgmental.

“Ha! Yeah right!” Sal replied. “As soon as I’m able I have a score to settle at home!”

Just then he felt a little foolish; had it not all been a wild hallucination as a result of his exposure to the chemicals? He laughed out loud at his own silliness.

“I suppose it’s all just a big game to you, huh Mr. Berringer?” the doctor held a long cold stare over the top of the tent, his eyes were oddly shaped, dark and menacing. “Well then!” he blurted out, “In that case… I’ll need your assistance here, nurse!”

Sal looked perplexed. “Did I say something wrong?” but there was no response, he only heard the doctor say to the nurse, “Now for a generous amount right there… now some on this area… fine, that should do it.” An arm appeared momentarily from
the side of the tent and placed a bottle on a tray at the foot of the bed. Sal’s vision was starting to clear, he looked at the bottle, it was somehow familiar. Two objects that looked like masks were suddenly tossed to the side then what appeared as four black spikes could be seen bobbing up and down behind the tent. Despite the anesthetic, an aggressive tugging on his foot could be felt, as well as an increase in pain.

“What the hell is going on down there!” Sal screamed. His vision was almost back to normal now and he finally recognized the bottle on the tray as sweat poured down his puffy cheeks.

“That’s... that’s Log Cabin Syrup!”

He then remembered something that literally stopped his breath... the doctor... his name... Doctor Tapinoma... Tapinoma...TAPINOMA!

“MY GOD!” he screamed out loud. “THAT’S A SPECIES OF ANT!”

IT’S WHAT’S FOR DINNER

“Star Command, this is Starship X-1. Do you copy?”

“Go ahead X-1.”

“Star Command, I’ve been fighting this damn thing for the past hour and it looks like I’m going have to set X-1 down on one of these small planets to get a look at her thrusters. She’s been responding like a drunken sailor and I don’t want to take any chances once I’m back out in deep space. Copy?”

There was a long pause as static filled the transmission, then...

“Ah... Starship X-1, you have permission to land, just send back you’re coordinates once you’re firmly on the ground.”

“Ten four Command.”

The pilot turned his attention to the observation window. He was entering a very unusual sector of space, one filled with the most bizarre and unexplainable sights imaginable. Fortunately, he spotted a small planetoid directly below that looked decent enough to risk a landing. “This will have to do.” he said to himself, and proceeded with the twisting of dials and the throwing of levers. Reverse thrusters shot out long jets of gas as the lumbering spacecraft started to make its descent. The controls felt extremely sluggish in his hands as though trying to steer an elephant through a tight maze but the spacecraft dutifully inched its way toward the planet’s surface, making what he would consider one of the all-time ugliest landings. The pilot immediately shut down the engine and a cruel shudder reverberated throughout the ship, finally settling into quietness. He took a deep draught of air into his lungs and sighed with relief.

“Star Command, Starship X-1 has landed successfully.”

“Roger, X-1.”

The pilot glanced down at one of the glowing green screens on his control panel. “I’m now punching in my coordinates. I’ll be suiting up and exiting the ship momentarily to survey any damage.”

“Copy that, X-1. Just keep us updated.”

Within a short time, the pilot was fully suited and stepped through the ship’s air lock. The outer door opened, accompanied by a swish of air and he cautiously stepped onto the planet’s surface. Once outside, he was temporarily blinded by an
ultra-white brilliance being reflected back at him. He reached up and pulled down his visor.

“Star Command, I’ve just stepped outside the spacecraft.” He tapped his foot against the planet’s surface. “This planet appears to be completely frozen.” He bent to the ground and raked one of his heavy gloves across it’s hard milkyness.  

“From the observation window on the ship, I could have swore that the planet was covered in snow but now that I have a closer look, it sort of reminds me of something akin to frozen custard.”

He stepped a few yards out from the spacecraft and slowly turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees to survey the rest of his surroundings.

“Command, this is very strange! It almost looks as though I’ve landed in a huge crater. There appears to be an enormous rim around the planet made up of some kind of dark material rising a hundred feet or so into the air and the frozen white surface seems to go on for miles. I can also see an enormous, brown slab of what I assume to be rock, not more than a quarter mile away.”

At that moment, Star command broke in. “Be advised X-1. You still have to rendezvous with the X-5 in a few hours at sector SG-4.”

“Roger , Star Command, I remember.”

The pilot walked over to the spacecraft and closely examined the ship. “Star command, it only looks like one of the Starboard thrusters slipped from its mooring. I should have it repaired in no time.”

The pilot then pulled from one of his pockets, a pouch of wrenches, and with a few twists he quickly corrected the malfunction. He turned his attention once again to the intriguing frozen planet. He removed from another pocket a small pointed hammer and a clear polyester bag used for transporting specimen samples.

“Star Command, while I’m here, I might as well get a few samples for study.”

“Good idea, X-1. Just be aware of your time. You have less than an hour before you must lift off again.”

“Ten-four , Star Command. Not to worry, I’ve never been late for a rendezvous yet.”

He knelt down and chipped off a piece of the frozen white material and placed it in the bag. He then looked out toward the brown edifice that conspicuously loomed in the distance. “I’d surely like to know what the hell that is,” he said to himself. He glanced at the time signature inside his helmet then looked back again at the tantalizing brown structure. “Heck,” he mumbled under his breath, “I’ll be back in plenty of time.” He set off for the structure at a brisk pace.

Not more than five minutes into his walk, he noticed a wisp of what might have been smoke or steam lifting from the frozen surface at various intervals along his path, and for the first time, he could feel his boots sinking, ever so slightly, into the ground. Concern washed over him as he finally realized that the planet, for some reason, was rapidly heating. He took a few more steps and as he did, his boots found their way deeper and deeper into the melting tundra.

“Captain Cheever, is everything alright? We’ve been monitoring your vital signs and it’s registering a large spike in your heart rate. Is there a problem?”

The captain tried his best to remain calm. “Everything is alright, Star Command. I’m headed back to the ship.”

He started running but the surface underneath him was softening at an alarming rate. Fissures of steam leapt up all around in great geysers and he could feel the heat under his feet increasing with every passing moment. He looked toward his spacecraft. Only a few hundred yards were between him and safety but to his horror
he could see the X-1 starting to tilt to one side and within moments, the X-1 fell, full force, into the soft white mush with a heart wrenching plop!

“Oh my God!” the panic stricken pilot screamed out, but he was immediately confronted with another emergency- trying to keep his body above the surface of the deadly white planet!

His arms and legs flailed wildly as Star Command signaled once again. “Captain Cheever…. tell us what the devil is going on out there!”

Back at Command, they could hear the pilot’s heavy and congested breathing. His vital signs were registering off the charts.

“All is lost!” came a choking voice over the intercom. “The ship... she’s gone!”

Not more than a second went by before they heard the Captain scream once again.

“Captain Cheever, try to calm yourself. We need to know exactly what’s going on.”

The captain struggled to compose himself and attempted to convey what he was witnessing to Star Command. “It... it’s a giant! A giant being... looking down at me from outside the planet! My God! It now appears to be picking up the entire planet! I feel the distinct sensation of being lifted up!”

There suddenly, in the background, could be heard an enormous grinding sound. Star Command was about to ask the captain what it was when his terror filled voice filled the intercom once again.

“The planet... it’s tilting sideways. Its entire mass is sliding off... off into a.... Oh Lord, no, it can’t be...”

“Captain, what is it?”

The words “black hole” were discerned before one last blood curdling scream ended the transmission for good.

“Starship X-1, do you read?”

“Starship X-1, this is Star Command, do you read?”

Only silence.

“Hang in there, Captain Cheever, we’re sending X-5 to your location just as fast as we can.”

Arriving home, late from work, a man walks through the back door of his house that leads directly into the kitchen. He immediately notices smoke billowing from a pan on the stove. He rushes over and turns off the burner and tosses the pan onto the cold burner next to it. With a few choking coughs he manages to open a window to clear out the smoke, then makes his way into the living room where his poor wife is seated with her head in her hands, sobbing.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

She looks up at him with tears in her eyes. “Jim, this has just been one of the worst days of my entire life! The final straw came when I started making your dinner. I was so behind in my work that I totally forgot about cooking something, so I pulled out last Thursday’s meat loaf and mashed potatoes from the freezer and started heating it up, only I noticed something tiny squirming around in the potatoes. I was so frustrated that I ended up just dumping the whole thing into the garbage disposal.”

He could see that she was too upset for him to mention that she had left the burner on. She probably never would stop crying if he did mention it.

“Tell you what,” he said, drying her eyes with his fingers, “there’s a new restaurant downtown that I’ve been meaning to take you to and this would be the
perfect occasion, don’t you think?”
    She smiled and wrapped her arms around him.

Not long after they were gone, a tiny thread of light could be seen shining down on the pan in the kitchen. It traveled from one end to the other, seemingly searching for something.
    “Star Command, this is Starship X-5, do you copy?”
    “Yes, go ahead, X-5.”
    “Starship Command, are you sure about the last coordinates that X-1 sent you?”
    “That’s affirmative, X-5.”
    “Well, Command, I’m over those exact coordinates now and all I see is a charred and blackened planet. It looks to be burned over pretty good and my sensors are not detecting any black hole anomalies in this sector. Command, I think we’re probably looking in the wrong place.”
    “Ten-four X-5. It’s a big universe out there. Command central requests that we have you return to the base until we can figure out what to do next.”
    “Roger, Star Command, I’m returning to base. Oh.. by the way, Command. On my way here I passed over a small planet that I swore looked just like... I know this is going to sound crazy, but it looked just like a bowl of fruit. I would like permission to investigate on my way back to base.”
    There was a long pause as though a conversation was being conducted on the other end, then....
    “Ah... X-5, we just ran a quick check through your medical records and it looks as though you’re way over due for your space fatigue evaluations. So that’s a no go on the planet, but you are to see Dr. Larson immediately upon arrival at command base. Is that understood?”
    There was no reply.
    “Is that understood, Captain Wells?”
    “Ten-four Star Command.”
    “That’s just great,” mumbled the pilot under his breath, “I knew I should have kept my mouth shut.”

ARRIVAL TIME

    Everest, the snow-capped jewel deep in the heart of the Himalayas had been one of Ted’s favorite destinations for a long time, but the magic and challenge it offered in the past had finally worn off. He decided that this would be his last excursion to the top, but in true Ted form, he was determined to make it a memorable one.
    Normally it would take him four days from base camp to reach the summit and another three to climb back down while carrying the necessary items to make the trip safely, chief among these the burdensome oxygen tanks. Ted always considered carrying those tanks to be a royal pain but this time he only brought along enough oxygen to reach the summit since he planned on making a most unorthodox descent, one intended to bring him to the bottom of the mountain in mere minutes instead of days.
    The snow had been unrelenting the entire trip, but by the time Ted found
himself perched at the top of the world once again, the mountain took on a glorious relaxation. The air became clear and still as a funeral and the rising orange ball behind the distant snowy peaks lit up the valley like a raging fire. Ted took off his goggles and looked down in wonder upon the world at his feet. “Just beautiful!” he said aloud, “You’re giving me quite a lovely send off, old pal! I’ll certainly miss your craggy old face but I still have a million places to visit and as they say... life is too short!”

He tore off his backpack and removed from it a bright red snowboard. He strapped the board to his feet, quickly got his bearings then shot off towards the bottom.

Following his ascending tracks, he felt like a human bullet being fired from a gun as he made his way down the mountain at break neck speed, but almost halfway down, he could see trouble up ahead. A cluster of gigantic rocks jutted out of the snow like the teeth of a slumbering dragon, looming large and forming an impenetrable wall. He knew that hitting something that substantial head on would reduce him to instant jelly. He must have strayed from the path but there was no possibility of stopping now, his only option would be to drastically shift to either side of the rock and hope for the best. He was advancing at a frightening speed but at the last second he shifted his weight with all the force he could muster. It was just enough to change his trajectory ever so slightly and by a hair’s breadth he passed by the extreme edge of the rock. He swooshed by like a rocket with his eyes shut tight, anticipating the terrible impact that never came, but a second later he felt a strange new sensation... that of leaving the Earth!

When he opened his eyes once again, the entire valley was spread out before him. He was no longer precariously tethered to the Earth by his snowboard; he now soared like an eagle upon the wind, as free and unencumbered as the air itself. The feeling of exhilaration he experienced was short lived, however, as his body started to tumble end over end, reminding him of his first free fall from an airplane, but of course he had a parachute with him then; this time he was certain the results would not be quite as enjoyable.

He began to wonder if the program would allow him to come to such a horrific end; he thought not, but there was still room for doubt. All his prior experiences had seemed so real, so lucid; perhaps anything could happen. The Earth came hurdling toward him now like a runaway freight train. He decided not to chance it and reached out to the omnipresent key pad that floated at his side in all his adventures. He pressed one of the buttons. Instantly his surroundings were transformed and he now found himself inside the curling pipe of an enormous blue swell of water. He crouched his frame to gain a better center of gravity and adjusted his footing upon the surf board. The wave he was riding came crashing down behind him in a boom of thunder but he managed to stay ahead of it. He could feel the cool spray of water lapping his shoulders as the ocean attempted to swallow him whole, still he remained upright and rode the colossal wave all the way to the shore.

A group of suntanned bodies stood by the water’s edge, cheering him on. Ted pulled himself out of the surf and was immediately consumed by the adoring crowd. After a few minutes his admirers dispersed and he felt completely spent by the day’s harrowing adventures. He made his way up the beach, finally collapsing into the soft warm sand.

“Would you mind?” came a gentle voice from out of nowhere.

Ted rolled over on his side to see who was talking and the lovely vision before him caused his mouth to drop. Lying on a blanket next to him was one of the most
beautiful women he had ever seen. She was wearing a skimpily two piece bathing suit and holding a bottle of tanning lotion.

“Would you be a dear?” she asked as she handed the bottle to Ted, untying the string to her top and rolling over onto her stomach.

At that moment, he knew he was going to visit this particular program more often. He uncapped the bottle and poured a generous amount of the lotion into his hand but immediately sensed that something was wrong. He began to smell smoke and a second later his surroundings became fuzzy and distorted.

The girl looked up at Ted, “What’s wr…..” her words ended in a crackle.

The scene around him fell apart in a scattering of scrambled lines then disappeared altogether. He was again back in his real world.

The console in front of him had caught fire and Ted reached for the extinguisher. A few squirts and the fire was out, but the damage had already been done. He instantly knew what this all meant and collapsed back into his seat, his heart pounding out of his chest, desperately trying to regain his composure. After finally catching his breath, he surveyed the damage to the hologram module, it was as he suspected, completely burned through. He began to hyper ventilate as he felt for the first time since leaving Earth the choking confines of the capsule that had been his home for the past three months. He pressed his face against the portal window, hoping to regain the calmness he had felt the entire journey, but the star field gave no solace to the claustrophobia that was building and would eventually consume him.

He turned his eyes ever so slowly toward the ships chronometer and as he read the brightened display his throat tightened into a knot and his face drained of all color. It read, “ARRIVAL TIME” ...975 days...43 minutes...55 seconds.

A TALE OF THE DAMNED

The disappearance of Keith Tuttle remained a mystery. A week had passed now and still no clues surfaced as to his whereabouts. All sheriff Moran really had was a bizarre tale to extrapolate from, one so queer that he would certainly have passed it off as pure lunacy had it not come from such a professionally distinguished person.

Doctor Williamson was the head of psychiatric medicine at the Shilo care facility in Washington state, a hospital of unrivaled excellence, or, in layman’s terms, “The best of the loony bins.” On this particular morning, the doctor made his usual walk down the long disinfected hallways of the hospital on his way to his office, only today he elicited some unusual stares and more than one compliment was given to him in regard to his healthy appearance. Arriving at his office, he found the Sheriff waiting for him.

“Morning, Doc! I hope you don’t mind this early intrusion.”

The Sheriff awkwardly lifted his ponderous frame, his wrinkled uniform looking as though it had been slept in and himself looking thoroughly exhausted, quite the contrast to when they had spoken a week earlier.

“Why Sheriff Moran, I wasn’t expecting to see you back so soon. How’s the investigation going? Any new developments?”

“That’s why I’m here, Doc. We’ve been searching high and low but keep coming up empty.”
“Did you search the cottage?”
“Yes, sir, we did.”
“And?”
“Absolutely nothing.”

The Doctor looked perplexed. “What about the fireplace, Sheriff, was it as Keith said?”

The Sheriff shook his head. “You know, Doc, that fireplace was a bit odd, it seemed to be out of place somehow but I couldn’t really find anything wrong with it.” He scratched his head. “This whole mess just doesn’t seem to add up, that’s why I’m here Doc, I was hoping that you could give me your version of the story one more time just in case there was something that I overlooked.”

The Doctor glanced at his watch. “I don’t start my rounds for another hour, but I don’t think I can add any more to what I’ve already told you.”

“Just be as thorough as possible, Doc, don’t leave out any details,” said the Sheriff. He took out a small tape recorder from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him.

“Anytime you’re ready.”

The Doctor leaned back in his chair and gave a thoughtful pause. “Well, let me see… Keith was an orderly at the hospital for about two years, but one day last month he just didn’t show up for work. We made numerous calls trying to track him down, but we simply couldn’t locate him. It was decided that more than likely he had his fill of the place and moved on. You see, this vocation can be very stressful and we’ve had the same thing occur in the past with other workers. This is what we all thought happened to Keith, that is, until the day I got the phone call.

Keith was calling from a pay phone and sounded extremely distraught, but I managed to get an address and drove out to pick him up. Now, Keith had always been a muscular and vibrant young fellow, but the pathetic creature I picked up that day was anything but that. He was filthy from head to toe and very emaciated with a sallow complexion and sunken eyes. It was obvious that he was suffering from exhaustion and some type of trauma so I immediately drove him to the hospital where he stayed with us for three days. Those first days were difficult. I tried speaking with him on a number of occasions, but he was a bundle of nerves and reluctant to open up. Finally, on the third day, I was told that he wanted to see me so I had an orderly bring him to my office. Despite his agitated demeanor, he was eager to relay his story to someone he could trust, and what followed was a very strange tale indeed!

“’Keith, I said, ‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better. You know, we were extremely concerned about you leaving us so sudden.’

‘That’s just it, Doc,’ Keith said in a trembling voice, ‘I didn’t leave, not intentionally anyhow.’

‘Well then, tell me what happened to you, lad. You’re in the company of friends here.’

‘Keith’s features relaxed somewhat. ‘I’ll tell you everything Doc. I just got to get this off my chest, only this story is going to sound crazy, but so help me I swear it’s all true!’

‘Ever since I’ve worked here, me and the other orderlies have been accustomed to hearing some rather bizarre stories from the patients, like old Mrs. Feldspar in room 224. She would occasionally talk about her husband, it seems that he just up and disappeared one day and hasn’t been heard of since. I always felt sorry for the old girl because I know she mourned him awful but there was something else that she frequently talked about and little did I realize that it would play a part in my own
nightmare. You see, the old gal talked incessantly about her life at the cottage and her 'guardian angels,' as she called them. She would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and see tiny men sitting at the foot of her bed just staring at her. She felt that they were her protectors but we all just passed it off as unbalanced chatter and had quite a number of laughs over it, only I couldn’t get her stories out of my head so that’s when I decided to do some checking on my own.

“It turned out that Mrs. Feldspar was right about her husband, it’s been a good twenty years since he went missing and they haven’t found hide nor hair of him. Knowing that she has no living relatives to speak of and that she still owns the cottage in the woods, an idea suddenly came to me. I’m not proud to admit this, Doc, but recently I’ve gotten myself into a bit of a financial fix so I decided to take a trip up to the cottage and do some rummaging around since it’s long been abandoned, you never know what treasures are hoarded away by old folk, so that’s just what I did.

“It took me quite a bit of the afternoon to find the place, it being secluded and nestled deep in the woods. I had to park my car a good distance from the cottage and walk the rest of the way on broken paths, but once there I busted the front door window and let myself in. There were a treasure trove of antiques all about the place but I was only really interested in small items that I could carry off easily. After much searching, it looked as though my hope of finding something of real value was in vain, so I wandered into the bedroom and picked up an old photo album I found on the bureau there. I stretched out on the bed and leafed through the album, but I felt a weariness come over me and I soon drifted off to asleep. At some point I felt a depression at the foot of my bed and being a light sleeper I awoke and glanced down. To my astonishment I could see the outline of two small figures with glowing green eyes staring back at me. I yelled and jumped to my feet. Hours must have passed because the room had grown dark but I was able to discover a candle on the night stand and with a shaky hand I somehow managed to get it lit.

“I nervously looked around the room and finally realized that I was all alone. It had only been a nightmare, I thought, one more than likely induced by the stories from the old woman. I was suddenly aware that the cottage had grown cold so I made my way into the living room with the intent of starting a fire. As I sat a few logs onto the hearth I noticed a thin line of light peeking out from the back of the fireplace. ‘How odd’ I said to myself as I placed my hand upon the rock. To my surprise, it moved as if hinged, exposing a tunnel of some fashion with an intense light at the very end. My mind was reeling. I thought for a moment and decided that I didn’t come all this way to go back empty handed, so I started to crawl upon the Earthen path toward the source of the light.’

“A steady downward slope was my trek, on and on I pushed with much effort to keep my claustrophobia in check. At one point I felt panic building inside me and I attempted to change direction but my chamber was simply too tight, I had no choice but to go forward. At one point, I felt a rush of warm air sweep across my face as if someone had just opened a door on a hot summer day. I crawled a few feet further then abruptly felt my Earthen support below me give way. I fell a good ten feet straight down and landed with a thud.

“I was dazed but luckily still in one piece. As I looked up, I realized that I was in the uppermost section of an enormous chamber of some type. I would later learn it was an immense cavern the size of a city. Gathering myself, I soon became aware of noises emanating from its lower parts and with it came the distinct sound of voices. My heart beat furiously as I peered over a crag of rock to get a better look. I saw what was generating that spectacular amount of light: far below me was an enormous bowl
shaped crucible that was hinged on both sides by rock pillars. The bowl was filled with a luminous golden liquid that gurgled and spat over the sides. The whole fixture was being superheated by fires below it and those fires were being stoked by the same little men I saw in my dream!

“I sat transfixed as I watched those diminutive demons go about their business. From my vantage point, they all looked the same with their long beards and dark tunics. I attempted to count them but they moved around in such great haste that I found the task impossible. Some of them tended the fire while others tilted the great bowl, spilling its contents into large rectangular forms carved out of stone. The forms were taken to a nearby pond and immersed, causing a great plume of steam and acrid stench to rise up. After a brief time, the forms were pulled up revealing an amazing transformation. The large golden ingot that went into the water was now a deep green color and only the size of a small brick. These bricks were placed on a wooden cart and pushed over a hill and out of sight.

“My curiosity would not be denied. I made my way carefully down to get a better look. Enormous spectral shadows danced upon the cavern walls enhancing the little men’s activities as I made my way. I stumbled from rock to rock, all the while barely breathing when at last I finally caught sight of the men and their cart. It had stopped in front of a large cave-like opening in the side of a rock wall. I maneuvered closer and hid behind a boulder. I observed a curious scene: the little men hurriedly placed the stack of bricks upon the ground, then one of them plucked a curved horn from his belt and blew three short blasts. The group made a hasty retreat down the hill with cart in tow. I heard a noise from deep within the cave. The sound grew, along with my anticipation, as an odd scrunching emanated from the front of the cave.

“The source of the commotion soon revealed itself: It was none other than a gigantic worm! I was instantly startled and fell on my backside. I was in awe of its enormity, which seemed to fill the entire opening. It hesitated as it sensed the outside then began to take in deep droughts of air, sniffing perhaps, turning its slimy features from one side to another. I was in fear of being detected by its cautious nature but it continued forward in an undulating motion, first stretching then contracting until it was upon the stack of bricks which lay a good twenty feet or so from the cave opening. Its true length could only be guessed at since part of its body still remained hidden. Were it not for the eerie green translucence of its body, it would have resembled the common earthworm except of course this one being the size of a bus!

“I was contemplating what role the bricks played in all of this and immediately became aware of the answer... food! Sensing the bricks, the creature opened an unseen mouth, displaying long rows of jagged yellow teeth. A high piercing wail soon followed, which forced me to cover my ears. Its head snapped down upon its fest with a vengeance, enveloping and engulfing all in one motion. Satisfied with its bounty, the creature wasted no time retreating back to where it came from. A few sharp contractions and it was once again out of sight, leaving a trail of slime in its wake. Both my heart and my mind were racing. ‘I have to find a way out of here!’ I thought to myself. That’s when everything went black.

“How long I was unconscious, I could not tell, but I awoke in another location to the pain of tiny feet mercilessly kicking at my sides and my head feeling as though it were on fire.

“I looked up through clouded vision at my assailants. ‘It’s about time, human!’ one of them said in a gruff tone. ‘We don’t think kindly about spies now do we Krunk?’

“The other let out a laugh then spit on me. I immediately became enraged and attempted to push them away but to my astonishment I could not budge them an inch.
They both let loose with a hardy laugh, mocking my physical inferiority. ‘Save your strength, human,’ one of them said. ‘You’re gonna need it for what’s in store for you!’

“I was immediately put to work mining the gold substance that streaked the cavern walls and fed their mighty crucible. At first I thought it gold; only it was not ore, but more organic in nature with a rubbery consistency. I must have mined tons of the stuff in the days following. I was only allowed brief hours of sleep and was always awakened by a slap in the face or a kick in the ribs. My anger grew to new heights but I was getting weaker all the while; my only form of nourishment came from a tankard of very strong beer given to me twice daily. The little folk, however, seemed to drink it continuously which added to their spirited demeanor. They joked and cussed and frequently took part in some terribly vicious fights among themselves.

“After an encounter between two especially nasty combatants, one lay splayed upon the ground with a pick axe wound to his neck. Horrible screams reverberated throughout the cavern as the little creature spat up endless clots of blood. His opponent calmly brought over a tankard of beer, knelt down and pulled out a small leather pouch from one of his pockets, he then added a pinch of its contents to the drink and gave it to the one on the ground. A miraculous thing happened: a green glow flickered in the eyes of the wounded one and within a few moments he sprang to his feet with great glee as if nothing ever happened. They both laughed uncontrollably and walked off together. This was astonishing to witness, but as the day’s went by, every now and then I noticed these little folk sprinkle a bit of this magic dust into their drinks. I was certain now that it was what gave them their amazing strength and recuperative powers. As it happened, I would soon discover the source of this magic.

“On this particular day, my routine of mining the yellow material was broken when I was ordered to follow a very stout and cruel little fellow to a chamber that I have never been to before. On our way there, we passed over a small foot bridge of stone. As I made my way across, a horrible odor assaulted my senses. I looked down to discover its cause and gagged violently. There, not ten feet below me, lay a pit with the remnants of what were once human beings! Piles of bones mixed with bodies in various states of decomposition. A more gruesome spectacle I could not imagine. ‘I must be in Hell!’ I thought to myself. Now I was certain of Mr. Feldspar’s fate; he must be somewhere below intermixed with the bones of the other poor creatures that came before him and labored until death mercifully took them.

“My cruel companion looked over the side and sneered, ‘Lazy buzzards every one of them!’ He kicked me in the thigh, forcing me forward. As I walked along, I felt that it was just a matter of time before I would join that macabre mix.

“Arriving at our destination, I found myself in an enormous vaulted room with spiraled and knotted columns of rock connecting floor to ceiling. As I looked up, I saw a large opening in one area of the ceiling and on the ground directly below was a pile of boulder type rocks strangely speckled with tiny luminescent green dots. The stench they emitted was sickening. The little demon thrust a fist to my abdomen that immediately bent me over with pain.

‘Now that I got your attention...this will be your new home for a while until Krog gets back from his journeys.’ An evil smile crossed his face. “You’ve already made acquaintance with Bezor the Provider. Her offerings have sustained us for hundreds of years. The work performed in this chamber is vital and must be done right or I’ll see to it that you end up back at the pit with the other rejects!

“What appeared at first as rock was none other than excrement from the worm like creature, Bezor the Provider, as they called it, was in essence their god. They
religiously fed it daily and in turn it provided the much-needed substance for their magical elixirs. I was instructed on how to extract the tiny green flecks of material which involved pulverizing the hardened excrement into powder with a large mallet. Once done, I would drop handfuls of powder into a sluice type contraption. The sluice was continuously fed by a stream of water that trickled out of a crack in the wall and continued down into a deep recess somewhere below. The water carried away the detritus and left only the flakes of green, which I carefully hand-picked and placed upon a rock to dry. I could work all day and produce only what amounted to a few ounces. The work was exhausting and I continued to grow more weary but on the fourth day I made a discovery that raised my spirits tremendously.

“During my labor I became aware of a reduced water flow in the sluice and followed it back to the wall where the water originated. I surveyed the problem then proceeded to remove the loose rocks that had fallen from above and restricted the flow, but as I did this a large portion of the rock gave way with an enormous gush of water following behind. I was drenched but smiling for the first time in weeks. Looking up, I could see blue sky above me not more than twenty feet and my elation grew as I studied this potential escape route. ‘It will be a tight fit,’ I said to myself, but my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices coming up the path. I hurriedly placed a few large rocks to cover the gaping hole, then resumed my work just as two of the drunken devils came stumbling in.

‘What’s this!’ one of them screamed, looking down at my meager pile of green dust. ‘You’ve been loafin’ all day?’

“With that, he forced a tiny boot into my side, leaving me gasping for air. As a result of his blow, he lost his balance and fell headlong into his drunken companion causing a fierce battle to ensue. They both ended up on the ground, cussing and biting, a whirl of arms flailing in all directions, viciously gouging at one another.

“In the course of their tussle, they worked their way back onto the footpath and this presented me with an opportunity. I ran to the wall and threw aside the rocks that I had placed earlier. The light struck my unconditioned eyes and I immediately glanced down. I spotted a small leather pouch that must have fallen from one of the little monsters. I shoved it into my pocket and started my way up the rock chute as quickly as I could. Only a few feet up, I could hear voices cursing me from below and felt a tiny hand grasping for my leg. I summoned all the strength I had and brought my foot down hard upon his face, sending him sprawling back to the rock floor.

“Almost at the top, I heard them both laughing hysterically and soon a voice said the words I will never forget... ‘Make no mistake human, you are ours now, body and soul, we will bring you back home!’

Doctor Williamson leaned forward in his chair and sighed. “That’s it, Sheriff, that’s the tale told to me by Keith himself... though strange and implausible as it sounds.”

Sheriff Moran shook his head, hardly knowing how to respond to what he had just heard.

“As for what happened afterward, Keith found his way out of the woods and made his way to a payphone and after three days at the hospital, his trauma subsided enough to allow him to talk about what happened. He was particularly frightened by the idea that the little men were coming to get him. I assured him to the contrary and told him that he was safe in our care but he kept mumbling that it was just a matter of time. I had to order a sedative to calm him down and sent him back to his room. That was the last time I ever saw Keith Tuttle.

“The very next morning I happened to be walking to my office when I
overheard a heated conversation in the hallway by two of our custodians.
   “I inquired as to the problem. ‘Damn kids!’ barked one of them. ‘They must
   have broken in last night, Doc, the doors been jimmed and what a mess... just look at
   all those tiny footprints!’
   “I dropped my clipboard and ran to the nurses’ station. Keith was nowhere to
   be found.”
   “Incredible, just incredible!” the Sheriff said as he ran his hand over his
   unshaven face. “You know, Doc, they’ll probably lock us both up if we start spreading
   a story like that!” His words were followed by a nervous laugh. “Well, I’ve taken up
   enough of your time... I still have a few questions for some of your staff.”
   The Sheriff started to rise, but as he did, his hand knocked the tape recorder to
   the floor. He knelt down to retrieve it but was struggling to get back up.
   “Here let me help you,” said the Doctor as he walked over and easily plucked
   the bulky Sheriff up in one easy motion. Both men stood facing each other for an
   awkward moment. The Sheriff was astounded by the Doctor’s strength and
   momentarily mesmerized by his penetrating green eyes.
   “... ah... I’d better be on my way Doc. I’ll call you if I hear anything.”
   The Sheriff wasted no time in making a quick exit from the room.
   Alone now, the Doctor walked over to the coffee maker, poured himself a cup
   and sat down at his desk. He pulled a small satchel from his desk drawer and sprinkled
   some of its contents into his cup.
   An opened letter sat on his desk, in it is a recent Oncology report that reads
   “NEGATIVE” in bold letters with a Doctor’s side note... “We can no longer find any
   trace of your cancer. This is simply a miracle!”
   The Doctor spun his chair around and gazed out the office window. He raised
   his cup in salute and smiled, “Here’s to you, my boy...wherever you may be!”

**NIGHTMARE ON WALRUS ISLAND**

Some people will go to great lengths in an effort to escape a haunting memory. This was certainly the determination of Paul Westing, a young geologist with Omni Chemical from Great Britain.

A few months earlier, Paul could have never imagined himself in such a forsakenly cold and desolate place as Walrus Island. The island was literally a frozen chunk of earth and volcanic rock that rode the frigid waters of the Antarctic like a wandering iceberg and, for the next six months, this winter wasteland would be his new home.

Paul was somehow hoping that this unexpected sojourn would allow him to come to terms with a nightmare that had befallen him recently, one that had sent his world reeling and plunged him into an unimaginable despair. Well intentioned family and friends only served to reinforce the pain he felt, so when his company offered him an opportunity to take part in a working adventure at the bottom of the world, he jumped at the chance.

In spite of the vast distance from civilization, he would not be alone for there was said to be a small tribe of indigenous people residing somewhere within the vast and dark catacombs that riddled the island like a worm bored maze. This fact had been reported a year earlier by a captain whose ship was in desperate need of fuel
and sought refuge there. Days soon turned into weeks and this indeterminate lingering made the islanders wary and eager to rid themselves of their uninvited guests.

On January fifth the captain reported in his ships log a most astounding and significant entry that would ultimately become their salvation and the sole reason behind Omni Chemical’s interest in the Island.

He wrote on that day, “Party of eight hunted seal ashore in the early morning hours. My first officer was approached by an elderly man clad entirely in Walrus skins who seemed to walk out of the frozen tundra from no place in particular. The old man attempted to communicate with the crew but was unsuccessful because of his strange dialect. After a few minutes of fruitless banter, the old man produced a pouch and emptied its contents in the snow, there were nine yellow rocks, each about half the size of a man’s fist. The old man then picked up one of the rocks and walked about twenty feet from where the rest of the party stood and placed it upon a large boulder. He pulled an unknown object from one of his pockets and struck it hard upon the rock. My first officer reported that an amazing flame of great size and intensity ignited itself, the heat of which was comparable, as some present would say, to that of a fully engulfed barn. The flame burned brightly and could be seen easily from the ship. It maintained its full intensity for a time no less than nine and one half days before it finally sputtered out. I personally made several landings to inspect this miraculous phenomenon and was ultimately convinced that the remaining rocks would be more than sufficient to power our vessel for the entire return trip back to Great Britain. Providence seems to be with us in this new and amazing discovery!”

Once the captain and crew had finally arrived back in home port, rumor spread of a new form of energy and Omni Chemical quickly asserted itself. The company proffered a large settlement to the captain and crew for the exclusive rights to the island’s location and also took possession of the remaining few rocks. Omni scientists were put to work attempting to discover its secrets but, in the meantime, the young geologist would be placed on the island to survey and record the exact locations of the rocks for future excavations.

(ON THE ISLAND, TWO MONTHS LATER)

In stark contrast to the eye bleaching snow that spread out in all directions, a small wooden cabin now sits forlornly upon the frozen landscape, its smokestack emitting a wavy tail of heat that cuts through the wind chilled air like restless spirits departing for the skies. Inside the cramped building, the young geologist laid upon his bed with an open book by his side. It had been one week since he first set foot on the island and in that time he had already fulfilled his obligations to the company by locating a number of caves riddled with the yellow stone lodged within the porous volcanic rock. In fact, he could find no reason to return to the caves for his discoveries would be adequate enough to keep his company toiling away for many years to come.

After a few days of being sequestered in the tiny shack, he already felt claustrophobia’s grip upon him and decided it wise to leave the cabin each day for a few hours of exercise. On this particular afternoon, after returning from his walk he noticed an odd set of tracks leading from his cabin into another direction. Upon reaching the cabin door, he saw two large fish lying in the snow, dressed and ready for cooking. He smiled at the gracious gesture of his island neighbors and thought that he would have to make it a point to visit them in the near future to return their generosity, perhaps bring them some of his canned food as a gift. The canned food had already become monotonous and the thought of having fresh fish for dinner was a most
welcomed change. On closer inspection of the fish, he noticed that they had been seasoned in a strange way. Tiny yellow particles of some unknown substance were liberally sprinkled throughout the fillets. He attempted to rinse them away, only resulting in lodging the particles even more persistently into the flesh. His hunger, however, exhorted him on and he prepared them for his evening meal. The taste, although somewhat unusual, was excellent and he ate his fill.

That evening, he lay upon his bed, fully content and weary from his earlier walk. Sleep was about to take hold of him when suddenly he heard what sounded like a cry upon the wind. He raised himself up slowly and cocked his head to listen, and after a few moments the sound repeated itself. A faint and distant plea for help could be heard upon the relentless torrents that whipped their way past his cabin. He was about to dismiss the sound to illusion until he heard it once again, this time more distinct.

He jumped to his feet and threw open the door. His eyes searched the icy landscape, “Hello!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Is anyone there?” Only silence. He walked to the other side of the cabin and repeated his call but only heard the continual shriek of wind in reply. Deciding that he had been mistaken, he made his way back inside and within a few minutes was fast asleep.

After a short while, Paul’s body began to twitch in an agitated manner and his face became flush with perspiration. In his dream-filled mind, he was once again back with his new bride on that fateful day three months earlier. They were journeying back from their honeymoon in Paris when a small animal scurried across the road. Michelle screamed out a warning. Paul swerved to miss the creature, but the car suddenly went into a terrifying spin and violently flipped over, tossing him from the car while his bride remained firmly tethered inside by her seat belt. The car eventually landed right side up and burst into flames. As he lay on the pavement about to lose consciousness, Paul could hear the horrible screams that emanated from the twisted and burning hunk of metal. With much effort, he managed to look upon the wreck. His last recollection was one that would haunt him forever: his beautiful bride’s melting face pressed against the passenger window, hysterically and horrifically pleading for her husband to save her.

He awoke with a scream and pulled his sweat drenched body upright and out of bed with a jolt. At that moment, he heard a voice beckoning him from far away, sending an icy chill through him and causing his heart to race uncontrollably. He hurriedly dressed and made his way out into the snow, his eyes were aflame with both promise and terror.

He screamed at the top of his lungs into the frozen wasteland. “Michelle! Michelle!”

A distant reply echoed his name faintly and he immediately raced in its direction. The voice became more insistent as he went, pleading his name in a mournful strain as he trudged violently against the snowy barrier that spread out before him. In his haste he repeatedly fell, but got back up with a frantic determination, for he now was certain that his bride had come back to him and no power on Earth would stop him from rescuing her. She would not be denied his salvation a second time!

He eventually came upon an opening in the side of a rock wall and hesitated for a moment not knowing which way to turn but was soon guided again by a soft sobbing coming from somewhere in the dark recess. He stepped into the blackness of the cave and at once remembered the few yellow rocks that he had stowed away for such a purpose. He knelt down and pulled from his pocket one of the smaller rocks and
placed it on the ground. After a few moments of fumbling in another pocket, he produced a piece of flint and struck it hard upon the rock. A large yellow flame instantly hissed its way into existence, sending the darkness quickly fleeing before him.

He found himself staring into a cavernous room of ice and volcanic rock. As he turned his head from side to side searching this new wonder, he perceived a slight movement out the corner of his eye and he began moving cautiously in its direction. A muffled cry echoed against the walls as he heard once again the distraught voice pleading him forward.

A bone chilling scream then split the frigid air followed by the words, “Paul... please... dear God... save me!”

His heart nearly leapt from his chest as he yelled out, “Michelle! I’m here... I’m coming, sweetheart!”

Up ahead, he could see what appeared to be a shadow moving behind a slab of ice on a ledge high up the rock wall. He felt the urge to run but the path gradually narrowed itself and the steep incline leading to the ledge was treacherously slick. He nervously shuffled his way forward, grasping at the occasional outcropping of rock to steady himself.

The pathetic sobbing started once again, which only increased his anguish with every step. He stopped for a moment and looked up. He thought that he could now see the blurry outline of a woman’s face behind the sheet of ice directly ahead. The face began pressing its features against the frozen barrier as though searching for its would be savior.

“Michelle! I’m coming... I’m almost there!” he screamed out, but the face responded by receding back into the ice and becoming shadow once more.

Her diminishing features reignited his urgency and he attempted to hasten his steps but as he did, he lost his footing and fell on his backside. He experienced a moment of sheer terror as he realized that one side of the path had opened up to a black emptiness. One wrong step would mean certain death, but he was determined and quickly regained his composure. He clawed his way on hands and knees the final few yards until he finally reached the ledge itself. Perspiration and tears poured out from his body as he ever so carefully pulled himself up until he was flat against the ice wall.

“I’m here, darling!” he ecstatically screamed through the ice in triumph.

Behind the curtain of ice, a dark figure stirred at his announcement and slowly moved close to where he stood. The two faces seemed no more than a few inches apart but her features were obscured by an outer haze of frost. He frantically layered his breath upon the clouded ice and wiped it clean with the sleeve of his coat so that he could see more clearly but the shock of what appeared before him sent him reeling backward in terror. It was not the soft and gentle face of the beautiful young woman he so lovingly remembered and expected to see; instead it was a gruesome figure wearing a mask of torn and charred flesh! A blood curdling scream then issued forth from the ghastly image, causing him to take another step backward, sealing his fate forever as he slipped over the side and plunged into eternal darkness.

(ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD)

Omni scientists gathered in the company’s boardroom to announce their final test results of the yellow rock. Sitting at the head of the table was Omni’s CEO reading
through the report with great relish. He looked up at the scientists and board members present and stated with a huge grin, “By God, this company is going to be rich beyond its wildest dreams!”

His words started an avalanche of excited murmuring among the group. A moment later his eye caught something highlighted in the report. “Ah...what’s this notation at the bottom of the last page?” he asked out loud as everyone followed his lead and turned to the page in question.

“Oh right!” exclaimed one of the scientists at the table. “I was just getting to that, Sir. It seems that the rocks have another unusual quality to them, they contain a very potent chemical that can act as an hallucinogenic, very similar to lysergic acid, or, in laymen’s terms...LSD.”

The CEO raised his eyebrows.

“But!” continued the scientist, “A person would actually have to swallow the rock in order for the effects to manifest.”

The CEO gave a look of concern. “You sure of that?”

“Absolutely!” responded the scientist.

“Well then, gentlemen,” said the CEO with a sigh of relief, “I don’t think we have to worry about the possibility of anyone actually eating our rocks... Eh?”

The remark was followed by a scattering of laughter.

“Then it’s settled, tomorrow we set sail once again for the Island, our fortunes now rest with the progress made there by our young geologist.”

The CEO raised his glass.

“A toast to our lad Westing back at Walrus Island!”

“Here! Here!” came the enthusiastic reply of all present as they raised their glasses high and drank to the young man’s health and long life.

SWEET MARY McBRIDE

Reverend Carmichael has been heard to say on more than one occasion that he never wanted to stray too far from Mary’s side because when the rapture finally comes he fully intends to latch onto her, thereby ensuring his own deliverance as well. Despite her sixty-seven years, Mary would probably blush if she ever heard such nonsense. All the praise and attention showered upon her by friends from church was much too overwhelming for such a lowly and humble servant of God. Her duty, as she saw it, was to minister to the poor and less fortunate and to do the Lord’s bidding in whatever capacity was required of her. For most of her life, she worked tirelessly at that very thing.

On this beautiful Sunday morning, Mary is sitting alone in her garden with a cup of tea in her hand, a bit nervous and a bit apprehensive because in a few minutes her friend Celia would be stopping by to take her to church services. Immediately afterwards, there is to be a party held in her honor. It would surely be a day filled with flowing praises and endless speeches giving full account of her lifetime of good deeds, but Mary is determined to resist the temptation of feeling proud or deserving. Of course, there were many nights spent away from home comforting and nursing sickly members of her congregation back to health, but it was certainly a small price to pay for staying in the good graces of the Lord and besides...she needed the church as much as it needed her; it served to fill an emotional void that was missing in her life, that of feeling wanted and yes... even loved. Richard had never been up to that task; in fact,
Mary painfully endured more than forty years of various forms of abuse by her so-called husband. She had her church, he had his bottle, and it wasn’t long before the rest of the world stopped inquiring about him because it was painful to watch her try to explain her husband’s continued absence or even the occasional bruised cheek.

Mary sipped her tea and delightfully drank in the solitude of the early morning. She loved how the dew sparkled on the leafy vine that delicately intertwined her trellis and how the golden shafts of morning light played upon the fragrant flowers that she lovingly labored to bring to life. At times she could almost imagine her own garden as that of the fabled Eden; this always sent her heart soaring and kept her spirits aloft for a good part of the day. Aside from church, her garden was the only true pleasure she had ever really known.

Just beyond the tinkling water fountain and on the other side of a patch of bright Petunias is Mary’s pride and joy; a thicket of beautiful red roses grow there from a recently packed mound of earth. Each petal bearing an exquisitely deep and rich luster, quite unlike anything she had been able to achieve to this point; and just in time because the annual flower show is approaching fast. Mary glanced lovingly at her roses. For many years now, she competed in the flower show with her less than stellar offerings but this year she is certain that she has a true contender for first place. A few months earlier, she pondered what her strategy would be for this year’s event and after much deliberation, an idea finally came to her from out of the past. As a matter of fact, it came from something quite bizarre she had heard as a child.

On that day, she spent the morning digging an enormous hole in the corner of her garden. After finishing, she sat on a bench nearby sipping tea and in an odd manner laughing under her breath like a giddy young girl who was abiding the juiciest of gossip. At some point, a bear like roar emanated from the house and moments later, the screen door from the house to the garden burst forth in a loud explosion.

A drunken old man staggered his way out into the garden. “Mary!” he screamed with violent and flammable breath. “Damn you! Where the hell is my whiskey old woman!”

Mary calmly turned to him and pointed toward her morning project.

“There... over there is your horrid tonic old man... in the hole!”

The old man’s red lidded eyes immediately flamed with displeasure as he stumbled his way over to the hole and looked down. Upon realizing that his entire stock of expensive drinking whiskey lay at the bottom, a stream of vile obscenities gushed forth and he turned to give her a sound thrashing for her insolence but a shovel seemed to come out of nowhere and hit him square on the forehead, sending him crashing to the bottom of the hole like a sack of wet corn.

The old man lay there for a moment, bloodied and dazed, then, slowly and with much difficulty, pulled himself up to the rim. When he looked up through blood and sweat, his eyes fell upon a slight figure standing on the edge of the hole silhouetted against an intense midday sun. The shimmer of warm light surrounding the figure gave the impression of an angelic presence bathed in a halo of holy illumination. For a short moment, a calmness washed over the old man as he studied the divine vision that was undoubtedly interceding on his behalf, but his reverie soon came to a horrible end as the figure raised a staff like object high in the air and brought it down upon his neck with surprising force. The sharp edge of the shovel cut deep and severed the old man’s jugular which sent him sprawling to the bottom of the pit once more in a fountain of red spray.

Mary giggled once again softly under her breath as she remembered that fine day. She then turned her thoughts once again to her beautiful roses. “Won’t Celia and
the rest of the ladies be jealous of my entry this year!"

The ladies would certainly be curious to learn the secret to her wonderful roses and when they inquired she would only respond with one word: “RICHARD!” The absurdity of the thought made her laugh out loud.

The doorbell chimed and Mary got up from the bench. She straightened her dress and patted her head just to make sure every hair was in place. Her special day had finally arrived and a charge of excitement now surged through her tired old limbs. Her many years of good deeds were finally about to be recognized and rejoiced over by those who loved her the most and at that very moment she was feeling... well... quite deserving of the day... and to be honest... a little annoyed that it had not come any sooner.

THE BLACK BOX OF SUMERIA

Just three blocks down from Ling Fu’s Chinese restaurant and catty corner to the Seacrest Electronic Emporium sits an incongruous little store front called Wilson’s Antiques and Oddities. The shadowy shop appears out of place next to its modern neighbors, itself a vestige of lost Americana, a business with a barely perceptible heartbeat, much like the patrons who visit it from time to time (old folks mostly, themselves also of museum quality). Visitors to the store are far and few in between these days but on this brisk October morning an eager looking middle-aged man in a yellow wind breaker can be seen standing just outside, clutching a package under his arm and looking up at the lettering on the dusty display window. Satisfied that he was at the correct address, he stepped through the door of the shop and heard the faint sound of a buzzer in the back somewhere, announcing his arrival.

The shop itself seemed alive with clicking and ticking sounds, these coming from a variety of wall clocks, their pendulums hanging like elongated tongues from a mouth, wagging to and fro, beckoning customers to look in their direction, as if to say, “Please, take me home. I’ve been hanging here far too long!” Immediately to his right, a wooden cigar store Indian stared back at him with carved black eyes, its once bright paint and lacquer finish now dull and faded by untold years of standing outside some American shop in some American city. As he glanced around, he noticed that everything was coated with a fine layer of dust and there was a distinct mustiness that brought back memories of scrounging around in his grandmother’s cluttered attic when he was a boy, hoping to discover any odd treasure that would help him while away the hours before his mother came to pick him up after a long day at work. “Antiques and Oddities” he thought to himself, “Yes, that certainly fits the bill.”

Stacked tightly against each wall could be seen a collection of old furniture, some interesting and most likely valuable pieces but he wasn’t a collector, nor did he have any special knowledge of such things. A squirrel sitting on a glass counter and holding a nut in its little hands caught his eye. He suddenly became aware that the shop was filled with all types of stuffed animals, like a beautiful golden retriever that stood only a few feet away, next to a drooping book shelf, staring with timeless anticipation of its masters return. There were also quite a number of birds of the
stuffed variety, some sitting quietly on shelves while others hung by wire cables from
the ceiling, animated in postures of flight, wings splayed and flashing aggressive beady
eyes.

The man was becoming quite intrigued by it all when there came from behind,
a shuffling of feet across the dusty floor. When he turned, he could see an old man
approaching. His first impression was that the old fella was the spitting image of the
famous physicist, Albert Einstein. He was gaunt and slightly bent and he wore a faded
green sweater vest over a white long sleeve shirt that looked to be in need of a good
ironing. A thick pair of spectacles attached to a chain lay across his spare chest. His
hair was long and airy, in a wind-swept way, like freshly spun cotton candy. His bushy
eye brows and full mustache held the same color of his hair which was a pure snowy
white.

“Can I be of assistance?” said the old man in a crepe paper lite voice. The old
man was now standing directly in front of him and he could see that his craggy dry
face was contoured in a number of deep folds, most noticeably at the corner of his
eyes. A fleeting notion crossed his mind to reach up and poke at the dry parchment-
like wrinkles, to see if they would somehow make a crackling sound or even perhaps
explode in a puff of dust.

“Yes, hello!” the man said, sticking out his hand. “My name is Richard Dorian. I
take it you’re the proprietor here.”

“That’s right Mr. Dorian...for better or worse, this is my little shop. I’m the
owner. My name is Wilson...Stanley Wilson.”

“Well, Mr. Wilson, hopefully, I won’t take up too much of your time. I was given
your name after making a number of phone calls. I was told that you were just the
man who could possibly give some insight as to what I have here.”

He squeezed the brown paper bag under his arm and it made a crinkly noise (as
squeezed paper bags tend to do). Now it was the old man’s turn to feel intrigued.

“Ok, Mr. Dorian.” The old man replied with a half-smile, revealing worn brown
nubs of teeth. “Let’s have a seat and take a look at what you’ve got.”

He gestured to a nearby table. They both sat down and the man slid away the
paper bag. The object in question was approximately the size of a jewelry box, and
like a jewelry box, it contained a lid that hinged open, but that was where the
similarities ended. It was made from a type of stone, or at least it appeared to be so.
It was a deep black color, polished to a shiny gloss and had strange lettering carved
into its top. The man spun it around so the old gentleman could see it more clearly but
after a quick glance, the old man flinched and suddenly looked more than a little
uneasy. The wrinkles around his eyes disappeared, moving their way up to his forehead
where great folds of concern seemed to register.

“Where did you get this Mr. Dorian?” The old man asked, keeping his distance
from the box, as though it were the conveyance of some deadly disease.

“I purchased it at an estate sale. Well, actually, I purchased an old steamer
trunk full of odds and ends. This box happened to be tucked away at the very bottom.
It looked interesting. I’ve never seen anything like it before in my life. Tell you the
truth, I was hoping that it might be worth something because I’m in a bit of a financial bind and could use a good windfall about now. Here, let me show you what’s inside…”

He tilted the lid back and they could see more odd lettering carved into the underside of the lid. He then pulled from the box a rectangular black object that was apparently made from the same material as the box. The object resembled what can only be described as a brick, but smaller in dimension. This particular object, however, had a very peculiar feature, it had two round apertures of glass somehow fused into one of its sides.

“When I first saw this thing I was reminded of a toy from my childhood. You know, one of those old View Master jobbies? You’d take a round slide card and drop it into a slot, then advance the pictures with a lever on the side. But this, of course, doesn’t have a slot or anything like that.”

For a few brief moments they both stared at the thing in silence then the old man donned his spectacles and leaned over to study it more closely. Something odd registered on his face, a look of wonder perhaps.

You see it don’t you? The lenses... there’s something like smoke or...or fog flowing behind the lenses isn’t there? Please tell me what you know about this thing Mr. Wilson. You do know something because I can read it in your face.”

The old man leaned back in his chair and drew in a great breath of air. His complexion was now almost the color of his hair.

“Yes, Mr. Dorian, I know of this particular item, but mostly from legend passed down through the ages and the occasional discussion with colleagues. What you have before you, if authentic, is ancient. If stories tell right, very ancient, and perhaps the only one in existence. The letters carved into this box look to be Sumerian... a language and civilization long lost for thousands of years. I may, however, be of some help in translating those letters....not because I’m versed in ancient Sumerian mind you, but because...” The old man stopped and held up a finger as if to say, “Wait one moment.” He got up from his chair and shuffled off to the back room. The man was beside himself with anticipation. He was certain that the mystery of the black box was about to be solved, but more importantly, he thought he was close to making a sale.

A few minutes later, the old man returned carrying a large manila folder. From it he pulled out a number of odd sized papers and spread them on the table. “Ah, yes.” He said, snatching one in particular and holding it close to his face for inspection.

“You see Mr. Dorian, I have an old friend who deals in antiquities...more like a collector of sorts. His particular area of interest, his obsession really, has to do with artifacts concerning the occult. On occasion, he will send me notices with descriptions of particular items that I am to keep an eye out for. This gentleman, you’ll be happy to learn, is exceedingly rich and would pay a king’s ransom to acquire that which he is seeking. I think that you may have just fulfilled a life-long quest of his, Mr. Dorian. The one item that has eluded him and the one he desires most of all...The Black Box of Sumeria!”
The old man expressed those last words with such theatrical emotion and such a feeling of underlying dread that the man half expected to hear a sudden burst of scary organ music to accentuate the mood.

“Take a look at this.” The old man continued, holding the paper next to the box. “See how the symbols match exactly? This letter contains the precise translation to the writing on this very box. The words on the lid translate to “DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?” and the first two lines on the underside translate to “THE FATE OF MAN IS SEALED IN STONE. TO FOLLOW THIS COURSE IS TO DISCOVER ONES OWN.”

“What the hell does that mean?” the man asked with a confused look, a few beads of sweat now forming on his forehead.

“Legend states, Mr. Dorian, that this box allows the user to witness his own future, or more to the point...to witness his own death!”

The notion struck the man as quite absurd and he laughed out loud.

The old man’s face remained dark. “I wouldn’t jest about things of this nature Mr. Dorian, or in any way take them lightly. I am reminded of a bit of Shakespeare that seems to apply here...”There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of...”

“More theater!” the man thought to himself and laughed again, but the old man ignored his impertinent outburst.

“Now, the last few lines explain the steps that one must follow in order to see the task through to completion.” He stopped and stared with expectancy, checking to see if he should continue. The man motioned with his hand, indicating that he should.

“It concludes with...THUMB PRINT OF BLOOD, BURN BY FLAME, REPEAT THE SACRED WORDS, AGAIN AND AGAIN,“

“The words to complete the ritual, Mr. Dorian, are...TIBUS-REMUS-SATANUS.”

“TIBUS-REMUS-SATANUS?” The man repeated. Now, what the hell does that mean?”

The old man shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “How the hell should I know?”

Mr. Dorian laughed. “Well, your story is quite spooky Mr. Wilson but let’s get serious for a moment shall we? How do I get in touch with this collector friend of yours? Or maybe...you’re interested in purchasing yourself?”

The old man’s face blanched at the suggestion. “Oh no, Mr. Dorian, I would never take possession of this box. Quite frankly, I think it’s...well, let’s just say I have a bad feeling about it and let’s leave it at that. However, if you write down your phone number, I will pass it on to my friend. I’m sure he will be most eager to contact you to discuss its purchase. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you got a call this very night.”

As he was leaving the shop, he glanced back around, taking one last look at the old gentleman who was shuffling slow and stiff toward the back room. If he should ever revisit Wilsons Antiques and Oddities in the years to come, he wouldn’t be surprised to see the old man stuffed and propped up next to the golden retriever. It would, he thought, be a timeless and fitting tribute for the dusty old shop owner.

Later that evening, back at his apartment, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table to read the days mail. He pulled back on the tab
only to see it break off, leaving it half open. He tried forcing the stubborn piece of metal down into the can with the tip of his finger but he paid an immediate price. Bright drops of blood materialized and dribbled to the table below, forming a small puddle of red. “Damn!” he said and rushed to grab a nearby stack of napkins. He wrapped his finger and was about to wipe the blood from the table when a thought crossed his mind. He looked down at the box on the table. Ever since he laid eyes on it he was consumed by a nagging curiosity of what lay beyond those smoky lenses. He even tried at one point to pry them open but he found the task quite impossible. He realized that this just might be the only opportunity he’ll ever have to discover its secret. Something in the back of his mind urged him to light the small votive candle on the table. A few seconds later it was burning. He pressed his right thumb into the puddle of blood and transferred the print onto one of the junk mail envelopes. He tore away the portion containing the thumb print and held it over the flame. It slowly burned with a slight hiss. He searched his memory for the words that the old man had read to him. “TIBUS...RE...REMUS...SATANUS. Yes! That’s it! TIBUS-REMUS-SATANUS! He repeated the phrase a number of times until the paper was reduced to a crispy black piece of ash burning at the end of his fingers. He immediately picked up the viewer and stared into its lenses with eager anticipation but the swirl of mist behind the lenses didn’t change in the least and he couldn’t help but laugh at the silliness of it all. That’s when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Yes, hello, am I speaking with Richard Dorian?”

“You are. How can I help you?”

“Mr. Dorian, I’m the gentleman that Mr. Wilson spoke to you about earlier. I must say, I’m delighted to hear that the black box of Sumeria truly exists. Let me be Frank, Mr. Dorian. I must have this artifact for my personal collection and am willing to pay a sum off...”

When he heard the offer quoted, the phone nearly dropped from his hand.

“But there is one catch, Mr. Dorian. I must have it in my possession before morning. I’m leaving on an archeological dig tomorrow and it looks as though I’ll be gone the entire year. That means that you must personally deliver the box to me. I have already taken the liberty to secure a round trip flight for you. A ticket will be waiting at the airport.”

“I don’t even know your name, Mr. ...”

“That, if you don’t mind, shall remain anonymous, Mr. Dorian. My chauffeur will be waiting for you at the terminal in New York. Haste, Mr. Dorian, haste is what’s needed now. Your flight leaves in one hour!”

A few minutes later, he had the box stuffed into a gym bag. When he turned to leave, a barely perceptible knock came at his door. He was about to mouth words of greeting as he swung the door open, but to his surprise, no one was there. He finally caught sight of a very small figure at the end of the hallway, wearing of all things, a black robe. To his eyes, the figure seemed to be gliding along instead of walking, trailing the black tail of its robe against the hallway carpet like the long black tongue of a decomposing corpse.
“Hello!” he shouted. “Hello, can I help you?” The figure did nothing to respond, it just continued gliding silently down the hallway, then, to the man’s utter astonishment, it disappeared in a sudden wisp of black smoke. He stood in the doorway with his mouth slightly open, not understanding what he had just witnessed and feeling a cold shiver run down the entire length of his back. At that moment, his right foot brushed against something on the floor. He reached down with a shaky hand and picked up a tiny red box wrapped in twine. He was in a hurry so he didn’t give it much thought, he just shoved it in his pocket and made a hasty retreat for the exit.

“Welcome aboard sir,” said a pretty, dark haired stewardess, checking his ticket stub as he stepped onto the plane. “You’re in seat thirty two, just two rows down and to your right.” She looked at him a little more closely. “Are you ok sir? You don’t look too well.”

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and patted his forehead. “I’m alright, just a little nervous about flying, that’s all.”

“Nothing to worry about, sir,’ she said, with a look that suggested routine. “Tonight’s flight has barely a quarter of its usual passengers, so you’ll be able to stretch out and get some sleep if you like. We’ll be serving drinks shortly. That always seems to help take the edge off.” Feeling satisfied that she had displayed an acceptable amount of concern, she turned to greet the other passengers and he took his seat.

He sat the gym bag in the seat next to him and strapped in with nervous, sweaty fingers. The rest of the seats beside and in front of him were vacant, which was comforting. He didn’t feel like talking. Maybe his heart would slow enough to allow him to nap during the flight but a child’s scream shocked his system once again and the bothersome rumblings of the other passengers slamming overhead compartments and noisily making their way to their seats kept him on edge. He was perspiring heavily and daubing his wet forehead every few seconds. Another stewardess was standing at the front of the plane now, holding a seat belt and buckle in her hand and giving instructions but the blood pounding inside his ears made her voice sound mechanical and far off, as though talking through a small pipe, from miles away. A few minutes later they were off the ground. He reminded himself of the money at the other end and how he would most likely make the return trip by train. This made him laugh. The drink cart came around and he ordered a rum and coke. “Relax old man, relax!” he kept saying to himself and it seemed as though he might finally be getting a grip on the whole situation when the plane jostled suddenly, lifting him a few inches off his seat.

“What the hell was that!” he screamed and his face went ghostly pale.

The pilot’s voice came over the intercom. “Just a little turbulence folks, nothing to worry about. Typical for this area.”

He sucked down his drink in one long swallow and waved for the stewardess. “Yes, sir, would you like another?”

“I’ll take three if it’s all the same to you,” he said with a weak chuckle, but not really feeling like being funny, “and a blanket, if you don’t mind.”
He quickly downed his second drink and was covering up with the blanket when his arm rubbed against the small box he had stowed away earlier. “I forgot all about you.” he said, pulling it from his pocket. He untied the string, removed the lid and tilted the box. A small object spilled into his hand, it was cylindrical in shape, almost identical to a small AA battery. It looked to be made of the same material as the black box and he was very much surprised to see the name, Dorian, etched upon its side. He reached over and pulled the box from the gym bag. What he saw made him blink his eyes in disbelief because he could have sworn that he had looked over every inch of the viewer and never detected a small hole at the top, like the one he was seeing now. He instinctively dropped the cylinder into the hole and the stone material seemed to magically fill in around it like water collapsing back into a splashed mud puddle. That’s when it happened.

The lenses started to clear and two beacons of light radiated outward. He was never so frightened or anxious in all his life when he lifted the viewer up to his eyes and peered inside. What he was seeing now can only be described as a movie, a movie depicting the various scenes of his own life. A bright sunny day immediately came into view. He was once again a boy of maybe eight or nine, surrounded by his childhood friends, playing a simple game of baseball in a field across the street from where he lived. How happy and carefree was the expression on his young face, and at that moment he felt as though he would give anything to be there now and to be that boy again. The scene suddenly changed. He saw his father, suitcase in hand, quietly walking out the backdoor of their house and getting into a yellow taxi. He felt himself barely stifling a shout, or was it a plea? That moment, he remembered, was the last time he would ever see his old man. The viewer cruelly reminded him of the one memory that he tried his best to keep buried. The scene altered again, now showing his mother at the miserable job she had held for many years. She was ironing like there was no tomorrow, like her very life depended on it, and of course, it did. But more importantly, she knew her sons life depended on it. She looked tired but determined, with a seemingly insurmountable mountain of laundry stacked behind her. He could feel his eyes starting to fill with tears. There came afterwards, a rapid succession of scenes from his school days and on through his adult life. Some, a welcoming reminder while others were like sprinkling salt into unhealed wounds. He could see a gloomy figure now, sitting at an office desk, surrounded by a scattering of paper and staring off into space, looking as though all life and meaning had been sucked from his very soul. The scene changed again; he found himself back at the meeting he had at the antique shop. While looking on, he realized for the first time how utterly frightened the old man’s face looked to be while staring at the box. A swirl of smoke suddenly filled the lenses and for a moment he thought that he might be cheated of his promised conclusion, but to his utter horror, that wasn’t to be the case. What he saw now was the end of all ends.

The lenses never quite cleared of smoke this time, and there was a reason for it. The smoke was truly part of the scene unfolding before him. There had been an accident. He could see cardboard boxes and debris of all sorts strewn long and far across what looked to be a roadway. There was a burning hulk of a plane in the
background, shattered and broken. His eye caught sight of something yellow lying among the debris field, not unlike the yellow wind breaker that he was now wearing. The scene drew closer. A body lay there, torn and bloody. Even closer now... a face is turned up toward the sky, bruised and purple, a victims face. At that moment the horror of recognition screamed across his crazed and terror filled mind.

“MY GOD! THIS PLANE IS GONNA CRASH!” He wasn’t sure if he actually yelled the words aloud or just inside his head. It wasn’t a moment later that the plane convulsed again, even more violently this time. A few shrieks came up from somewhere in the back of the plane, more like laughter really, but only the sound of fear registered in his mind. Another bucking of the plane followed, causing the oxygen masks to come flopping down from their hidden compartments and dangle in mid-air, strangely reminding him of the stuffed birds that hung from the old man’s ceiling. He felt as though he was on the verge of throwing up and immediately groped for an airsickness bag in front of him. He barely freed it in time before he wretched the entire contents of his stomach into the bag, though some of the puke didn’t quite make it inside. He pulled back moaning, like a wounded animal caught in a steel trap. The plane appeared to be shrinking in size, crushing the very breath from his lungs. He began taking in quick and shallow gulps of air as though he were a fish out of water. He unbuckled his restraint and jumped from his seat. Quizzical eyes stared back at him as he stood crouching in the aisle-way; a sweat drenched figure with lines of puke running down the front of his jacket and a wild look of shear terror on his face.

“WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!” he screamed into a scattered patch of on-looking faces. A few rows back, a child buried her face into her mother’s bosom and started crying. Angry shouts and threats now rose from the passengers. Something red and pointy flew past his head, missing it by inches. A second later, his arm was being grabbed from behind. He spun around and stared into the face of a very angry stewardess.

“Sir, I insist that you sit down and stop upsetting the passengers,” she said, her grip tightening all the while, like a vise. “We’re in absolutely no danger. Do you understand me? We’re only experiencing normal turbulence.” She pushed him into his seat and brought her face close to his, trying to keep her words confidential. “If you persist in this behavior then we’ll have no choice but to restrain you sir, then we’ll be forced to land at the nearest airport where the police can take over from there. Do you really want that to happen?” He was quiet now. For a few seconds she thought he had gone catatonic but his features eventually evened out. He stared back at her with what looked to be calm resignation. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t quite know what came over me. I won’t be any more trouble, I promise you.” With that, he pulled the blanket up to his chin and closed his eyes.

The rest of the flight was uneventful. Much to the relief of both crew and passengers, the crazed man appeared to have slept the rest of the journey. The fight arrived on schedule, and by this time most of its passengers had already un-boarded. However, there remained in seat number thirty two, one lone and immobile figure draped in a blanket. One of the stewardesses stepped up and said to him, “Sir, we’ve landed in New York. It’s time to get up, Sir.” There was no response. She gently shook
his shoulder. His right arm fell out from underneath the blanket and dangled lifelessly in the aisle; its wrist slashed open, dripping what was left of his life giving blood to the floor below.

At that moment, somewhere in the terminal a man stands with a sign in his hand that reads “DORIAN.” A faint scream is heard by everyone nearby but he pays no attention, he only looks impatiently down at his watch and shakes his head.

*            *            *

“I assume that you, the reader, are somewhat perplexed as to the final outcome of Mr. Dorian’s story. This is understandable, especially since the black box did, after all, foretell of a plane crash. Mr. Dorian could plainly see his own lifeless corpse lying on a tarmac, amidst a scattering of debris. This is true, but how was it that the plane he was on made it back safely? How was this possible? Please, allow me to explain what happened. You see, the plane that Mr. Dorian was on absolutely did not crash as he expected, but a crash did eventually occur. Two days after he took his life, his body was being transported back to his home town for burial via a UPS transport plane. That plane crashed during landing which split it in half, ejecting Mr. Dorian’s corpse from his coffin and tossing him onto the tarmac like a rag doll. Had he studied the scene more closely displayed to him by the black box he would have recognized the UPS logo on the side of the burning plane. I know you’re probably thinking that the whole thing was a setup, that Mr. Dorian was deceived. I’ll only keep quiet on that subject. But we must certainly acknowledge the fact that the black box showed him that which was undeniably true. It is up to each of us to put aside the terror of the moment that clouds our thinking and rationally evaluate what is before our very eyes. Don’t you think?”

“I’m sure you’re probably wondering how I know all this. Well, you see, I myself dwell inside the black box, and have done so for time immemorial. Mr. Dorian is only one of countless others who have performed the sacred ritual in hopes of getting a glimpse of their future. Unbeknownst to them, chanting those ancient words allowed me to take possession of their soul. They are now at my side and will do my bidding inside the box for all eternity.”

“The question is…”Would you yourself like to know?” My guess is that you would. So what are you waiting for? Go grab a candle and a razor. I’ll make sure that the black box arrives at your doorstep within a twinkle of an eye. And don’t worry, there’s always plenty of room in the black box for one more curious soul…such as yourself.”

SOMEBODY PLEASE CUE THE ORGAN MUSIC……..

A GIFT FOR TIMMY
It was a cool October evening. The crowd exploded in a mind numbing roar that could be heard halfway around the world and partway to heaven. Tonight is the opening night of the World Series and the fans are in an ecstatic mood. There in the middle of it all, stepping up to the plate for the opening pitch is the object of this unbridled enthusiasm, a ten year old phenom named Timmy Williams.

Through the din of the crowd came those magical words, “Play Ball!” and Timmy slowly made his way to the batter’s box, confidently swinging his bat with each stride and drinking in the chaos and excitement of the moment. Flash bulbs popped like tiny star bursts all around him as he reached his destination and tapped the tip of his bat against the cold hard plate. Looking up, his gaze fell upon a young beauty in the front row who immediately sent a kiss in his direction. He touched the brim of his helmet, smiled, then looked toward the pitcher’s mound.

The lanky pitcher appeared less than confident as beads of nervous sweat dripped from his brow in spite of the cool night. He slid a forearm quickly across his face to clear his vision then immediately went into his windup.

The first pitch came in fast and hard, a trajectory clearly intended to displace the batter from where he stood. Timmy avoided the bullet just in time as it whistled past his chin, but the sudden jerk of his body caused him to fall backward and into the dirt.

“Ball one!” screamed the umpire.

A barrage of boos issued forth from the crowd as they signaled their displeasure with the pitchers obvious attempt at decapitation.

Timmy dusted himself off and got set once again, but the next pitch arrived even closer this time and sent him sprawling to the earth in the same manner as the first.

“Ball two!”

The crowd hurled a measure of curses toward the mound, but the pitcher was now feeling a sense of command and shot back a menacing look.

Timmy dusted himself off once more but this time he patientely stood outside the batter’s box and stared long and hard at the man on the mound. A crease of a smile formed across his face as he lifted his bat with one hand and boldly pointed it in the direction of the outfield. The gesture caused spasms of outrage in the pitcher but the crowd was fully behind the boy now and roared its approval.

Channeling his anger, the incensed pitcher screwed himself into a fantastic contortion and let loose a deadly projectile. The screaming fastball streaked toward the boy with the full intention of splitting him in half, but Timmy was ready this time. As the ball left the pitcher’s hand, Timmy cooly took a step backward and swung with all his might; the ensuing collision between ball and wood created a tremendous concussion, the sound of which cut through the noise of the crowd like a sonic boom. For a moment afterward, there was a pause of dead silence as everyone present was stunned by the rocket like lifting of the ball, which seemed to defy gravity and quickly disappeared from all eyes as it left the stadium.

Thunder from the exploding fireworks and the roar of the crowd shook Timmy out of his momentary stupor; he blinked and focused on the first base coach who was sporting a huge grin and frantically waving for him to run the bases. Timmy dropped his bat and started what he hoped was the first of many victory laps that night. The entire crowd was on their feet now, wildly pumping their arms and stomping their feet. The chant of TIM-EE! TIM-EE! broke out and soon every breathing creature, save the opposing team, had the boy’s name upon their lips.

As he trotted along, he felt a euphoria unlike anything he had every
experienced before. His senses were on fire as he absorbed every nuance of emotion. He rounded third base and could see his teammates enthusiastically urging him on toward home plate. His heart was pounding out of his chest anticipating the welcome. TIM-EE! TIM-EE! But the chant was echoing strangely in his head now as if calling him from far away. His surroundings became fuzzy. Forms seemed to lose their shape and before he knew what was happening his entire world faded to black.

“Timmy...Timmy, are you awake honey?” came a lilting voice from somewhere outside of him.

Timmy slowly opened his eyes and realized that he was back in his room. The voice, his mother’s voice, was the one who pulled him out of his dream and back into the harsh reality that was his life. He sat there misty eyed at what might have been, forcing back the tears that he knew would certainly upset his mother.

“It’s getting late, Timmy my boy,” she said as she got behind him and maneuvered his wheel chair away from the window and toward his bed.

He let out a slight yawn. “I must have fallen asleep mom, I was watching the guys playing ball in the field and I guess I just nodded off.”

His mother pulled back the covers from his bed and fluffed up his pillow. “Oh my, that game was over hours ago,” she said, undoing the restraints that held his little body securely. She lifted him easily from the chair and placed him on the bed, pulling the covers up to his chin and primping in the manner only mothers tend to do.

After finishing, she bent close to his face. “You did have a nice day, didn’t you honey?”

He gave a big smile. “Yeah mom, it was a great party, in fact, the best I’ve ever had. I’m glad all the guys could make it this year.”

She looked a little sad but smiled back just the same, her one hand cupping his cheek as the other gently brushed back the hair that fell across his face.

“Well,” she said, “it’s not every day a boy turns ten you know, and like your father said, you’re practically a man now!” He raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes. She laughed and kissed him on the forehead. “Sweet dreams honey, I’ll have a nice stack of blueberry waffles waiting for you when you wake up.” She got up, turned off the light and left the room.

Timmy lay there in the quiet darkness, his mind returning back to the happy thoughts of his birthday party earlier in the day. His parents had decorated the living room in a baseball motif, what he most adored. There were streamers of baseball cards hanging from the ceiling and an enormous birthday cake shaped and decorated like a baseball. More importantly, the whole gang was there; all of his friends from the ball team for whom he was voted honorary captain last year.

Leading up to the party, his mom was a bit nervous; she knew there would be risks in having a bunch of rowdy prepubescent boys in her home, but after a while she realized that the house was still in one piece and started to relax ... until something unexpected happened.

The boys were sitting around the dining room table chatting away after they had sung a horrendously loud version of Happy Birthday. It was time to cut the cake and Timmy’s mother served a large slice to each boy. She was about to feed Timmy his first bite when Bobby jumped up and asked if he could take over the feeding chores. His mother hesitated and looked in the direction of her husband who smiled and nodded his approval. She handed Bobby the plate and fork, taking a seat beside her husband. Bobby stood there a long moment, inches from Timmy’s face, with a big Cheshire like grin that stretched from ear to ear. He looked at the plate then at Timmy
and again back at the plate.

“Happy birthday, old boy!” he yelled and proceeded to squash the contents into Timmy’s face.

His mother let out a shriek and the whole room fell silent. Bobby removed the plate and there was Timmy, his entire face covered in frosting, laughing hysterically. Moments later, each boy repeated the gesture to one sitting next to him and soon there were chunks of cake flying across the table in every direction. Timmy’s mom stood in shock, not knowing what to do, until her husband calmly placed his arm around her waist and walked her out of the room. The melee lasted a good five minutes until there was no more ammunition left except for what was stuck to the walls. The boys fell into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

As Timmy remembered the scene, he started to giggle, but a sadness suddenly came over him as he realized that today had been the first time he had ever seen his mother cry. It was just before the cake fight when the boys presented him with his birthday present. He asked his mother to open the box and when she did, his eyes got big as saucers. She pulled out a regulation big league uniform and held it up for everyone to see. The jersey had “WILLIAMS” stitched across the back in bold letters; both shirt and pants had been professionally tailored and adjusted to fit a boy such as Timmy, who had no arms or legs. There was also a cap which Timmy’s friend Greg placed squarely on his head for him, and in the box was a new catcher’s mitt. Timmy asked Gregg to hold it up to his face so that he could smell the leather and, as Greg held it in place, Timmy could see his mother over top of the glove, wiping away tears from her eyes.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices coming from the register on the floor near his bed. He could clearly hear the conversations people were having in the kitchen below his room, like the night he overheard his parents talking about how sad it was for their boy to be given such a fate as his.

“He will never know what it’s like to fall in love or even to have his first kiss,” he heard his mother say with an unmistakable sadness in her voice.

He remembered feeling sorry for himself many days afterward, that is, until the night of the dream...or at least he thought it was a dream, but then he wasn’t quite so sure.

On that day, he was feeling particularly downhearted. Earlier, he had seen some boys pass by his window in full flight, heading across the street, gloves in hand, laughing and carrying on. He instinctively thrust his body forward as if to follow them, his chair made a creaking sound and he was reminded once again of his affliction. He cursed under his breath for the first time and brooded the rest of the day.

That night, as he lay staring into the darkness, a most amazing thing happened. Out of nowhere a small ball of white light floated in the air at the foot of his bed, soon followed by another of the same. Before long, his room was radiant with hundreds of small luminescent spheres. They began to dance to and fro and were in constant motion until a larger crystal blue sphere of light entered the room, then all movement ceased. Timmy’s eyes were transfixed upon the ball of blue brilliance. He felt no fear for what was taking place, only a sense of wonder. The blue light began to transform and elongate itself until Timmy could start to see the distinct outline of a human form. The figure was blurry at first but as it made its way towards him its features became more defined, it was a man, an old man...in fact, a very old man. As he looked down at the boy, his long white hair fell forward; his bushy eyebrows and beard white as snow. Timmy couldn’t help but stare into his eyes, which seemed to be aglow somehow from the inside to an unfathomable depth. The old man said nothing
but placed his hand upon the boy’s brow; the touch sent an instant wave of warmth and colored light racing across his mind. Timmy closed his eyes trying to assimilate the sudden and beautiful intrusion upon his senses. When he opened them once more, his room was again dark and silent. He lay there for a long while pondering what had just happened until sleep finally took hold of him.

That night he experienced the first of many extraordinarily realistic dreams. Earlier in the afternoon, he had watched a TV program of a young couple snorkeling off the sunny beaches of the Hawaiian Islands and yearned to be part of the same adventure. In bed that night, somehow, someway, his wish had come true. He found himself floating in warm blue water, paddling his way among a beautiful underwater menagerie. A large sea turtle gently rubbed across his left leg as it passed by and he found the sensation to be exhilarating. He dove deep to the bottom and picked up a conch shell from the sandy floor and brought it close to his face. He turned it over and over in his hands, the speckled markings glinting like polished jewels in the clear water. As he stared at the shell, he realized that it was he who was holding it and not someone else.

The next morning, he awoke feeling refreshed and as happy as he could ever remember. His mother came into the room to get him for breakfast and as she leaned across him a strange look came over her. She tilted her head closer and sniffed the boysearchingly, then pulled back and shook her head. “I don’t know why it is, but I swear that you smell just like…well…a beach!”

He couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

Since then, every night a grand new adventure played out in his mind. One night he was skateboarding with his friends at the park downtown and the next, riding the wild rapids of the Colorado and hiking the great canyon. There was even the dream where he found himself walking hand in hand with a beautiful young girl, the one in which he got his first kiss.

There would be an endless list of places to visit and adventures to consider, but none so desirable as the one he had not been able to fulfill earlier. The blessing bestowed upon him by the old man was unfaltering and at some point that very night, magic once again visited the dream filled sleep of young Timmy Williams. Through the night time shadows could be seen his slight form gently rocking from side to side in his bed as he rounded third base and fell laughingly into the arms of his awaiting teammates.

THE UNEXPECTED VISITOR

A magnificent harvest moon held sway in the night sky. Its resplendent glow flooded the farm in a silvery cast. The old man wearily straightened himself against another long day’s toil; a leathery hand cupped the small of his back as the other relieved a trickle of sweat from his brow.

“You know Casey, this just might turn out to be a good year after all.”

But even as the words left him he felt the need to be more cautious with his enthusiasm, for the last three years had been anything but successful for farming in Brier county on account of the drought. This year, however, the Lord finally saw fit to provide an abundance of rain to make up for past deficiencies and the corn responded
by tipping the night sky like a dense forest.

This long awaited change of fortune came too late for many of his neighbors who, in their disillusioned efforts, sought the refuge of city life but the old man was of a different mind. Not only was farming all he really knew, but there was a tie that held him steadfast to the farm, some might say an historic obligation. Raising a soiled fist to his face he took in a deep breath. The life giving aroma coursed through him and replenished his spirit while the words of his father came back to him, “Son, take care of the soil and it will do the same for you, just as it has for many generations of Took.” The old man always lived by those words and was proud to be part of its heritage but in reality the farm could not survive another bad harvest and this had been weighing heavy on his mind for a long time now.

Through the warm night air came the sound of a screen door slamming in the distance and a voice soon rang out, “Pa, come get yer supper, it’s getting late!”

“Well Casey,” said the old man, “Another days gone by us, let’s not keep mother waiting.”

Looking up approvingly and staying close at his heels, his shaggy companion followed his master through endless rows of corn, past the old grey barn and up to the steps of the clapboard farm house. Fried chicken and dumplings was the night’s fare and after the evening’s meal, the old couple, as was their custom, retired to the front porch where Mother read her bible and the old man sat rocking with Casey by his side. Smoke billowed from his corn cob pipe as he looked out into the fields.

“This year’s crop is as good as I’ve ever seen, Mother,” said the old man, “not much longer now and I’ll be able to call the boys in for harvesting.”

She could hear the sense of pride back in his voice; the last few years had been emotionally draining on him and she thought he looked extremely haggard at times but he managed to rebound this year with a renewed vigor and purpose.

Looking up from her bible, she smiled, “I’m so glad, Pa, it’s been a long time comin’. You’ve worked so hard.”

“We both have,” replied the old man as he took her hand in his.

For a short while they sat discussing the day’s events with mother recounting the loud reports that echoed from the hills and how it was upsetting her chickens and the old man chuckled as he related his ill-fated attempts at capturing that crafty old possum that kept getting into the barn.

After a time, the old woman stood and bid her husband good night with a kiss on the forehead. “Don’t be long now Pa, you need your rest.”

“Not to worry, Mother, I’ll be in shortly,” he said as he sat rocking and puffing away at his pipe.

A gentle warm breeze crossed the porch and carried with it the sweet aroma of Mother’s lilac bushes. The night was thick with the sound of chirping crickets and deep throated bull frogs from the nearby pond.

After a series of uncontrollable yawns, the old man decided it best to retire but, as he started to rise, he noticed Casey standing erect as stone and staring intently into the darkness.

“What’s wrong old fella?”

Casey let out a high pitched yelp and quickly retreated under the rocker. Out of the night came a rush of air that filled the porch like a small torrent, accompanied by the sound of large flapping wings.

The old man’s face blanched as he sat in stunned silence. Perched upon the railing was a hulking dark figure, its hideous appearance unlike anything he had ever seen before. The creature glared back at him through
liquidy black eyes that blinked painfully as though repulsed by the porch light. The whole of its body was scaly and it sported two large bat like wings. A thick angular jaw jutted forward, dark and granite like, supporting fleshy jowls with thick heavy lips that hid multiple rows of serrated teeth. Its ears came to a distinct point on top and the entirety of its frame was supported by two well-muscled legs that ended in three razor sharp talons each. One was clutching something unrecognizable.

The moment rendered the old man incapable of the slightest utterance but the silence was finally broached when the creature began speaking in a shockingly humanlike voice.

"Good evening farmer! I saw your light from a distance and decided to drop in and pay you a visit. By the way, I hope you don’t mind that I sample some of your excellent crop, you see, it’s been ages since I’ve eaten and I am extremely famished!" The creature raised what appeared to be an ear of corn to its mouth and, with a ravenous appetite disposed of it outright.

It seemed an eternity for the old man to shake off the shock of what was taking place. Yes, the beast could most certainly talk, but how was this possible? Could his own weariness be playing tricks on him? He rubbed his eyes thinking that the apparition might be gone when he opened them but it was not so.

Gathering himself as best he could, the old man stammered, "N… no… I don’t mind at all, by all means… we have never turned down a hungry guest on this farm."

"Excellent!" responded the creature, and for a long moment the two stared inquisitively at one another.

"Well, I should probably introduce myself," said the old man. "My name is John, John Took and I would be much obliged in knowing who you are, that is…ah… what you are and where you came from, beggin’ your pardon. You see, I’ve lived here my whole life and have never made an acquaintance of such… of such a person as yourself." The old man squirmed at these last words.

The creature laughed, baring its gleaming sharp teeth. "As you can plainly see, farmer, I am not a person as is familiar to you. Your reaction at seeing an oddity such as myself for the first time is understandable, but I can assure you of one thing: me and my kind have existed in this world practically since the dawn of time itself, in fact, eons before your human ancestors made their, shall we say… inglorious debut out of the primordial slime! We have since watched your progression with much interest but became disheartened by your inherent war like nature. You see, my dear farmer, your race has developed many a flaw over the course of its short existence and quite frankly self-destruction seems to be your likely fate."

The old man was shaken by the creature's brutal assessment of mankind but, as he considered those words the reasonable part of him, had to conclude that there was a ring of truth behind what it said.

"Yes," the old man said with a sigh of resignation, "I suppose that you’re close to the point…as a race, we have had less than glorious moments in our past but still… there are those who have always stood up for what is decent and righteous!"

As he said this, his right hand patted the bible on the table. The creature glanced down and let out a terrifying hiss that startled the old man. "Ah yes! How could I ever forget that famous book, the very same that was carried forth by a host of soldiers many years ago!"

As it said this, a pained memory darkened its countenance.

"Before we came to this land, we had spent long years in hibernation in the dry caves surrounding what was called the Dead Sea, only our sleep was disturbed by a bloodthirsty mob from another land. It’s a vision that will always stay with me…one of
a disheveled army trudging up the slopes towards the caves, banners of red crosses flapping in the wind and sharp points of metallic death glinting in the scorching sun, seeking all the while to rend the flesh of my innocent brethren. As I remember, they carried that very book before them, a book I am told that begs love and tolerance for all but in reality only brought us death! They called us devils for our appearance alone and vowed to wipe clean our noble lineage from the Earth. Regrettably, many of my kin perished in those caves but some of us managed to escape. We traveled a long distance, finally finding refuge in the dark caverns of these surrounding hills where we remained in a deep slumber ever since, regaining our strength and awakening only to repopulate our species. But alas! Once again our sleep has been disturbed!”

The creature let out another frightening hiss as its mighty talons scraped and clenched tight upon the porch railing.

For a long moment, the old man sat pondering what the creature had said and was sympathetic. He considered offering an explanation to the disturbance in the hills which was, of course, the result of miners blasting for ore but decided not to mention it since he knew full well the mining would not cease and besides, the creature was enraged enough as it was.

“Tell me of your kin, if you please,” asked the old man, trying to find a way to lighten the tension. “I’m interested in knowing more about them.”

The creature shuffled and straightened its bulk. “We are a proud and ancient race, I could spend hours enlightening you to our noble history, my dear farmer, but I must make haste because my brethren are hungry and understandably in a foul mood. I have left our refuge this very night to scout for an abundant source of food as well as a safe place to once again hibernate. This task is upon me alone; I must not fail because the survival of my race hangs in the balance.”

A few moments passed in silence as the old man rocked in his chair, contemplating what he just heard. “Yes… I understand your plight,” he finally said with a look of concern. He then raised his head as if the real implications of their conversation had finally hit home. “Tell me,” he asked, trying not to give away the sudden alarm that rose inside of him, “just how many kin of yours are hidden away in those hills?”

The creature showed no sign of suspicion in the question and answered freely. “Since coming to this land, we have been fortunate enough to reestablish our numbers to ensure the continued longevity of our race, so I suppose that a strong Metabru now exists, which in your numbers would equate to about a thousand, give or take.”

The old man raised his eyebrows.

“Now I have a question for you, farmer. Did I not see a body of water as I passed over your land?”

“I reck on so,” replied the old man with a measure of hesitation. “That would be the Took pond, our only real water source here on the farm.”

“Lovely! Just lovely!” responded the creature. “You know, farmer, it just occurred to me that you and I are not so different. Do we not feel an obligation to the continued welfare of our kin and would we not do whatever was necessary to see that their needs were fulfilled?”

The creature searched the old man’s eyes for some glimmer of understanding, then after a few moments, the old man scratched his head and nodded his agreement. “Excellent!” cried the creature as if coming to a satisfying conclusion. “I see that we are of the same mind!”

An air of urgency suddenly percolated in the beast and it bid the farmer a hasty farewell. Turning abruptly and with one powerful thrust, it was aloft once again.
The old man now stood and Casey made a cautious appearance from under the rocker, barking in the creature’s wake. As he watched the beast rise into the night, the old man considered all that was said. The dark figure soon became silhouetted against the soft glow of an enormous harvest moon. The old man needed to make a quick decision. His outstretched hand trembled as it passed over the bible, hesitating a moment as if struggling with some internal debate, then reaching for what lay beyond. He brought it up to his shoulder and a loud explosion soon followed. In the distance, an unearthly cry split the night and the ancient wings of the creature folded, its jumbled mass plummeting to Earth in a lifeless heap.

Mother came swiftly down the stairs and threw the screen door open. “Lord have mercy! Why the shooting Pa? What’s wrong?”

“Relax, Mother,” said the old man as he placed his rifle back against the wall. “Just that pesky possum again... I think I got him this time.”

“Well then!” she said with a stern but relieved look. “We’ll talk about this in the morning... in the meantime let’s try to get some sleep!”

“Right you are, Mother, let’s go to bed.”

As they went inside, the old man turned and paused for a moment glancing back at the fields that have caused him so much anxiety over the past few years. “You know, Mother,” he said with confidence, “This old farm’s luck has finally changed... I’m certain of it!” and shut the door.

ESCAPE

Why the front gate of the prison lay open was a mystery but there it was, a beckoning pathway to instant freedom. The old man cautiously stepped into a blinding sun not seen by his feeble eyes for a very long time and a moment later compelled himself to run. By some miracle, his tired old legs found their youthful vigor and he soon set a pace that he never would have imagined possible, one fed by the elation of shaking off the misery that had been his life for over forty years. The crackle of rifle fire never followed nor the commanding voices of his despised captors that would stop him cold in his tracks by fearful obedience. He ran effortlessly through the cobbled streets of the surrounding village, his heart pounding out a joyful rhythm with every step as he distanced himself from that interminable nightmare.

For the first time in years, he could feel the sun’s warming rays enveloping his pale body like a soft winter coat and to his delight, the laughter of children seemed to be all around him, a chorus of carefree voices in full bloom, lifting his spirits even higher. Rounding a corner, he came upon a grey haired woman in a flowery apron hanging the day’s laundry. As he trotted past her he spoke a friendly greeting and she turned to him with a bountiful smile. This newfound freedom began a stirring of sweet memories, the old woman invoking images of his own mother performing a similar chore from his childhood and his eyes started to mist over. For a moment, he thought that he would like to stop and talk, but his mind had always been bent upon a single desire all these years, that of being reunited with his beloved Susan and this would be his only chance.

He quickened his pace until he seemed to be running at a full sprint and the village soon melted behind him. He could no longer hear the clapping of shoe leather against hard surface, the sound was reduced to a light crunching, for he now found himself treading upon a pathway of golden sand and a glistening azure sea spread out
before him like a sparkling desert. He made his way down to the water’s edge and kicked off his shoes. An incoming wave reached his ankles, the cool water curling and caressing his tired feet. Falling to his knees, he scooped up a handful of wet sand and held it against his heated brow. A weariness suddenly came over him and he fell backwards, his limber body collapsing easily into the inviting surf.

“I’m free!” he shouted to the sky, “After all these years ... I am finally...FREE!”

A dark silhouette framed by the burning midday sun suddenly appeared over top of him and his heart took a bounding leap. “Susan! My dear sweet Susan!” he shouted, but as he focused on the figure it was not that of his long lost angel but a man in uniform and the sun had now strangely transformed into a radiant light bulb dangling overhead by a thin wire.

“Now old man, Susan wouldn’t be that dame you sliced up all those years ago now would it?” chuckled the toothless prison guard.

The old man looked confused at first to find himself strapped into a large wooden chair but his cruel reality came flooding back to him in a burst of grim horror. Only moments ago his mind had managed to escape the confines of his nightmare but there was still a worldly price to be paid. The guard took a step backwards and motioned to a man on the other side of the window, a lever was thrown and the sun like bulb dimmed in response. The room filled with a terrifying hum as a million ravaging volts ripped into the wooden throne and into the old man.

“Well, old timer,” the guard shouted above the crackle and hiss, “There’s really only one way for a man to gain his freedom from Crenshaw prison, and you, my dear fellow, have finally found it!”

DEVIL’S TOWER

“The following is an account of one man’s disturbing story--my own. I feel an obligation, however, to inform you that my tale takes a most bizarre and frightening detour from what most of us would consider, well, normal. Just a friendly warning.”

“In the waning year of 1931, I was twenty-one years young and fresh out of college. I earned my degree in Journalism and was bursting with youthful confidence knowing that a long and happy life of journalistic endeavors lay before me. Only, things didn’t turn out quite the way I expected.

“Coming out of college, there were bills to pay. Lots and lots of bills. My original intention was to gain employment with one of the more prestigious newspapers or magazines in the country, but after a number of dispiriting rejections I settled for a newer, albeit seedy magazine at the time called-- Weird Society. A true forerunner of the tabloid magazines that were to follow in later years, Weird Society wasn’t really intended for intellectual stimulation; on the contrary, this was the beginning of the depression years and the magazine’s focus was to bring to a gloomy yet, sensational-hungry audience some form of entertainment-- a diversion of sorts to help them forget, at least for a time, the dismal circumstances behind their own pathetic lives.

“As it turns out, people were extremely eager and willing to drop their last dime in order to read about a phantom ship crossing the ocean or the latest ghost story. More often than not, they would immediately turn to the gratuitous sex romp
that was included in every edition. In the beginning, our stories were based mostly on heresay, legend, or a large dose of fabrication from enthusiastic staff writers who had absolutely no compunction about stretching the truth from here to Sunday. This type of writing was not only encouraged by the magazine’s editor, but demanded. With new subscriptions coming in daily, the magazine’s coffers swelled to record heights and the powers that be finally determined that an air of authenticity would be needed in order to keep the magazine alive and in long-term circulation. This meant that its reporters were now charged with finding original and exciting stories outside their borders.

Much to my delight, I became one of those globe-trotting reporters.

“Of course, being that I was the newest addition to the staff, I didn’t rate choice assignments to places like Italy or Spain. Instead, I went to less far off and less exotic lands like Paraguay and Chile to report on odd stories that had to do with things like haunted villages or unidentified lights in the sky. It seemed that I was the reporter of choice for Central and South America, but I didn’t grumble much— it was still quite an adventurous experience for a young lad who had never stepped a foot outside his own small town before.

“After a few well received stories, I was appointed to an indefinite stay at a little town in Peru called Mancora. My editor thought it more practical for me to stay centrally located in case I should have to pick up and leave to track down a story. The truth is, the company didn’t like the idea of me coming all the way back to the States after every story, which of course, cost them a boat load of money. I’m a practical man myself; I could see their point, but even in spite of the wonderful friends that I made in Mancora and the obvious paradise that I lived in, I still became desperately homesick.

“My tale actually begins on one particular hot day in mid-August. I was just lounging around in my underwear trying to work up a not-so-interesting story when I got a knock at my door. A young lad handed me a telegram from my editor back in the States, but I hesitated to open it right away. I had full control over my own stories and the only time I received unsolicited news from him was on the rare occasion when he wanted to congratulate me on my latest submission. Of course, I hadn’t sent him anything in over two weeks, so the telegram set me on edge. I fully expected bad news as I slowly tore open the envelope, but relief came over me as I read. ‘Wilson. You are to proceed to a town in Bolivia called ‘Tapacari’ where you will contact a man named Juan Chavez at…’ The telegram went on with additional details and I was relieved that it turned out to be only an assignment. That afternoon I was packed and on the first train out of Mancora and headed toward Bolivia. But as you will see, I never did make it to my destination.

“‘This is the end of the line, Senor.’ came a voice from overhead, shaking me awake. I groggily came around from my nap to one of the baggage conductors looking down and smiling a big toothless grin at me.

“‘Are we in Tapacari already?’ I said, glancing around, looking somewhat disoriented.

“‘Oh, no, Senor. This is Palo station. This is as far as the train can go.’ He motioned to the window. ‘You see, the tracks stop here.’

“I looked a bit confused and he could tell that I was annoyed. ‘My good man, I was told...’
"’Senor, I’m sorry if there was a misunderstanding. Still, if you want to go on to Tapacari, you will have to make arrangements in town for a horse, or maybe you prefer to walk. The town you seek is only twenty miles away but I’m afraid you will have to get there on your own. I’m sorry, Senor.’

‘That pretty much settled it. Arguing was pointless, so I grabbed my bag and headed into town.

‘I could see why the track ended the way it did. The terrain appeared to gradually slope upward into a number of sharp stony hills that went on for miles outside the city. In contrast to the rocky terrain further on, the small town of Palo was a virtual paradise of lush green jungle and heavenly scented flowers. I strolled past a number of adobe homes on my way into town, waving a greeting to the smiling faces I met along the way, and finally arrived at the only hotel. I went inside and inquired as to where I could rent the horse and supplies I would need. Because of the late hour, I decided to stay the night and get up early the next morning for a fresh start. After making all the arrangements for my trip, I had some hours to kill before nightfall, so I slipped into one of the local cantinas to cut the dust out of my throat.

‘I stepped through a pair of double doors and walked up to a long wooden bar. The place was dark inside, the only light coming from what could be squeezed past the double doors and two oil-filled lamps. By the smell alone, it was probably a good thing a person couldn’t see inside too clearly. ‘Nice combination of grease and sweat,’ I thought to myself as I sat down. I was a little disappointed that there weren’t any senoritas around. There were only two men talking at the end of the bar and one disheveled figure draped over a round table in the corner, snoring away.

‘What can I get for you senor?’ came a voice, seemingly from out of nowhere. A second later, a bald old gentleman popped up from behind the bar.

‘’Beer,’ I said.

‘’You’re an American, are you not?’

‘I nodded yes.

‘’So what brings you to our little town of Palo?’ he asked, handing me the beer.

‘’Just a bit of research,’ I said. ‘I’m a writer for a magazine back in the …’

The old man quickly cut in. ‘What is the name of your magazine, senor?’ he asked, in an overly zealous way.

‘’Weird Society,’ I replied.

‘His eyes seemed to light up like the Fourth of July. He raised one of his fingers in the air, hesitated, then disappeared behind a curtain of beads. I didn’t know how to react to the old man’s sudden exit, so I just worked on my beer. Out the corner of my eye, I noticed the two men at the end of the bar staring at me and mumbling to each other.

Within a minute or so, the old man returned, proudly carrying last month’s edition of Weird Society.

‘’I’ll be damned!’ I said as I took hold of it and started leafing through its pages.

‘’Where in the world did you get this?’ I asked. ‘I didn’t think that we were in circulation in this part of the world—at least not yet.’

The old man smiled. ‘My brother lives in the States and he sends along many of the magazines that he has read. Weird Society is one of my very favorites!’

‘I turned one more page and tapped my finger upon it. ‘This… this is one of my stories.’
“The old man was beside himself with joy and practically begged me to sign his copy. I was tickled by his enthusiasm.

“At that moment, the two men at the end of the bar got up and left without saying a word. For some reason, I felt uneasy. A few minutes later I was stepping through the double doors myself and onto the dirt road. I took a short cut through one of the alleyways that led directly to the hotel, but as I started through, I heard footsteps from behind. I turned to see who it was, but there came a sharp blow to the back of my head, then everything went black.

“After some indeterminate amount of time, I regained consciousness and found myself stretched out on a bed of hay in the back of a moving wagon. My hands were bound behind me and I could hear two men up front talking. My head throbbed terribly and I felt as though I was on the verge of panic. I struggled to get to my knees but before I could right myself, one of the men turned back and struck me across the face with a heavy wooden stick. I saw a momentary splash of blood as I was flung back into the bed of the wagon. I cursed the man who struck me but he turned and barked some words of warning. I could now see that the two men were the ones from the cantina, and they meant business.

“I decided it wise to lay silent for a while as I tried to figure a way out of the mess I was in. I watched the droopy vines and greenery overhead pass slowly by as the creaky old wagon labored it’s way along. At some point during our journey, I could feel an incline to the wagon and the trees became less and less noticeable, gradually turning to sand-colored rock.

“Within an hour or so, we arrived at our destination and I was forcibly pulled from the wagon. Before me stood a massive stone edifice, silhouetted against a grey and darkening sky. It rose to at least a hundred feet and had a round configuration, not unlike some great castle turret of days gone by. A dark foreboding seemed to emanate from the structure and a sudden fear ran through me like flame upon my very soul. I turned to one of my captors. ‘I’ll give you all the money I have, please just...’

“He laughed in my face and pulled my wallet from his shirt pocket. ‘We already have your money, Senor. The question is... How much are your magazine friends willing to pay to get you back in one piece?’

“He and his partner thought the remark very funny. It was clear now what they intended to do. I would be held for some type of ransom. My thoughts returned back to a lecture given to me on this very subject by my editor before I left for Peru. He said, ‘Wilson, folks in other countries don’t take kindly to foreigners. They’ll throw you in jail no sooner than look at you, so you best be on your guard at all times.’

“I can remember thinking that his warning, although well intentioned, was a bit over the top, so I didn’t put much stock in it. Oh, how wrong I was! The more I thought about it, the more dejected I became. Not because I thought my company would in any way forsake me, but it was obvious that these two criminals were not the most sophisticated. It was questionable whether they could successfully carry out such a devious plot as this.

“‘If they screw up,’ I thought, ‘I’ll probably either be killed or left to rot in this God-forsaken tower, never to be heard of again.’

“I was pushed to the wooden door at the base of the tower, then pushed once again into its dark interior. One of the desperados removed a torch from a bracket on the wall and lit it. The flame blazed brightly and my eye immediately caught sight of a number of dark figures on the floor scurrying off to find the comfort of shadow. The
inside was dank and foul, smelling of rot and mold and things long dead. White streaks of cascading niter encrusted the walls on all sides and a gossamer curtain of spiderwebs stretched across our path at every turn. The ghostly shrouds were quickly erased with a crackle and a hiss as we followed the torch bearer to the far wall. A winding staircase of stone ran its way up the inside circumference of the tower, spiraling to the top. The torch bearer gave a grunt and motioned to a bale of hay sitting by the bottom step. I must have hesitated too long, not understanding, because I received a sharp rap to the side of my head by his partner. ‘Pick up!’ he yelled, but I shrugged at the absurdity of the command, for my hands were still bound behind me. Still, I received another rap on the head for my impertinence, and a moment later I heard the distinct click of a switchblade opening. The man waved the knife inches from my face in a menacing way, taking delight in my nervous reaction, then reached down and cut the rope. I breathed a sigh of relief and rubbed at my sore wrists. ‘Pick up!’ he barked once again. I did as he wanted.

“We slowly made our way up the dusty steps and every so often I would hear the squeal of a terrified rat being kicked over the side into darkness, followed by a muffled thud. Along our way, we passed by numerous barred rooms. I couldn’t see inside because of the poor lighting, but I could sense something none the less. I shuddered at the thought of what evil things might lay within those darkened confines.

“I was struggling now with my burden and much relieved when we finally reached the top of the steps. The door to the room was pushed open, making a most unnerving sound as it moved upon its rusty hinges.

“We now entered the upper-most part of the tower. The room contained four iron-barred cells that looked to me like old-time western jail cells. Two were on one side of the room while the others were directly opposite. The room itself was rank smelling like the rest of the building and draped in the same ubiquitous spider webbing. I was thrust into one of the cells and told to stand against the opposite wall. I heard the switchblade click open again and the twine from the hay bale was cut.

‘This is for your bed,’ said the one holding the torch. ‘You may be here a long time, Senor, so be very careful about using up your supplies too quickly.’ With that, the man nodded to his partner, who in turn took off a small back-pack that he was carrying and dropped it to the floor.

“They started to leave, but at that moment, I couldn’t contain myself. Panic overwhelmed me and I lunged forward. I made a desperate attempt to slip past them and run for my life, but they must have expected this because I saw a flash of the same wooden stick the man hit me with earlier and I was knocked senseless once again. Coming to, a short time later, I could hear the door at the bottom of the tower slam shut and I realized that I was now all alone in that filthy dark tomb.

“What in God’s name have I gotten myself into?” I said, as I rubbed my poor aching head. I walked over to the cell door and gave it a good shaking. It was sturdy enough. They had put a chain through the bars and padlocked it secure. I became aware that I was casting a long shadow on the stone floor and I turned to see where the light was coming from. On the far wall was a good sized square window open to the outside with four iron bars evenly spaced within. Dull bands of moon-light filtered through the bars in ghostly strands. I started to walk over, when to my complete
surprise, I heard a voice.

“'Hello. Hello, Senor. Welcome to Diablo's Tower. It is so nice to finally have company once again.'

“I jumped and was in a momentary state of shock, remaining silent for the longest time. The voice called out again and I realized that a person must be on the other side of the wall next to me.

“'I say, Senor. Will you not give conversation with such a lonely creature as myself?'

“After gathering my wits about me, I was comforted in knowing that I had a cellmate to share my gloomy experience. I yelled out, 'Hello. Yes. I am an American, my name is Paul, Paul Wilson.'

“'Well now, Paul, Paul Wilson. My name is Carlos and it's my pleasure to meet you. What brings you here to lovely Diablo Tower, Senor Wilson?'

“I relayed my story to him in full detail and he listened patiently.

“'Yes,' he finally said. 'Your story is one that is very common, Senor, but you should not despair, for I think that being an American carries great weight and the likelihood of your release is much enhanced because of it.'

“For some reason, his words didn't comfort me, but I was eager to learn of his own story.

“'So tell me, Carlos,' I said, 'what is it that brought you here? Trespassing? Words of sedition maybe?'

“'No, Senor, murder.'

“I was caught off guard. He said the word with such ease, as if to think it a mere indiscretion. I started to feel a bit uneasy and I think he sensed it.

“'You see, Senor, Wilson, I had always worked for a particular well-to-do family in San Pueblo. This family owned a great deal of land and was considered very powerful in our community. My own family lived in a small shack on the outskirts of one of their plantations and every day I would work the fields in exchange for our living quarters as well as a small allowance of food. I came home from the fields early one day carrying my pitch fork and from a distance I heard my wife screaming. My heart nearly leapt from my chest as I ran to the door. I kicked it open and saw the man I worked for tearing at my poor wife's clothing. It was all over quickly. They tell me that I was in such a fit of rage that I thrust the pitchfork all the way through the man's neck and he expired right there on our dirt floor. I'm sure that I probably did such a thing, but the truth is, I don't remember any part of killing him.'

“His tale chilled my very bones and I really didn't know how to respond. I felt awkward and thought that I should change the subject, so I asked how long he had been incarcerated within the tower. There was much hesitation before he answered.

“'I couldn't say, Senor. All I know is that I've been chained up against this wall for ages.' He seemed to give much consideration to what he said next. 'Time... time seems to no longer have any hold on me. I know this will sound strange to your ears, but sometimes I seem to drift away from my cell. I really can't account for where I've been, or for that matter, how long I've been there.'

“I thought his response, although sad, was perfectly within the bounds of what one might expect from someone who has suffered the kind of trauma he had. Only what he said next made me wonder about his sanity.

“'Perhaps, word will get back to your illustrious president and he will use his...'}
considerable influence to deliver you, Senor. I hear that Mr. Lincoln is a very great and compassionate man in your country. Is that not so?"

"I was taken aback. How was I to react to those words? Yes, it is a great distance from the U.S. to Bolivia and news does travel slowly, but he was speaking of a President who had not been alive for over 65 years!

"I could only respond by agreeing with Carlos. I walked over to the window, shaking my head. The moon was waxing full that night and even in spite of the obstruction from the metal bars, I could see the whole panorama of what lay outside the tower. As I looked out, I felt a brief moment of vertigo, for the tower itself was dangerously teetering on the edge of a sheer precipice. Directly below were jagged rock walls on either side that transitioned quickly into a deep chasm, gradually disappearing into hazy darkness. Although I could see the occasional small shrub or plant sprouting here and there I was amazed when, to my right, I saw an enormous tree not thirty yards away. It was oddly beautiful and seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. It looked to be growing right out of the rock itself and I cursed myself for not having my camera with me. The tree was undoubtedly very ancient; its long grey roots groped their way all along the face of the rock wall, crossing over each other like snakes in a basket. Just then, something curious caught my eye. In the top portion of the tree there appeared to be some kind of nest--yet, not a normal nest. Huge limbs were bowed over and covered with a thick casing of some type of silver-looking filament. I thought this, looked more like a cocoon than anything else. On one end of it was an opening or entrance, which could simply be described as a large black hole. I suddenly turned away from the window because a strange and creepy feeling came over me, as though I were being watched from somewhere within the blackness of that very opening. Tomorrow would be here quick enough, and I knew I could get a better look at the thing in the light of day, so I retired to my bed.

"I heard no more from Carlos that night, in spite of my wanting to talk more. I was about to drift off when I was jolted awake after hearing a number of screams coming from somewhere in the lower recesses of the tower. They were agonizing screams, as if someone was having the skin pulled away from their very bones. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end as I listened to the terrifying ejaculations of those tortured souls. I held my hands tightly against my ears, trying to block out the horror that tried to seep its way into my brain. The noise went on for hours and I thought I was on the verge of losing my mind when, all of a sudden, it stopped. I was both relieved and exhausted. I took in a deep breath and settled back down into my bed of hay but my nerves were on edge. Needless to say, I slept very uneasy the rest of that night.

"The next morning, I awoke to a sore head, but to my pleasant surprise, the gloom that pervaded my cell the night before appeared to have lessened. This, I suppose, had to do with the warm sunlight that filtered its wholesome rays through my window. The room was actually brightened to an almost cheeriness and I could hear Carlos singing quietly to himself.

"'Good morning, Carlos!' I yelled out.

"'Good morning, Senor Wilson,' came his reply. 'I hope your first night's stay in Diablo's Tower wasn't too uncomfortable.'

"'Oh, it was a delight,' I said sarcastically. 'Just like a stay in any four star
hotel."

“He laughed.
“I was eager to ask him about the screams I heard during the night, and I did so.

"'Oh, those.' he said, nonchalantly. ‘You will soon come to accept them, Senor; they are part of the tower itself. You see, these walls have a very dark memory hidden within them. Diablo’s Tower has been used over the centuries by many bad men. Evil men. Much torture and abuse has been conducted here and that pain and anger still lingers, much like a nightmare that one can never rid himself of.’

"'Just what I needed,' I thought to myself. ‘On top of everything else, I had to be held captive in a haunted tower.’

“I suddenly felt hungry for the first time in a long while. I reached down and picked up the small back- pack the men had left behind. There was jug of water inside as well as a number of brown tortillas wrapped in green palm leaves. I started munching on one, then thought of Carlos. I offered to share my meager rations with him, but to my surprise, he declined. He told me that it would be virtually impossible for him to receive the nourishment since he was chained ever so tightly against the wall, and besides, he no longer felt the pangs of hunger that haunted him for so long in the beginning.

“At hearing this, I was in fear for my new friend’s life. Losing one’s desire to eat is a sure sign of giving up. All that day, I did my best to raise his spirits and I assured him that upon my release, I would do everything in my power to secure his also. He thanked me in a voice choked with emotion and, for whatever reason, I didn’t hear from him again until the next day.

“Since I could do nothing else, a large portion of my day was spent staring out my window. I became obsessed with watching the old tree, for I was convinced that there was an unholy quality to it. Now, in the light of day, I could see more clearly and I noticed a number of white objects strewn just below the tree, scattered and lodged behind jutting rocks and boulders. I squinted but was unable to discern exactly their true nature. The whole of the day passed slowly by, and once again I found myself facing another night of nerve wracking screams from the tower’s ghosts. I did, however, fare a little better this night, knowing what I was up against, but after the racket had ended I was again drawn to the window because of a different sound coming from outside.

“The moon was shining in its full radiance once again and I could see very clearly. When I looked toward the tree, much to my horror, I saw a thing backing its way out of the nest. I looked on with utter dread and fascination as the creature turned and flung what appeared to be a body over the side. I could see, for only a brief few moments, the arms and legs of whatever it was flailing lifelessly in the air as it dropped from the tree and landed with a thud on a large boulder far down below. My eyes turned back to the creature and got a very good look at what I can only describe as some type of demon. I have seen its form before, but it took a few moments to register in my mind. Finally I understood. It was a Praying Mantis! Yes! That’s it, a Praying Mantis! But the thing, in a disgusting way, was also part human. I could see that its upper body, torso, and arms were like a powerfully built man but the rest of its body was bug-like. Its head and face resembled a man but with one
exception... it contained two bulbous yellow eyes, which seemed to phosphoresce in the moonlight giving it a most diabolical appearance.

“In my fright, I must have exhaled or gasped too loudly because the thing suddenly turned its attention toward the window. A shiver ran through me as I took a few steps back, hoping that I remained undiscovered, but as I did I could hear a buzzing sound. A few seconds later the thing was clinging to the outer wall of the tower and staring in at me!

“I stared back in abject horror. A strange clicking sound emanated from the creature’s throat and it reached its powerful arms between the bars, attempting to grab me. I backed up against the far wall in a kind of shock. It stared at me with its vile pus-like eyes, then smiled. Its teeth were pointy and thin and seemed to crisscross in every direction like pick-up sticks tossed to the floor.

“As if my horror couldn’t be heightened any further, the creature said in a loud and inhuman voice, ‘FEED! FEED!’ I could feel the blood run cold in my veins. The strength of the creature was astounding, for it proceeded to pull one of the bars from the window, but to my relief, the others held firm. The thing was not going to be deterred, however, as it began scraping away the mortar surrounding the bars with one of its sharp claws. For some inexplicable reason, for I’m not courageous in the least, I made a quick movement toward the window, hoping to shoo the thing away, but it lunged at me through the bars with an angry hiss that sent me trembling back against the wall once again. I watched helplessly for more than an hour while the creature made progress at scraping away the mortar. Suddenly, it turned its head and looked back over its shoulder. A second later I could hear the buzz of its wings as it flew back to the safety of its nest. I stepped up cautiously to the window and looked out. I could just see its tail end passing through the nest. I noticed something else that was very telling... the sun was rising.

“I awoke a few hours later by the sound of Carlos calling my name. I opened my eyes to a depressing sight. I was hoping that it had all just been a bad dream but I looked to the window and my heart sank. Only three bars remained. I walked over and immediately saw that the mortar had been thoroughly gouged out in deep pockets around the remaining bars. I told Carlos my tale but he only laughed and dismissed it as a nightmare. It was useless to argue the point, so I settled in for another long day of chatting with Carlos, napping and staring out my window.

“That night, my nightmare, as Carlos called it, continued. I was lying quietly on my bed when I heard that same disturbing flutter of wings that sent my heart pounding. The creature alighted once again outside my window and continued with its abhorrent scraping and the incessant ‘FEED! FEED!’ intoned under its breath. I felt as though I were going mad since there was nothing I could do to better my situation. Another bar broke free from the window and the thing let out an evil laugh at his accomplishment. Hour after hour, it continued on with its scraping until once again the sun began to rise. It looked back and let out a loud cry of exasperation and with one mighty tug, another of the bars broke free with a resounding metallic snap! I could see the delight on its face as it turned and flew back to its nest. I was relieved to see it gone but I was deadly certain that, the following night, the creature would enter my cell.
“As you can well understand, I was completely exhausted and at my wits end. I contemplated my situation all that morning and concluded that I didn’t much care for being eaten alive. But I had no real options left to me. I had no weapons to defend myself against the inevitable attack that would come this very night and I had no chance against the creatures overwhelming strength. No, I could only do one thing. I reached down and picked up the twine from the hay bale and twisted it into a kind of rope. I walked over to the bars on the cell.

“I heard a door open from below. The sound was followed by a set of feet shuffling their way up the long winding staircase. The wooden door flung open and my captors stepped through with large grins on their faces. ‘You are free to go, Senior. Your company has paid well for you and we will now keep our word.’ With that, his partner undid the padlock and the door swung open. I stepped out of the cell with tears running down my cheeks. ‘What about my friend Carlos?’ I said. ‘Hasn’t the poor man suffered enough?’

“The two men looked at each other as though I was quite insane and I stepped to the front of Carlos’ cell.

“‘Carlos, I’m free,’ I yelled out, ‘and I’m going to see to it that...’
“My face went white and I was reduced to utter silence, because before me, in the back of the cell, chained to the wall, was my friend Carlos. A mere skeleton!

“You might think that my tale would end there, but you would be wrong. I ask you to please be patient, for there is a little more to my story and I think you will be quite surprised by how it all ends.

“I returned to Mancora and submitted my bizarre account to the magazine. A few days later I received a reply from my editor. He didn’t chastise me at all for my costing them thousands of dollars in ransom money; in fact, for whatever reason, he never even brought it up. His only concern was with the story I sent him. ‘They’ll never buy it!’ he wrote. ‘Try again, and this time, make it more believable!’ I laughed for hours after reading that telegram. This, from the same magazine that had an exclusive interview with the Yeti Snowman in this month’s edition! I could have submitted a revision but I was adamant. My tale really happened the way I wrote it and I would not budge an inch on changing any of its details.

“In the end, I sent them something entirely different that seemed to appease them, but for the life of me, I couldn’t get the Devil’s Tower out of my mind. It haunted my waking hours and my night time dreams and, as a result, I soon became a frazzled shell of a man. I was extremely depressed, not able to sleep or eat, and there was, of course, the enormous amount of tequila that I was consuming on a daily basis just to dull the anxiety. I woke up one day after riding a three-day bender and I knew something just had to change. I needed to get this behind me, pure and simple, otherwise I would go mad. That meant nothing less than exacting my revenge upon the creature.

“The next morning I was on the first train headed back to Palo; only this time, I took along with me a very capable friend. Its name... Smith & Wesson.

“Upon arrival at Palo, I immediately rented a horse and set out for Devil’s
Tower. I didn’t linger in town this time, for I was a man possessed with one mission in life: To kill the creature that insisted upon haunting my very soul.

“Hours later, I arrived at the tower and my heart was pounding so hard that I was certain I would pass out at any moment. I pulled a camera from my backpack and took a few photos of the tower. I decided earlier that I might write a book on my experiences, provided of course, I got back alive. I grabbed a long coil of rope from one of the saddle bags and proceeded on foot to the rear of the tower. As I rounded the building, I stopped and stared in wonder at the old tree growing out of the rock wall. I never had seen it this close before and it looked quite magnificent in the daylight.

“Wasting no time, I tied off one end of the rope around a large boulder and tossed the rest of the coil over the side. I shimmied my way down the rope until I came to a thick limb that grew close to the rock wall. I hopped easily onto the limb, tied off my rope and started to climb toward the nest. As I glanced down, my eyes happened to fall upon patches of sun-bleached bones strewn across the rock wall. At that moment, it occurred to me that the white objects I wasn’t able to discern from the darkened tower were actually human bones! I shuddered at the thought, but continued my climb.

“My ascent was easy enough because of the many limbs so closely grouped together, only, my heart was beating so loud in my own ears that I thought the noise would be enough to give me away. I finally reached the opening of the nest. I knew this because I could smell a foul stench emanating directly above. I pulled myself up slowly and cautiously, just far enough where I could get a momentary peek into the entrance. I suddenly felt unnerved. It may sound foolish, but because of my obsession and my hasty desire to kill the beast, I really didn’t have a well thought out plan as to how I would actually accomplish the task once I got there. Would I just shoot into the darkness of the nest hoping that one of my six bullets would find their mark? And if they didn’t, what then?

“As it happened, I had no need to worry, because the horror of what transpired next quickly decided things for me.

“As I peered over the edge of the nest, I did my best to remain quiet, but as I pushed myself up, one foot lost contact with the limb I was standing on and I slipped, causing a terrible racket and undoubtedly giving away my element of surprise. As a result of my slip, I unintentionally reached up a little too far into the opening of the nest to support myself, and that’s when it happened. The creature sprang from the darkness with the quickness of a cobra and buried one of its sharp pointy claws deep into my left shoulder blade, like a butcher’s meat hook. I let forth an agonizing moan as the thing pulled me up and partway into its filthy lair. It looked down at me with those demonic bright eyes and seemed to laugh. At that instant I was sure it recognized me. It moved its repulsive face closer to mine and smiled with those sharp needle-like teeth.

“’FEED! FEED!’ it said in its evil bug voice. But I was determined not to be the main course of this or any other insect’s meal. I reached behind me with my free hand and pulled my pistol from its holster. ‘FEED THIS!’ I shouted in dramatic fashion and fired a point-blank shot into the center of the creature’s solar plexus. It immediately
tore its claw from my shoulder and both it and I screamed out in pain. The thing staggered as I pulled the trigger once more. This time, the bullet tore through one of its putrid eyes, obliterating it in an explosion of yellow pus that splattered both me and the nest in a reeking stench. The creature fell on top of me. I could feel its rage. It was now outside the protective confines of the nest and I heard a sizzling and crackling noise as it screamed in utter agony. I looked back and witnessed the effect the sun was having on the creature; it was literally frying to death, like bacon in a pan. But still, it attempted to pull its way back into the nest.

“In one last surge of anger I kicked the creature in the face with my boot, completely shattering its other eye and sending it over the side. I heard a momentary flutter of wings as it tried to recover, but the sound was short lived. I quickly adjusted my body so that I could witness its demise but all I saw was a thin line of green smoke hurling toward the ground, ending in a wisp of ash. The deed had been done and I laughed harder than I had done in a long time. I immediately started my way down the tree. I remember thinking that I could now put this nightmare behind me. Only, in hindsight, I should have given more attention to the muffled clicking sound I heard coming from somewhere within the tree.

“I struggled my way back up the rope and headed for the tower itself. I wanted to take a few more pictures for my book, which would include the interior of the tower as well as my old jail cell. My motivation for coming back had always been, first and foremost, the destruction of the creature, but I also had my friend Carlos in mind. I fully intended to give him a proper burial; perhaps that would help him find everlasting peace.

“I made my way up the winding stairs and entered my old room. I was, of course, a bit apprehensive about returning but my nemesis was now dead and I knew that I had nothing left to fear. I called out for Carlos a number of times but he didn’t answer. This wasn’t unusual and I thought that it might be for the best; after all, I wasn’t looking forward to explaining to him that he was actually dead!

“I stepped into my old cell and walked over to the window. The daylight was fading fast and I pulled my camera out to get one good picture of the tree. I suppose my adrenaline was finally wearing off because my shoulder began to ache terribly. I obviously lost a good deal of blood and suddenly felt light headed and extremely weary. I decided to lay down for a while in the hay, just to take a quick nap and recover my strength.

“I quickly floated off into a wonderful dream where I found myself back in my hometown playing a game of baseball with my childhood friends. It was my turn at bat and I stepped up to the plate, feeling extremely happy and sporting a huge grin. I looked down and tapped my bat against the plate, but saw that it was covered in dirt so I asked the umpire to clean it off. He dutifully bent down with his small whisk broom and moved it back and forth across the plate. It made a strange scratching sound that, for some reason, started my heart racing. While he was bent over I could hear him mumbling to himself the same words over and over in rhythm with the brush strokes. His intonations were indistinct at first but to my horror, I soon recognized the words, ‘FEED! FEED! FEED! FEED!’ When he finally looked up at me, I reeled back in terror because I could see that he wore the same ghastly face of the Praying Mantis!
“I awoke with a scream and jerked to a sitting position. I took in a deep breath. It was all just a dream. Or was it? I say this because the scratching noise never stopped and I was still hearing the words ‘FEED! FEED!’ I slowly lifted my eyes to the window and at that second, all the life seemed to drain out of me, for there outside was the same Praying Mantis creature frantically scraping away at the mortar that surrounded the last remaining bar. Only, this one was a female!

“If my mind hadn’t been so damaged by the sheer terror of it all I could have easily ran from the room to safety, but I seemed to be frozen in place. There came a violent wrenching of the last bar and the creature slithered its way into the room and toward me. What little existing sanity left to me completely evaporated in those final few moments of my life, for amidst my screams and struggles, I clearly heard my old friend Carlos yell out in a loud voice, ‘Please, Senior Wilson... You are making enough noise to wake the dead!’

“At hearing this, I was reduced to a fit of hysterical and uncontrollable laughter, even as I was being helplessly dragged through the window. A few moments later, I found myself at the creature’s nest. She tossed me through the opening and I tumbled into blackness. I was still laughing when out of that darkness, hundreds of tiny yellow eyes popped into existence. I could sense the she-creature standing victoriously over me and in her fell insect voice, I heard her say, ‘FEED CHILDREN FEED!’ That’s when the laughter stopped and the screaming—Oh God, the screaming!

**IN THE COMPANY OF GEESE**

When a flock of geese fly overhead, do you ever wonder what all that squawking is about? I do. That’s why I decided to give my own weird interpretation as to what it is they might be saying. Like all of us, I’m sure they struggle with everyday problems and are probably a bit dopey and smart-alecky as well. And really, who’s to say I’m wrong?

Honk, Honk, Honk.
“C’mon now, keep that formation tight. Be the ‘V’ boy’s, be the ‘V’!”
“Hey, Sid, whatcha got there on your leg?”
“Dude, don’t tell me you got tagged.”
“Wow, you guys are observant. I’ve had this thing for over a week now.”
“Heck, we just thought you were tryin’ to make some kind of fashion statement.”
“Very funny. Just so happens that some guy snuck up behind me while...”
“Hey, I think the old man’s gonna land again.”
“Geez, can’t this guy ever make up his mind?”
“Yep, looks like we’re goin’ in.”

The flock could see a beautiful sunny patch of tall grass directly below, thinking it had to be their destination, only the leader made a last second correction and angled them toward a small pond further away. The ones in the back couldn’t respond fast enough to make the adjustment and their momentum carried them through a tangle of spiky trees, where some had their wings clipped, and not less than
a few curses could be heard. They came in fast and hard. Most glided easily and settled into the pond with nothing more than a moderate splash of water, but others weren’t so lucky. A few overshot the pond and tried to make a stand up landing but were reduced to a blur of feathers, tumbling into a thicket of mulberry bushes and ending flat on their faces. The fallen ones scrambled to get to their feet quickly, hoping to avoid the inevitable razzing. A sarcastic voice shouted, “LAND MUCH!” and many pointed their wings and laughed.

One by one they made their way out of the pond, each choosing a nice soft spot of grass to nestle down into and bask in the day’s glorious sunlight. The leader could be seen waddling his way to a more distant location, separate from the rest of the flock, quite aloof and determined to be alone as he had been from the very beginning.

A group of them gathered around.

“Say, Ox. Ain’t somebody gonna say something to Der Fuhrer over there. I mean, he’s gonna get somebody killed one of these days.”

There arose a number of honks in agreement and Ox raised his wings to quiet them.

“I know, I know. We’ve all been wanting to get rid of him for awhile now but until we can find a suitable replacement, I think…”

“How about you, old boy?” came a voice from the back. “The fellas would surely follow your lead

All seemed to be on board with the suggestion and someone shouted for a vote. Ox looked embarrassed and lifted a wing to quiet them again.

“Now that’s darn decent of you guys, but the truth of the matter is, I got no sense of direction. Heck, we’d probably end up buzzard food in the middle of a desert somewhere. No, I don’t want that on my conscience. We’re just gonna have to figure something else.”

“Well, in the meantime, how’s about you have a word with Der Furher? What say, old buddy?”

Everyone thought it an excellent idea and Ox nodded. “Sure fellas, I’ll have a pow-wow with him.”

So, Ox turned and waddled off in search of the leader.

While he was gone, the rest of the flock engaged in one of their deep intellectual conversations.

“Hey, does anybody really know why we always have to fly in that stupid ‘V’ formation? It’s starting to get a little old, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah, I agree with Phil. There ain’t no law that says we gotta fly in a ‘V,’ is there?”

“I heard that it helps us slice through the air easier,” said another. “Something to do with wind drag and all that.”

“Is that so, professor?”

“You guy’s are all crackers,” squawked another. “The reason we do it is because of tradition, plain and simple.”

“I’ll tell you why we have to fly in a V,” came a voice from the back, “it’s because flying in a ‘Q’ or any other letter would look stupid, now wouldn’t it?”

They all laughed.
“What say we just stick to what’s got us here, fellas. There ain’t nothing wrong with maintaining a little tradition. Am I right?”
Most honked their agreement but a small goose started shaking his head and got up from where he was sitting. He placed his wings behind him and paced back and forth as though he was about to give a locker room speech.
“Tradition. Tradition, you say!” Well, I for one am willing to do away with tradition altogether! I want you guys to just think for a moment how boring our lives have become. I mean, we fly, we land, we eat bugs, and that’s about…. oh yeah, and we poop. As a matter a’fact, we poop a lot! Then, of course, we start the whole predictable thing all over again. I ask you, in all honesty, does that sound like a fulfilling life?”
He could see that his words were having some impact. Each of them was staring down at the ground in a thoughtful way and he could almost hear the wheels turning in their heads. Then someone yelled out…
“What do suggest we do Fred, open up a small hardware store in Poughkeepsie and learn how to square dance?”
That broke the tension and they all started laughing.
The speechmaker looked as though he was about to continue his rant but as he glanced around he could only see goofy faces smiling back at him and he knew that it was no use. He just grunted his exasperation and sat back down with a red face. This elicited even more laughter.
“No, no, you’re looking at this all wrong,” said another goose, standing up to make his point. “We got it made in the shade, fellas. We’re living the life of Riley here. Just think. We fly when we want and where we want. There’s no punchin’ a time clock or having to take any crap from the man. Heck, call me a fool, but I can’t see any possible downside to the life we live. It’s all gravy, baby!”
There arose more honks of agreement and a few patted him on the back.
“What about the inclement weather, Sid?” one voice shouted.
“Yeah, well, I admit that the weather can be a problem sometimes, but…”
“And the power lines. Ever fly into one of those?” said a goose, getting a few laughs as he twitched on the ground, giving his best imitation of being electrocuted.
“Don’t forget about the jet airplanes. Getting sucked into one of those babies will get your attention real quick!”
They started throwing out a whole list of problems:
“What about skyscrapers?”
“Poisonous chem trails?”
“Predatory animals?”
“Hunters?”
“Disease?”
“Lice?”
“Carpal Tunnel Syndrome!” added another, with a giggle.
Everyone just stared at him.

“Alright, alright!” I get your point! Geez…now I feel like killing myself!
The flock roared with laughter.

At that moment an attractive young female seductively waddled her way past them and hopped into the pond. There followed the usual whistles and catcalls.
“You know, she did that on purpose, don’t you?” said one goose, nudging his buddy next to him.

His friend was staring with his tongue part way out of his mouth.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I wouldn’t mind flyin’ behind that for a while. You know what I’m sayin’? HIGH WING!”

“Say fellas, how’s come we got none of them cuties in our flock?” asked a gangly looking goose, craning his neck. “It ain’t like we stink or nothin’.”

He took a quick sniff under a wing and crinkled his face.

“Do you really have to ask?” said another.

“Oh, I’m sure that if we include a female or two into our little boys’ club here it would add a touch of class, but I’m telling you fellas, the whole dynamic of the flock would be changed. I can just see it now: you dunder-heads falling all over yourselves trying to make an impression. Before you know it, you’ll be bathing every other day and handin’ over your very last bug to her. And where does it all end? I’ll tell you where! Once a better lookin’ flock comes along she’ll be outa’ here so fast it’ll make your head spin. You’ll just be standin’ there with a dumb look on your puss as she flies off into the sunset, on the wing tip of a Sergio or a Kevin. No, we don’t need no gold-diggin’ female types in this ….

“Sounds like ol’ Pete’s been hurt, fellas. I think somebody needs a hug!”

They all started waddling their way toward him, chanting,”Pete needs a hug! Pete needs a hug!”

“Now, you guys just keep away from me, I’m warnin’ you….”

Away from the flock, Ox wasn’t having too much luck. He approached the leader with a bit of apprehension.

“Hey, uh...hey there, flock leader. Sorry to bother you, but me and the boys was talkin’ and we got a few grievances we’d like to lay on you if you don’t mind. So…”

“Oh, that’s just great!” replied the leader, coming out of his sleep and looking defiant. “Let me tell you something. I never asked for this job. As a matter of fact, I remember a few weeks ago, I was just enjoying a nice pleasant nap all by myself when out of the blue I heard a noise that startled me, so naturally, I took off. Next thing I know, you and your misfit friends are following me like some kind of bad habit. I’ve been trying to shake your sorry butts off my tail ever since. So don’t you…”

“Alright! Don’t get your tail feathers in a bunch! Geez, there’s just no talkin’ to some people!”

Ox waddled his way back to the flock looking dejected but no more than a squat little fellow who was making his way to the edge of the group at the same time.

“What’d you find out there, Sammy?” asked Ox.

There was a most sour look on the face of this particular goose as he settled down into the grass with the others.

“Well, Ox. I think we can forget about considering ol’ Mickey for flock leader.”

“What do you mean, Sammy?” asked a goose next to him.

The rest quieted so they all could hear.

“Well fellas, I think Mickey’s decision making skills are a bit suspect.”

The group pressed him for an explanation.

“Truth is, I just saw ol’ Mick drop a turd, take a few steps forward, then backtrack.”
“What are you sayin’, Sammy? You sayin’ that Mickey stepped in his own mess? Ha! That’s no grounds for impeachment, old boy!” laughed Ox.

The goose swallowed hard and looked a little green under the gills.

“Only…. he ate it.”

There was about three seconds of silence after Sammie’s disclosure then there came a litany of “Oh God” and assorted choking and gagging noises.

“Well, that settles it,” Ox said, turning his attention back to the flock. “We’ve been trying to get this leadership thing worked out for over a week now.” He looked at each goose long and hard. “Any of you bozos think you got what it takes to be flock leader? C’mon now don’t be shy.”

There was a lot of shuffling and sideways glances, then all of a sudden someone shouted out, “Hey! It looks like the old boy is taking off again!”

The flock jumped to its feet and Ox rolled his eyes. “Alright you guy’s, let’s have an orderly take off this time, and for God’s sake, show a little pride; try to stay in formation for a change!”

“We know!” the flock shouted together, then laughed. “Be the ‘V,’ be the ‘V’!”

You’re probably wondering what ultimately happened to our lovable flock of misfits. Well, it seems that a few days later, their despised leader flew off during the night. Ox got the nod and despite his reluctance, he took his new role very seriously. Unfortunately, later that week, he flew them straight into the middle of a hunters blind and they all ended up getting whacked.

Of course, that’s just my version of how it went down. If it makes you feel any better, you can imagine them lying on a beach in Maui, sipping Mai Tais and watching a beautiful Hawaiian sunset. It really doesn’t matter, because after all, the whole thing’s just silly.

You know, I’ve also been thinking lately about the squirrels I see in the park. They scurry around with so much energy, just like tiny little dynamos. They don’t appear too chatty, but I’m sure, if given a chance, they’d have plenty to say. Wouldn’t you agree?

Bon Apétit

Out of the wilderness stepped two weary and frozen trappers. They trudged their way toward a group of log cabins that seemed to appear out of nowhere, like some snowy desert mirage. An old man and young boy stood just outside one of the cabins, eagerly watching as the strangers approached. The elder bent down and whispered something into the boy’s ear, then the boy took off like a shot around the corner of the cabin.

The old man hobbled his way through the snow to greet the men. “Welcome, strangers,” he said in a weak and feeble voice. His eyes were sunken black pits and his translucent skin seemed to be stretched far too tight over a protruding skeleton.

“You boys fixin’ to stay awhile?”

“You boys fixin’ to shake off this chill and maybe get a decent bite to eat,” replied one of the men.
“Well, you fellers are in luck. A good steamin’ hot bath’ll melt the freeze off yer bones fer sure. In the meantime, we’ll see what we can do about rummagin’ you up some vittles.”

A few minutes later, the two found themselves happily soaking their tired bodies in a huge outdoor copper tub heated below by a generously stoked fire. While they were simmering away, a stream of ghost-like bodies glided silently past them, all with hollowed out eyes and slavering mouths. A few stole furtive glances at the men as they made their way inside a great log cabin located near the copper tub. The men spotted the same young boy they had seen earlier and called him over.

“Well, don’t that beat all!” said one, turning to his partner with a gleaming smile. “Looks as though we’re gonna be the honored guests at this here shindig. In that case, I’d better get myself half ways presentable. Say, Luke, hand me over that there bar of soap you got. I plan on doin’ some serious scrubbin’.”

At that moment, the old man, wielding a sharp axe, quietly approached the tub from behind, and following close by were two very hungry looking women carrying a large copper lid that fit that particular cooking pot perfectly.