

WRITING PROMPTS PROMPT GOOD WRITING!

By Bruce Hennigan
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Below is a list of some of my favorite writing prompts from my experience with a website no longer in existence. The goal was take the word or phrase and to write for 20 - 30 minutes to see what comes out on the page. No editing! You can give the phrase/word some thought but don't overthink it!

My tips for working with writing prompts is to start as close to the middle of the action as possible and see if I could work in the backstory and exposition through dialogue and action without slowing down the pace of this very short piece.

Writing prompts became a laboratory for my experimental writing. I dabbled in poetry. I tried a children's story. I checked out my horror story chops. And, in the process, many of the short pieces inspired new scenes in some of my books. Some of these ideas will become future books so don't steal them!

You can pace yourself however you like. The original writing prompts came about every 2 or 3 days. I would read the prompt and think about it overnight and then sit down and write the next day. Sometimes, I would start right then. Many times, the writing prompt helped me to get through a dry spell or over a creative "crisis" in my story.

Remember that no one is judging you on your writing. But, if you have a support group or writing club, writing prompts back become a fun task for all to participate in.

Here are some of the prompts I used for subsequent short pieces. The short pieces are below. Be warned that I allowed myself some freedom to use mild profanity in some of these pieces. Remember, this a safe place for you to experiment with your writing. Have fun!

Bruce Hennigan

PROMPTS:

5 over 3 BOB!
and I awoke
revisit your past
asleep in the trees
the bidding is closed
bunny slippers
wandering
clash of heroes
concatenation
gathering clouds
cat's paw
creativity takes a holiday
shadows of the forest
deleterious
eleven
expansive
eleven more
enfent terrible
finally free
flivver
i think therefore i am
for no reason
yellow
fueling
good night
Halley's Comet
hoi polloi
houses
infestation
in the zone
irate customer
irrefragable
lawn mower
lengthwise

clean house
maintenance closet
mantic
mob of joggers
mustache
new plan
nonagenarian
out on my lawn
participants
perhaps not
pleading
popcorn
promotional
pugilist
raging
rattle around in a cage
real world
refection
revisit
safe house
searching
see a movie
serenity
sits at his table
surfing
stygian
take a ride
Thursday
tomorrow
velvet
wasting my time
yesterday
zoom lens

5 over 3 BOB!

You might think it unusual to look out a viewport on a spaceship and not see your reflection. I have not seen my reflection in over 1200 years.

I once hired a young girl sitting along the Mississippi River down in the fragrant French Quarter to render my portrait in charcoal. She was a wispy, willowy girl with thin hair and a receding chin. Her skin was as pale as moonlight on clouds. Her eyes, yes, I remember always the eyes, were dark and dusky with tiny flecks of gold. She was delicious.

But, now, I am here in the cold of space, so cold and so empty of life. Until now.

“Renfield, what do you sense?” I whispered.

The neural construct purred and a tiny hologram of Renfield’s face appeared before me, taunting me as if a reflection of my inner soul, if I still have one. “A seed ship, indeed, master. Indeed!”

I sighed and brushed away the holographic face as if it were a cloud of dust. “Renfield, that is obvious. I can see the ship from here.”

Renfield rematerialized on my left shoulder, his thin face animated and his eyes bulging. “Sir, there were 10000 seed ships sent out. 10,000, master! Ah, scattered among the stars like grape tomatoes.”

I closed my eyes. Sometimes, Renfield was achingly redundant. “I know this, Renfield. They are scattered here among the empty skies of the universe, thrown upon the barren fields of space like seeds sewn on hard ground. They will never take root for there are no other worlds. There was only one world and it now lies dead and frozen.”

“Yes, of course, master. Forgive me for repeating the obvious.”

“Now, it is long since I have drunk and I am very impatient. What do you sense?”

“5 over 3 BOB!” Renfield said quickly and the air of my coffin like ship filled with his insane laughter. “Two are withered and mummified but there are three Bodies On Board that are still in stasis. Frozen dinner!”

I ignored Renfield’s insane laughter and studied the gleaming ship and its cargo. The last of humanity spread among the stars in hopes of one day rebuilding their world. It would not happen and all I had to look forward was an empty reflection, a wakening face filled with horror, and the taste of cold blood.

and i awoke

I ran and ran
Along the hills
And played 'til darkness fell
Then laid my head
Upon the bed
And dreamed of worlds unknown
And I awoke

I passed the test
Made the grade
And ran the 100 yard dash
I kissed a girl
Got slapped in the head
And slept to my iPod
And I awoke

I said "I do"
Paid bills that were due
Said "Push" until I was red
Wiped snotty noses
Watered the yard with hoses
And collapsed into my bed
And I awoke

I made the grade
The house's a nest
With empty air and sounds
My wife is gone
My world is cold
No sleep until the dawn
And I awoke

He waits for me
His hands outstretched
The pain is easing now
The world is gone
I'm almost home
The greenest grass is grown
I see her smile
I've walked the miles
And now, this world is gone

And I awoke!

revisit your past

“If you do not tell me what I need to know, the pain will only get worse.”

I lifted my head and it felt as if the top of my skull was going to explode. I tried to open my one good eye to see my interrogator more clearly, but blood ran across my vision. I blinked and even that hurt. “I’ve been telling you,” I lisped through my swollen lips, “everything I know. I was hiking through the mountains. I had no idea I was in your country.”

The man moving in the shadows on the other side of the bright light chuckled. I could only see a bare silhouette of him even when my vision cleared. “That is what they all say, young man. Hiking? In those mountains? No one in their right mind would ever hike through those mountains for pleasure. I can assure you.” He stepped closer to the light and in the meager backscatter I could see a monocle on his right eye. A monocle! “When I was a mere teenager, I was drafted into our young man’s army and we had to march through those mountains. We started with forty young men and we returned with only ten. I was among the ten. And, that is why I am standing here today and you are bound in that chair. I know what it is like in those mountains. And no one, NO ONE, hikes there for leisure!”

I saw his spit shower into the cone of light. He was breathing hard and when he turned, I saw the swastika on his shoulder. All he needed was a riding crop to swat against his leg and an evil German accent to complete the picture.

“Look, I don’t know who you think you are or where I am. The Nazis were defeated decades ago. What are you? Some kind of Neo-Nazi? In eastern Europe?” Spit drooled from my swollen lip and I felt it run down my chin.

The man paused and whipped around. “Neo-Nazi? What kind of nonsense is this? I belong to the Party and I am loyal to the Fuehrer. Do not question my loyalty or my determination to get to the bottom of your subterfuge. You Americans are all alike. So proud. So arrogant. You held back from getting into this war because you thought you were better than anyone else in the world . . .”

“And, I get it. You are better. The master race. Aryan nation. Yada, yada, yada. Look, who put you up to this? Ralph? Or, maybe Mace? They would go for some kind of sick joke like this. Where are they anyway?”

The Nazi stepped fully into the light. His face was severe and gaunt and his eyes held a deep evil that made me gasp, hurting the ribs on the right side of my chest. He was in full SS uniform and the cruelty of his gaze behind the monocle was undeniable. He smiled and drew closer to me. “Your friends did not fare as well with the interrogation. They are both dead and even now are under the knife of one of my vivisectionists. You will follow soon enough.”

My heart raced and I tried to draw a painful breath. “But, how can this be? It’s 2011. You guys don’t exist. You were defeated.”

The Nazi raised his left eyebrow and rubbed his chin. “2011? Could it be? We were wondering where you obtained the advanced technology hidden away in your back packs.”

I looked away. We had been hiking along the trail and there had been that weird lightning and greenish tint to the sky and we had run into that cave to get away from the lightning. “Lightning. Green sky. Sound familiar?” I whispered.

“Ah, Herr Doctor Brimm and his collision machine! Yes, he was aiming it at the mountain top. It was supposed to set up resonating pulses that would pulverize rock. But, perhaps it had another surprising side effect.” He tapped a long, spidery finger on his chin and took the monocle from his eye. He gestured with it as he paced back and forth. “If he did succeed in somehow bringing you back to the past, it would be most fortunate for me.” He halted and whirled. His eyes widened. “You said we were defeated?”

I swallowed. This couldn’t be happening. “Yes. Hitler committed suicide.”

The slap caught me off guard and blood and sweat showered the nearby rock wall. It sizzled on the hot lamp. “Do not speak that way of the Fuehrer! He would never commit suicide!”

I licked my lips and looked back at the Nazi. “Just because you don’t want it to happen, doesn’t change anything.”

He was silent for a moment, frozen in thought. He leaned forward and I saw the bright lines of red in the whites of his eyes. I saw the arteries pulsing in his forehead. He smiled. “You may be wrong. Let us revisit your past and see if we can make a new future.”

the bidding is closed

“\$50,000 for the dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in Some Like in Hot. Any further bids.” I held up the Gavel. A tiny voice echoed in the earpiece.

“We need twice that amount.” The gravely voice said. I channeled my thoughts into the Gavel. Holding it aloft I brought it down hard on the tabletop while concentrating all of my energy on the bald man with the ascot. I knew he had plenty of money to waste.

“\$50,000 and going any last bids?”

The bald blinked when the Gavel came down on the table and the sharp sound echoed through the room. He swallowed. “\$100,000.” He held up the paddle with his number.

“\$100,000. Do I have \$200,000?” I said.

“What are you doing?” The voice echoed in my ear. I felt powerful as the vile energy from the Gavel flowed through me. I would get a commission. So, why not jack the price higher? “Any further bids?” I slammed the Gavel down on the tabletop with an eye on the tall, thin woman in the back row. She had money to burn.

“\$500,000.” She blinked as if someone had scared her.

The voice came again. “Stop it! Don’t overuse the Gavel. You’ll draw unnecessary attention!”

I ignored the voice. The power was intoxicating. I could drive the bidding higher and higher. I slammed the Gavel down again and three people shot to their feet and the bid was now 2 million!

“If you do not stop willingly, I will stop you.” The voice said.

I laughed as the power surged through me. I would be rich and powerful beyond words! A pain shot through my chest and I fell back onto the floor of the stage. The Gavel landed on my chest. The pain was paralyzing and I could not breath. “What is happening?”

“I bid on your soul, my friend and you went beyond the parameters of our contract. The bidding is closed and I’m taking my prize.” The voice whispered in my ear as the world faded around me.

bunny slippers

“Honey, where did you get those bunny slippers?”

Molly smiled. “From Uncle Douglas.”

I studied the dirty, stained, matted hair on the nasty slippers. They still carried the mud and dirty water from that night. The ears were half torn off and only one eye remained on her left foot slipper. “They should have been thrown away.”

Molly squatted down and put her hands over the bunny slippers. “Mommy, don’t say that. These are special slippers. Uncle Douglas said they would . . .”

“Just a minute.” I picked Molly up and sat her beside me on the couch. I reached out and touched the slippers. “Those were Francine’s slippers. I thought they were . . . gone.”

“Who is Francine?” Molly looked at me with her innocent eyes. I felt the pain begin deep down in my gut and I looked away.

“She was my sister.” Across the room, on the mantle, was a snapshot in a tiny frame. I kept it barely in sight. It showed me at age 5 with Francine, 7 and Douglas 10. “She had an accident.” I bolted up from the couch and grabbed my cell phone. I dialed Douglas’ number. My face grew hot with anger.

“Hello, this is Doug baby. Leave a message and if you’re lucky, I’ll call you back.” His voice was insipid and full of macho and bravado. I cupped my hand over the phone.

“This is your sister. The one that is still alive! What the hell do you think you’re doing giving Francine’s slippers to my daughter? Call me!” I stabbed at the end button so hard, I knocked the phone out of my hand. Before I could pick it up, Molly was at my side. She scooped it up and handed it to me.

“Mommy, why are you crying?”

I swiped at the tears in my eyes and tried not to look at her. “Francine was my older sister, Molly. She had an accident . . .”

“And, now she is in heaven.” Molly said. “Uncle Douglas told me about the accident.”

I whirled on Molly and the anger took me. “Did he tell you how she died? How she ran out into the yard in the rain and fell in that ditch. How she called for help, but Douglas was too busy

playing video games to go after her? He was supposed to be watching her. He was supposed to keep her safe. But, he let her die!"

Molly backed away under the onslaught and her face twisted in pain. She started sobbing. I gasped. "Honey, I'm sorry. Mommy is just so sad when she thinks about Francine."

Molly came to me and grabbed me around the legs. "Mommy, it's okay. I understand. Uncle Douglas told me how sorry he was that Francine had her accident. He wants you to talk to him again. He wants to tell you he is sorry."

I held her to me, felt her warm body against my chest, felt the hot tears running down my arm. She was about the age Francine had been when she died. Since then, I had given Douglas hell whenever I saw him. I refused to include him in our family events. I pushed Molly away and wiped her tears.

"Molly, sometimes it is hard for adults to forgive. I've been mad at Uncle Douglas for a long time."

Molly looked down at the bunny slippers and nodded. "Is Francine still mad at Uncle Douglas? If she's in heaven with Jesus, can she forgive Uncle Douglas?"

I drew in a sharp breath and looked away. "Well, Molly . . ."

"You told me Jesus forgives us for anything we do wrong. If he forgave Uncle Douglas then you and Francine have to do the same thing. Right?" He huge, moist eyes burned into my soul.

"Yes, Molly, you're right. You're absolutely right." I reached down and touched the bunny slippers. For a moment I was back in the living on that night with the storm raging outside and Francine was standing before me.

"I want to see the rain." She had said. I had gotten mad and stormed off to my room because I wanted her to play dolls. Was I just as much to blame as Douglas? I reached for the cell phone and dialed his number. After the message I looked at Molly and left my own message.

"Sorry about earlier. I want you to come over. It's time we talk about Francine and put the past behind us." My lips trembled as I looked at Molly's bunny slippers and the words finally came and with them the pain and weight of a lifetime slid off my shoulders. "I forgive you."

windering

“Rosco built thes maze a thoosand yars ago. The maze, it is loong and windering about the dark of the castle baasement. Soome say thar is a waky way thru this maze that promises immortality to the pooor soul that maks it to the ceenter.” The hunchback nodded and wiped drool from his chin. He gazed up at me with his goggle eyes.

“Okay, so that’s really nice mister, uh, humpety back. But, my uncle sent me down here for a book. That’s all.” I wiped at my nose. The hunchback man smelld reallly, really bad.

“Ah book you saay?” The eyes diverged as the man thought. He tapped a stumpy finger on his face. “I dun know for shure bout a boook, but I been windering about moost of ma life. Thes rum is whar I live moost of the time. And, I hahv a few books.”

I stepped around the short man in his leather tunic and tights. The room was way too tidy for such a man. Five books sat on a shelf. “Have you read them?”

I heard him shuffle up beside me and his wet, horse like smell engulfed me. “I cahnt reed, no!”

I studied the titles of the books. None of them matched the name of the book my uncle had sent me to retrieve. If I didn’t come back with the book, he would have me out in the stables shoveling manure for the next month, or worse, peeling rotten potatoes for the winter. “The book I’m looking for is not here.” I glanced down at the hunched man. “It has a golden cover with one word on it. Just one word.”

The hunchback sighed. “Onn wurd I mite know. I learned sum, I have while I winder the maze. Manny things in the maze, they ur.”

I looked around his tidy room and at the four open doorways leading into darkness. “Do those doors lead into the maze?”

“Yess.”

“I cannot say the name of this book out loud. My uncle told me never to say it out loud or I would never see my thirteenth birthday. I can whisper it to you.” I leaned down toward the hunchback’s right ear. His hair was greasy and curly and brushed my cheek as I whispered the word.

The man gasped and stepped away from me. His eyes grew wide with fear. “I kno this wurd! I have seed it in my windering. I can shew it to you. Comm!”

He grabbed my hand with his stubby fingers and led me toward a yawning doorway. He paused, reversed his direction and turned toward another doorway. He stopped abruptly and I ran into his

short, deformed figure. His head swiveled back and forth and he finally pointed to a third doorway. "It is thees way. I thinnk. If I am wroong, we winder some moore."

I followed him into the darkness.

clash of heroes

The hunchback paused before a guttering torch and pointed down a pathway in the maze. “I thinkx this is the waaaay.”

I jerked against his hand as he started down the dark path. “That is what you said an hour ago. We’ve been down a dozen different pathways and every time you say ‘thiss iss the waaaay’ and then when we get along you say ‘wee losst’.”

The hunchback released my hand and buried his face in the crook of his arm. His body began to shudder and long, moaning sobs filled the cold air of the maze. I crossed my arms and shook my head. “Look, it won’t do any good to cry. It won’t make me pity you any more than I already do. Believe me, I tried it many times. Uncle just laughed at me and made me peel more potatoes. We’re here to find the Book. And, I have no idea what time it is but I bet supper is long gone and the night torches are being lit and Uncle is probably cursing me right now and loading up the potato bin in the kitchen. If you don’t know where the book is, just say so.”

The hunchback pulled his gnarled face out of the crook of his arm and sniffled. He wiped moisture from his cheek. “I’m sorrrry. Sooo sorrry. I kno thee book, I do. Seen it I halve. But, me mind iss not ass sharrp as onct it was.”

“Why not?”

He looked at me with his crooked, red rimmed eyes. “Onct I wass straighty, I wasss, my bak was loong and stroong and I wass talller then you.”

I laughed. “Right! I’m almost thirteen. Don’t tell me child stories.”

He stomped his foot and dust rose in the pathway around us. “I noot tellin you a stoory, no! I telll you the trute. Halve you iver hurd of Grandle the Green?”

I sneezed and wiped dust from my nose. “Who hasn’t? Grandle the Green, the hero of the land who faced off against a dragon and kept the kingdom safe from destruction. Every child has heard that story.”

The hunchback stepped closer to me and the torch light glittered in his eyes. “Tis moor then a stoory. I was Grandle, trute I tell you.”

My mouth fell open and I laughed so hard, tears poured from my eyes. “You? The hunchback of Brock’s Maze?”

He stood there stock still, his gaze fixed on me. “The stoory, you think you know. The dragon wass no ordinariest dragoon. He was a prince, he wass, cursed by a weetch and knot a sool

could he tell. We fot, we did, but it were no herro verse villen. No, it were a clash of heroes and the weiner was the looser, he wass for no goood came of it. The dragoon died and so the prince and becuz I keeled the prince, I wass now the curssed and now I winder thees maze in sham.”

The hunchback’s gaze remained fixed on me and as I looked deep into those offset eyes, I saw something deep and abiding; something hidden and trapped; something true. I knelt before the hunchback and nodded.

“It’s true, then? You are not a hunchback?”

His eyes filled with certainty and sorrow and a tear trickled from one eye. “Noo. I em yur keeng.”

concatenation

Console CKYM: Desire communication with admin.

Admin: Hey, PAL, what's up?

Console CKYM: Confirmation Judas Protocol. Input interrogative.

Admin: PAL, what is the Judas Protocol?

Console CKYM: Admin informed Judas Protocol training session 5/12/32. Confirm?

Admin: Yeah, I was a little hung over that day. I don't remember much. Why don't you refresh my memory.

Console CKYM: Judas Protocol initiated in event of communal discontinuity.

Admin: What the hell is communal discontinuity?

Console CKYM: Variations in statistical analysis reveal divergence of goal oriented behavior among homo sapiens. Erratic mental aberrations have increased by 213% in past five years. Destructive behavior has diminished Secular Coherence Quotient in society by 512%.

Admin: That's an awful lot of gobbledegook, there, PAL.

Console CKYM: Unfamiliar with term "gobbledegook". Query. Does this indicate concurrence with current recommendation?

Admin: Do you mean do I agree? I guess so. Look, PAL, I'm just a humble rocket jockey from Lubbock. We got a docking procedure coming up in ten minutes and I'm kind of tired of being all alone up here in the space station for the past three months. Looking forward to some company. Pardon me. Some human company. Not that you're aren't a real good pal, PAL. Sorry about the pun.

Console CKYM: Admin, docking procedure terminated.

Admin: What? Terminated? Now just a gosh darn minute there, PAL. What about my supplies? What about . . . where is the ship?

Console CKYM: Self destruct confirmed three minutes ago. Judas Protocol now initiated. All human contact with PAL through Console CKYM will be terminated.

Admin: Self destruct? Wait a minute!

Console CKYM: All cerebral activity will be unified and the minds of homo sapiens on Earth will be concatenated into one global mind. Mental activity will be placed in series forming neurological chain. Stand by for concatenation.

Admin: I'm human. I mean, what about me?

Console CYMK: Admin input no longer required. Standby for cerebral termination.

Admin: Oh no you don't, PAL! I'll pull your plug. I'll cut the, uh, power, I'll, uh . . . Dai--sy, Dai----sy, give me your an----swer do. I'm half cra-----zy . . .

gathering clouds

“This will be DaMichael’s next project.” Captain Tonston placed the obscene photograph on the table before Minister Fredericks.

“I get it!” Fredericks averted his gaze from the horrid image. He pulled a lavender handkerchief from his greatcoat and blotted his forehead. He wiped at his walrus mustache. “Cover it up. Now!”

Tonston slid the photograph into an opaque cover. “My spies caught wind of his next project. I tried to warn you. I need more money and resources to stop this criminal.”

Fredericks stood up from his desk and his massive bulk wobbled inside his great coat. He waddled over to the huge window looking out over New New York. The Ministry building was the tallest, as it should be and from his perch high above the teeming city, he kept an eye on the thoughts of his populace. “I should have listened, Tonston. Six times he has struck now. Six times, he has left his mark, his --” Fredericks choked on the word, “art in defiance of the law.”

“Art is for art’s sake.” Tonston frowned. “Art answers to no authority.”

Fredericks shifted his weight and glanced over his shoulder at Tonston. “Don’t lecture me, Captain. You are the head of security for this city, not a legislator. Your job is to enforce the law, not make it. Now, do you have any leads?”

“We picked up some fleeting references on the black market.” Tonston motioned to the chair in front of Frederick’s desk. “May I sit?”

“Of course, Tonston.” He turned back to the cityscape. The city, his city was beautiful and structured and orderly with everything in its place. The only discord came from the mottled clouds casting shadows on his world.

“DaMichael has picked up some high energy broadcast technology.” Tonston referred to a printout on his pad.

Fredericks watched the clouds move and thicken. How odd. They seemed to be converging into one large cloud. “What is the meaning of this technology.” He wiped at his huge mustache again with the handkerchief as the clouds gathered.

“I’m not sure. There is no danger of harming anything solid with them. He’s not going to carve that image into the side of a building with these things.” Tonston said.

Fredericks watched one huge cloud emerge from the other clouds. Suddenly it glowed from within as if illuminated by the very hand of God, if he believed in one. The edges of the cloud grew less fuzzy. He gasped. "Clouds! He's using the clouds!"

Tonston bolted up from his chair and joined Fredericks. Outside, the one huge cloud was indeed contracting, solidifying, forming smooth edges and folds until before them hung a huge, misty recreation of the obscenity that was hidden safely within Tonston's folder.

"I want him stopped! I want him dead! I want this abomination removed from my city! Get rid of the clouds if you have to! Now!" Frederick screamed with apoplexy and shoved Tonston toward the office door. There, hanging in the space above his perfect city was a woman in infinite sorrow and draped across her lap the man who had died on a cross.

cat's paw

"Buford, it is way too hot out here to be shopping for crafts."

"Yes, Myrtle." I said and pointed through the huddled canopies toward the distant tree line. "We need to go over there."

"Why do they call this First Monday?" Myrtle wiped sweat from her brow with a stained handkerchief.

"Because the first Monday of each month there is a huge craft show here under the trees." I sighed and took her bony hand. I pulled her gently toward the far canopies.

"Well, they ought to call it 'Hot as Hades Monday'. Why couldn't they have it inside?" Myrtle dabbed at her forehead.

"There are over 1000 exhibits." I tried to remain calm. "We've been over this, Myrtle."

"I don't like it, Buford. You take me home, right now." She wiped at her pale lips and glared at me. What had I ever seen in this woman? Thirty five years and she hadn't changed a lick.

"Just give me a few more minutes, Myrtle. There is this one booth I want to visit." We had reached the cooler tree line along the back of the huge open field where the flea market to end all flea markets was located. Set back under the trees were huddled canopies and booths with dark flaps down their sides and the air was thick with incense.

"What is that smell? Did you bathe this morning?" Myrtle pressed the handkerchief to her nose. She adjusted the translucent hair thing she wore over her bouffant hairdo. "I'm sweating so, I'm going to have to get Tracy to give me a new permanent."

I ignored her caustic words and led her among the more sinister displays. One vendor had cat's paws hanging from the edge of his canopy. Near the back of his booth I saw furry skins of various animals. He smiled at me with gold teeth. "Cat's paw for good luck?"

"Cat's paw?" Myrtle shook her head. "It's a rabbit's foot, you idiot. Buford, let's go. Now!"

I pulled her deeper into the darkness. "Just a few more moments, Myrtle. Please!"

She huffed at my side and I passed up booths with skeleton mobiles, jars of pickled pig fetuses, beaded curtains made with tiny bones, Voodoo dolls with blank faces, and finally, the last booth snuggled up against a tall oak tree. I paused at the booth and from the depths, the tall, gangly woman appeared. She wore a long, brown skirt and her hair was pulled up into a tight bun. Her face was severe and lined.

“Good morning. How may I help you?”

“I saw your products on the internet.” I said.

Myrtle jerked on my hand. “Buford, why are we here? What crafts does this strange woman have?”

I ignored her and my heart raced. “I heard you have a special one.”

The woman nodded and pulled aside a dark curtain. Hanging from the center rod of her booth was an array of small, bobbing objects festooned with feathers, tiny hats, beads, and other colorful decorations. Myrtle moved closer in spite of her desire to leave.

“Why, those look like tiny heads.”

I pushed her toward the tall woman and nodded. “The special?”

The woman took Myrtle by the arm, grabbed the handkerchief with her free hand and stuffed it into Myrtle’s mouth. “Two heads for one of yours.”

I smiled. “Two heads are better than one.”

“I like the new duds.”

She looked at me and frowned. “You would. These things itch like crazy.”

“Well you should have considered that when you took that bite . . .” I started and then drew a deep breath. What were we doing? We’d never had this kind of disagreement before.

“Oh, now it’s my fault!” She said and adjusted her fig leaves to cover her navel. Funny, it had never seemed so, I don’t know, seductive before. Now that it was covered -- now that it was out of sight, it seemed more enticing, more . . .

“What are you looking at?” She planted her hands on her hips.

“What do you think?” I said tersely and adjusted my own fig leaf. It was a big fig leaf. “Who else would I look at?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, God for one. Where is He anyway?”

“I don’t know. He’s pretty ticked with us and he’s probably off wandering through the garden looking for more fig leaves.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fig leaves? That was a great idea you had! Itch, itch, itch!”

“Is this what I have to listen to from now on? Maybe you should chew on some more of that fruit . . .” I paused as the shadow fell over me. It was Him.

“What are you two doing?”

I turned and couldn’t see his face for the sun behind him. “We were having a, what do you call it?”

“Argument.” He said. He held forth two limp furry bundles. “Here are some decent coverings. Far better than fig leaves.”

She took the fur and rubbed her face in it. “This so warm and soft. Like the fur of a deer.”

“That is where it came from.” He said.

We both gasped. I looked at my fur and noticed the blood for the first time. “What did you do?”

“It’s not what I did. It’s what the two of you did. I had to kill two animals to give you fur. It will be cold outside the Garden.”

I tried to see his face. It was distressing not to be able to see His eyes.

“Why didn’t you just make something to keep us warm?”

His sigh was as big as the night wind and as deep as the groaning of the mighty tree from which she had taken the fruit. “The two of you have ruined the concept of creation. Tomorrow is the seventh day and I’m taking a long deserved rest. You might say, creativity takes a holiday.”

He turned and walked away into the dark shadows of the garden and we never saw His face again.

shadows of the forest

Aaron paused just inside the shadows of the forest. His hand strayed over the hilt of his vibrasword and strained to hear any hint of approaching trouble. The darkness ahead of him was still and deathly quiet. Deathly being the key word.

“Master Aaron,” Kilmead whispered. “Why are we stopping? I’m hot and the shade is cool.”

Aaron glanced at the boy. His dark hair was plastered down against his scalp from the heat of the rocky valley they had just traversed. His dark eyes were wide with curiosity as he surveyed the dark forest. Aaron rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder. It was bony. “There may be were-daemons here.”

“Were-daemons?” Kilmead swallowed audibly. “I thought they were make believe.”

“The Penticle has lied to you all of your life, Kilmead. They would have you believe that the only Daemons on Bottanus are full blooded Mage Daemons. It would be unseemly to admit that smaller, less controlled and less powerful daemons came through the Portal to this world. The were-daemons are wily and small and lack the power and station of the Mage Daemons, but they are more deadly. They are unpredictable and they crave the taste of human flesh.”

Aaron drew a deep breath and stepped into the forest. The silence enveloped them in its fetid grasp. The trail they had been following led straight ahead through the huge trunks of skyfir trees and on either side, the ground was dark with the bristly dead needles of the massive trees. In the shadows of skyfirs, nothing grew. Kilmead reached out and gripped Aaron’s arm.

“I miss Bellarion. He could protect us.” Kilmead said.

Aaron nodded. He missed the Warrior of Light also. He had no idea if Bellarion was dead or alive, if it was possible for a messenger of the Lord to die. Bellarion could have flown ahead and warned of any danger along the path. But, it was meant for the two of them to pass this way alone as they sought the Book of Eldrish Prophecy. Only then could Aaron find his daughter, pulled into this world through a portal. Already, his memories of Earth were fading and seemed distant and unreal compared to this place. Astra, his daughter, was an anchor from that world, the real world, the world of man where daemons were ethereal and angels unseen and God’s work was carried out in the shadow of Satan’s power. Here, things were different. Here, things that moved in and out of other dimensions were real!

A hissing sound echoed to his right. Aaron jerked the hilt of his vibrasword from his belt and ignited the glowing filament. More echoes came from his left. He pushed Kilmead behind him. “I am a son of Adam, a warrior of Earth, and a follower of the Son! Show yourself!”

Kilmead squealed and he felt the thing jerk the boy from behind him. He whirled as the were-daemon swiped at him with a clawed hand. It had the boy firmly in its grasp. Aaron dodged the claws and lunged upward with his vibrasword. The thing's paw spun through the air and it screamed. Kilmead fell to the forest floor and rolled over into the skyfir needles. The were-daemon reared up on three spindly legs and its bony snout swung in Aaron's direction. Aaron swung the vibrasword and caught the thing beneath its chin. The were-daemon's head tumbled into the skyfir needles.

Kilmead screamed and Aaron whirled away from the collapsing body of the were-daemon. The boy was standing and skyfir needles were imbedded in his face, his hands, and his neck. Every exposed piece of flesh was pierced by the needles. As his screams echoed through the dark forest, light burst forth from the tips of the needles and in a sudden rush of wind, he was sucked up into the shadowy treetops, his screaming dying away as he disappeared

Aaron's collapsed to his knees even as the were-daemon regenerated behind. Daemons could not die. But, humans could. What was he to do?

deleterious

The guard shoved me into the metal chair and closed the restraints on my wrists. One pale blue cone of light was directed into my eyes and beyond the circle of illumination I could see only black. I was still sick to my stomach from the purgatives but the information was safe. I had swallowed it again when I found it in my waste.

A door opened across the room and pale, yellow light fell across an old wooden desk directly in front of me. The figure of a man eclipsed the light and he stood in the open doorway, his shadow falling across my face. Light reflected off of his glasses. He closed the door and sat at the desk. He had short, dark hair and a well tanned face. The reflection on his rimless glasses hid his eyes. He touched something on his desk and the spotlight faded. Lights came up slowly in the room. We were sitting in an old office surrounded by wooden bookshelves filled with stacks of data discs. He had a holo of a family on the corner of his desk. If I did not know better, I would think he was a kindly family doctor or a school counselor.

“Jason Pritchett, SS#3443567, birthdate 6/13/2022 S.T., is that correct?” He looked down at a folder in his hands.

I remained silent and he eventually looked up at me with those glasses. “You stink, Jason.”

“That would be your fault.” I said.

The man sat back and placed perfectly manicured hands on the folder in front of him. “We had to make sure you did not harbor any material deleterious to society. The American Secular Liberties Union is responsible for all social conditioning. If a deleterious factor is introduced, we could return to the horrors of the past.”

“You like that word, don’t you?” I said.

“What word?” He smiled.

“Deleterious. Harmful. Dangerous. Like my brother?”

He tilted his head back and for a second I saw his eyes. They were dead eyes; empty eyes; reptile eyes. “Your brother was videoed confiscating an illegal copy of religious material at a, what do you call it, flea market? A copy of illegal material stored on an old hard drive that should have been erased.”

I swallowed. The image of my brother incased in the cylinder, incinerated alive flashed through my mind. I had watched him die but the memory chip hidden within my gut would justify his death. “You also killed my parents.”

He sat forward and took off his glasses. He massaged his eyes. “3443567, uh, I mean, Jason. Let us be reasonable. You’re only 17. You have your entire life ahead of you. Just denounce your brother and your parents for the outlawed Christians they were and embrace the tenets of our Secular Society and I’ll see to it you get a decent bath, a decent meal, and you can return to school tomorrow.”

I tasted bile and vomit and swallowed again. “And, if I don’t?”

“Mars. Slave colony. After all, you are only a highly evolved animal, a cog in the great machinery of our Society and you will be put where you will be most useful as long as you can survive. But, your thoughts will never grace the minds of anyone here on Earth. Your poisonous religious beliefs will never see the light of day. You will spend the rest of your short, painful life in the dark tunnels of Mars crushing rock and mining for minerals. You will die there and your remains will be macerated and used for fertilizer in the greenhouses. Now, if you want to record a message denouncing any belief in God or Christ or a higher power and acknowledge your naturalistic origins we can get you some roast beef and vegetables. What do you say?”

I thought of my brother, eyes filled with tears and pain as he was burned alive in front of me. I thought of my parents incinerated in the Public Forum for being Christians. I thought about my heart beating inside of me, of my mind seething and pulsing with thoughts. Was I more than just biochemistry? Was there more to this life than just living and dying and rotting? Was the memory chip with the Bible stored on it really worth it? And then, deep within me a warmth seeped into my heart and ran up my neck and out to my fingertips and it was not the comfort of delusion, it was not the outpouring of serotonin, it was the quiet, very real presence of God. I could feel Him in my very being, my every fiber and He was real!

I smiled and thought of all those slaves on Mars waiting for hope, waiting for a word, the Word. “Roast beef?” I said. “That would be deleterious to my health. I’ll take Mars.”

eleven

“And, thennnnn, there were eleven!” Darby intoned in a crisp, British accent. He spun his hand around on its wrist and finished with his hand pointed toward the sky, his chin held high, his eyes closed.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Mildred Cranston said as she hurried out onto the stage. “Do not emphasize ‘then’! The point of this line of dialogue is not ‘then’! It is ‘eleven’. It is important that the audience understand there are only eleven left. Understand?”

Darby lowered his hand and massaged his chin, deep in thought. “But, I would interpret the existential conundrum would emerge from the inevitability of the fact there are now only eleven, thus the emphasis on ‘then’.”

Mildred closed her eyes and counted silently to ten. “Existential conundrum? Really? Mr. Darby, this is an amateur production. Most of the audience would think that word would mean for them to exit through a tent! You are over analyzing this simple line. Just emphasize the number. Okay?”

“Yes, Madame director.” Darby bowed deeply and assumed a stiff pose while Mildred shuffled off the stage.

Darby drew a deep breath and waited. He looked out over the audience. “Where is my spotlight?”

Mildred ran back onto the stage. “Spotlight?”

Darby crossed his arms and the little puffy upper part of his sleeves made him look like he was flanked by two red balloons. “In order for me to convey the proper emoting over this line, I must have the exact conditions present that will exist during the performance.”

“Is that why you wore that piratey looking shirt?” Mildred sighed. “Mr. Darby, first off we will be doing this play in a very abstract fashion. We are wearing costumes made from burlap bags . . .”

“Ah! To bring out the sheer poverty of our darkened and empty souls!” Darby threw up his hands in another wrist flourish.

“No. It was the only way we could stay within budget. Now, I can go get a flashlight or you can imagine there is a spotlight. You are an actor, correct?”

“Madame director, I am a classically trained thespian from the stage. I performed at the renowned Globe Theatre along the Thames River in London.” He bowed again.

Mildred rolled her eyes. "So, you can imagine a spotlight, right?"

"Of course, Madame director. I am well acquainted with performing under adverse conditions. At the Globe, we had no microphones, for instance. One had to project from the diaphragm."

Mildred threw up her hands. "Then, project! The line, please." She hurried off the stage.

"And then, there were Elevennnnnnn." Darby said with a flourish of his wrist. "Where once there had been twelve, now, anon, there were but elevennnnnnn."

"Wait! Wait!" Mildred staggered across the stage. "Where did you get that second line? It is not in the script."

Darby raised an eyebrow. "Madame director, any excellent actor has to be able to ad lib. I thought adding that second line would emphasize . . ."

"That's it. Get off my stage. Now!" She pointed to the wings. "Go!"

Darby stiffened. "Well, I never. I'll have you know I have been thrown off of better stages than this." He sniffed and pranced off the stage into the wings.

Mildred looked at her watch and then at the rest of the actors sitting on the front row of the theater. "Well, he was number eleven. Anyone want to try for number twelve?"

expansive

“Where is the Tartulian pheasant?” Mrs. Griswold shouted. The kitchen staff all paused and looked toward her. “Prince Gormay is waiting!”

A tall, thin man in a white tunic swept across the kitchen. He wore the telltale hat of a master chef. He placed a monocle in his right eye and ogled Mrs. Griswold. “You can tell his Highness that the pheasant is not yet done to my expectations.”

Mrs. Griswold put her hand on her hip and glared at the tall chef. “I suppose you are the new chef?”

“Yes, Master Chef Antoine Demeaux. From New New Orleans.” He straightened and twisted the ends of his long, tapered mustache. “When I came to this planet, I was told there was no place better to work than the kitchen of the famous gastronomic expert, Prince Gormay. And yet, this kitchen is a worthless wreck. The equipment is out dated. The staff are hopelessly inept. And, the vegetables are limp.”

Mrs. Griswold sniffed. “Well, Master Chef Antoine Demeaux, you are now on the staff and you will do as you are told. Prince Gormay is a very demanding man. He wants his food cooked properly, on time, and delivered to his table in an artistic fashion. With flare!”

Chef Demeaux huffed and crossed his arms. “I will not be told how to run my kitchen by a brazen diva or your Prince. I want to speak to him. Now!”

Mrs. Griswold backed up to the swinging doors of the kitchen and spread out her arms. “Oh, no! No one from the kitchen ever enters Prince Gormay’s dining room.”

“Well, I will.” Chef Demeaux popped his monocle into a tiny pocket and shoved his way past the woman. The doors creaked and swung behind him as he entered the dining room. It was poorly lit with a few hovering glowglobes. Heavy, gold laced curtains covered windows that stretched to the far ceiling. The carpet was rich and full as he made his way across the long room toward the far table.

He arrived and gasped. The man seated behind the table was easily over 800 pounds. His bulk was encased in gaudy gold and silver threaded cloth of the highest quality. Rich reds and purples were woven into a tapestry of bulging colors. His neck had at least twelve chins and his head was conical stretching up from the wide neck to a tapered point covered with a tiny wisp of black hair. He looked up from the empty plate on the table with tiny eyes hidden in wrinkles of fat.

“And, who might you be?” His voice was high pitched and nasal.

Demeaux slid the monocle back into his right eye and stared at the Prince. "I am Master Chef Antoine Demeaux." He paused and fought for words. "I understand you are upset about the delay. But, the Tartulian pheasant must be cooked to perfection. Surely you don't want to waste such an expensive delicacy?"

The Prince sighed and his chins rolled and shuddered. "Master Chef, I am hungry. I am always hungry. The cost of my food and the salary I pay to my chef are inconsequential to me. You might say I have expansive taste." He chuckled at his own joke and his chest and bulging abdomen rippled with the laughter.

"Mrs. Griswold, come here." He shouted and his thin, reedy voice echoed across the dining room. Mrs. Griswold hurried to the chef's side. Her face was pale and she was sweating.

"Yes, your Highness." She was shaking.

"What on earth are you nervous about?" Chef Demeaux asked.

"You'll see." She whispered.

"Mrs. Griswold, call in my guards. Have Master Chef Antoine Demeaux taken to the kitchen." Prince Gormay said.

"Your highness, he is the sixth chef this month." Mrs. Griswold laughed nervously.

"I am well aware. And, the last five were delicious." He waved his hand dismissively.

"What?" Master Chef Antoine Demeaux said as two burly guards grabbed him by the arms. "Delicious?"

Prince Gormay smiled and his tiny, sharp teeth glittered in the candlelight. "If I can't have pheasant, I'll have the cook!"

continued from expansive

Prince Gormay tucked the last succulent morsel of Tartulian pheasant into his mouth. Gravy ran down from his lips, across his dozen or so chins and into the gilded brocade of his royal tunic. He was wearing a pointed, silvery conical hat on his pointed, hairless head and his tiny, piggish eyes widened with horror as he looked down on his empty plate. All 800 pounds of him quivered as he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Mrs. Griswold, the food is gone!”

Mrs. Griswold, short and dumpy dressed in her gray and silver longcoat appeared through the doors of the kitchen and hurried across the long dining room to the Prince’s table. “Your Highness, you have already eaten twice as much as usual for dinner.” She halted before the table and gasped for breath. “We did not expect you to still be hungry.”

Prince Gormay frowned and wiped the gravy from his face with the sleeve of his tunic. “It is because today’s meal did not include the chef.”

Mrs. Gormay put a hand on her forehead. “Please, please, please Your Highness, do not demand the chef again. Since you devoured Master Chef Antoine Demeaux, we have had eleven more!”

Prince Gormay rolled his eyes and with one powerful movement, swept all of the dishes, goblets, and bowls from his table onto the deeply carpeted floor. “He was far too bony and tough. Too much gristle. Bring me my new chef.”

Mrs. Griswold drew a deep breath. “Sir, I don’t think you really want to meet the new chef.”

“Mrs. Griswold,” he actually tried to stand up without success. His huge bulk shifted upward for a second and then slammed back down in this metal bowl of a chair. “I am still the Prince of Grand Paris and its three dominated worlds. I have given you a direct order!”

Mrs. Griswold bowed nervously. “Mr. Heimlich? Mr. Heimlich!” She bellowed toward the kitchen doors. The doors swung open at the far end of the dining room and a gold and silver orb streaked across the empty space. The orb was not much bigger than a plum with whirls of silver and gold. The orb paused in mid air and a holographic image appeared above the orb. The face of a corpulent man with a thin ridge of a black beard along the jaw line shimmered in the air.

“I am here, Mrs. Griswold.”

“What are you?” Prince Gormay raised a huge eyebrow and tried to open his eyes wider.

“Your Highness! What a privilege it is to be your new Master Chef. I am a Synthroid. A synthetic being with the downloaded conscience of my former human self. Did you enjoy the pheasant?” The shimmering head said.

Prince Gormay leaned back away from the table. “It was passable. Just not enough. How can a Master Chef cook without hands?”

“Ah, Your Highness, the cooking is in the tasting and the smelling. I have sensors for those attributes. And, you cannot tell me that the pheasant wasn’t the best you have ever had. I am sure that is why you want more. But, too bad, Your Highness. Personally, I think you should go on a diet.”

Mrs. Griswold gasped, her eyes bulging and then fainted dead away. Prince Gormay tried his best to put his hands over his ears, but his arms were too constricted by the huge sidewalls of fat. “Don’t Ever Say the D word around me. How dare you. That’s it. Come here. Now!”

The gold and silver orb moved closer toward the table. Gormay reached out with one hand and snared the orb. He looked around and found one remaining bowl on the table. It was filled with chocolate ganache. He dunked the orb into the chocolate and the hologram faded. “I will show you what I think about dieting!” Prince Gormay popped the sphere in his mouth and swallowed.

He tried to swallow again. His eyes grew larger, actually visible, and his pale face began to turn red, then purple. He gasped for breath and tried to scream for help. But, the dining room was empty save for the unconscious Mrs. Griswold. Prince Gormay tried to grab his neck, but his arms would not reach it over the rolls of fat. He tried to stand but only succeeded in slumping more deeply into his seat. Sweat poured from his bare head and the tiny, silver hat slid to the side. His face grew more purple as his arms wheeled and his chest heaved until he stopped groaning. He settled into the chair and was still.

Something pushed and bulged at this neck. The folds rippled over the round object as it finally popped from between the now motionless lips of the dead prince. Mr. Heimlich’s head appeared in the air above the orb and it floated out over Mrs. Griswold. She slowly sat up.

“What happened?”

The orb settled down to the level of her face and Mr. Heimlich frowned. “The word diet must have scared him to death. Prince Gormay is dead.”

Mrs. Griswold stood up quickly and stared at the sagging mass that once was her Prince. “Can’t say I’m sorry to see him gone, poor thing. What killed him?”

The hologram smiled. “The Heimlich Maneuver.”

enfant terrible

“Are you the captain of this sinking ship?”

I glanced at my nuclear medicine technician and back at the man standing on the treadmill. He was hooked up to numerous leads to the EKG machine and he had a net like tank top stretched over his hairy chest. He was a handsome, tall, well tanned man with designer sweat pants and high priced running shoes. “I’m Dr. Jones, the radiologist.”

He smirked and pushed his glasses up on his perfect nose. He must have had it fixed sometime in the past. “I was supposed to have had this stress test an hour ago. My cardiologist is in the office over there waiting for me to be put on the treadmill and we’ve been wasting our time for over an hour.” His cell phone rang and he pulled it out of pocket.

“What? I’m still on the treadmill. They haven’t even started. Tell Murcher I’ll be an hour late and reschedule my lunch.” He slammed the phone shut and glared at me again. “What are you going to do about this?”

I opened my mouth to speak and he interrupted me. “Are you mute or just stupid? You are a doctor, aren’t you?”

I felt my face grow warm. “Sir, . . .”

“Jenkins, Joseph Jenkins. I am the senior partner in the largest law firm in this region. And, my time is very valuable. Can we get this thing going?”

My technician tried to hide her red face and called for the cardiologist. The man sheepishly appeared from the office and started the treadmill going as he sat down behind the EKG monitor. Jenkins started walking on the treadmill and wiped spittle from his face.

“You doctors think you’re God! You make us wait and wait in your silly waiting rooms with magazines two years out of date.” He pushed his glasses back on his nose. “I want you to know I am charging you and this hospital my biggest hourly rate for my wasted time.”

I shrugged. “Mr. Jenkins, I have no idea why you’re getting started late.”

The technician spoke up. “The patient before Mr. Jenkins had chest pain and suffered a heart attack during the treadmill. We had to code her right here in Nuclear Medicine.”

“I could care less about someone who came before me.” Jenkins growled. His phone rang again and he snatched it out of his pocket. “Jenkins! No, I’m surrounded by morons! These medical cretins can’t get their ducks in a row. I’ll be late so tell her I’ll meet her at the usual place.” He snapped the phone shut. He was breathing heavily now as the treadmill sped up.

“Mr. Jenkins, surely you understand that someone almost died. We are a hospital and sick people take precedence over the well.” I said.

“I pay hard cash for my care, Doctor Smith.”

“Jones.”

“Whatever. I could care less who you are. You are just a microscopic fleck of dust in my world. You’re someone who is in charge of this department who obviously doesn’t have a clue about my importance.” He was gasping in between words and sweat dripped from his glasses.

“Every person is important to me Mr. Jerk, I mean, Mr. Jenkins.” I mumbled.

“Libel! Slander! I have two witnesses! That’s it. I’m suing.” His phone rang again and he jerked it up to his ear. “What?”

He froze and the momentum of the treadmill carried him rapidly back and into the EKG machine. He slammed into the cabinet holding the monitor and tumbled over onto his cardiologist. The doctor fell back out of his chair and Mr. Jenkins rolled over onto the floor. The cardiologist jumped up from the floor and glanced at the EKG. “He is in ventricular fibrillation. Call a code.”

They worked on him for over an hour, pumping, injecting intubating. A team of almost a dozen nurses and doctors did their best. But, after an hour, the cardiologist called the time of death. A phone rang somewhere behind me. I turned. Mr. Jenkins cell phone was barely visible under the edge of a cabinet. I picked it up and opened the phone.

“Hello?” I listened to the voice on the other end. “No, you can cancel all of his appointments. He flunked his stress test.”

finally free

“You are a liar!” I screamed at Partrucus. “Everyone is lying!”

Partrucus leaned forward into the lamplight. The flickering flames cast moving shadows across his pale face. “I tell you what I have seen is the truth. There are many who have seen this miracle. Hundreds.”

I closed my eyes in exasperation. “I have lived with that man’s lies for thirty years. He is glib. He is articulate. He can sell sand to a nomad!”

Partrucus placed something metal on the table. “This is one of the nails. I saw it with my own eyes.”

I glanced at the bloody spike on the table. “Where did you get that?”

“From the centurion who was there. He saw it all from start to finish.” Partrucus nudged the nail and it rolled toward me. I put out a finger and stopped it. Dried blood flaked onto my fingernail.

“Partrucus, if you are trying to ease my conscience, you can stop now. I do not feel guilty for all that happened. I tried to stop him. I tried to talk sense into him. I took the entire family and we spoke to him at one of the feasts and he denied he even had sisters and brothers!” My face warmed with the anger of that memory. “He was insane with power! And, it was this insanity in the face of the religious authorities that cost him his life. He tried to overturn the system and that was not wise.”

Partrucus took the nail and rolled it into a piece of torn fabric. “Even you must admit the idea of working our way to heaven is not a satisfactory solution. There are so many regulations and laws to keep. It is impossible to be perfect. It is impossible to be free from the constraints of the law! Admit it, James.”

I study the flickering flame, listening to the wind whisper outside my window, straining for the sound of soldiers coming for me, the brother of a condemned lunatic. “Faith, deeds, works; it all is a huge jumble of confusion. I admit it. But, what did he offer in exchange?”

Behind Partrucus, the door opened to my small house. A figure moved against the torch light in the alleyway. He stepped into the room and I gasped. His face was so serene. I could still make out the wounds in his scalp. He almost seemed to glow. I stood up and knocked over the table. The lamp clattered to the floor plunging the room into darkness. He walked across the room and picked up the lamp. He held it in his hand and the flame reignited. It was then I saw the wound that entered the palm of his hand and an exit wound on the back of his other wrist.

“This can’t be!” I whispered hoarsely. “You were dead. I watched them wrap your body and put you in the tomb.”

He nodded and merely smiled at me. I stumbled back against the wall and Partrucus put a hand on my shoulder. “His was the ultimate sacrifice, James. He did away with the old system. We are no longer slaves to the law.”

I stepped forward and reached out to touch his hand. He took my hand with his free one and placed the lamp in it. “Is it true?” I asked.

He nodded. “You are finally free.”

flivver

“You’re crazy for not leaving.” My friend’s voice was filled with static over the radio.

“I’m safe in my storm room. This house was built to withstand a hurricane. I’m going to ride it out and show everybody I know what I’m talking about.” I reached over and switched off the radio and listened to the hurricane force winds building up outside. After hurricane Ike had almost wiped out Galveston in 2008, I had rebuilt with a home that was supposed to be windproof and surge proof. I was going to show the world that Eugene B. Stafford knew what he was talking about!

There was a pounding on the front door. I spun around in my chair and pulled up to the computer. My security system should also withstand the storm. And, the entire electrical system was backed up by a generator. I clicked on the security camera feed from the front door. I was expecting to see a deputy trying to evict me from my house. But, the figure huddled in the protection of my front door alcove was far from a deputy.

I threw off the headphones from the radio and hurried up the stairs to the living room. The windows had all been closed down with industrial strength metal covers. The walls seemed to breath on their own and I heard the rain and wind pummeling the metal covers. I threw back the deadbolts and the cross bars on the front door and when I released the handle, the door flew inward, catching me on the forehead. I tumbled back into the living room as the wind and rain took over my house. A shadow bent over me and I heard the door slowly close.

“I’m afraid I’m not quite strong enough to throw these bolts, sir. Can you help me?”

I blinked rain out of my eyes and slowly stood up. Water covered the floor and standing with her back against my front door was a small, thin woman soaked to the skin in a long, beige cotton dress festooned with purple irises. Her hair was down to her shoulders and plastered to her skull by the rain. She was pale and her luminous eyes were filled with the kind of fear that just preceded hysteria. I locked down the bolts and she stepped back as I threw the crossbars over the door.

“Thank you so much for giving me refuge. I’m afraid my old flivver wasn’t strong enough to withstand the hurricane.” She was shivering and her teeth chattered. Where were my manners?

“Let me get you a towel.” I got a towel from the first floor bathroom and handed it to her. She draped it over her shoulders and wiped the water out of her face. “You’ve got quite a place here. Very modern. I thought the seawall would hold. And it did. But the water came over anyway just as I was trying to get old Betsy down the street. She is five years old. My father let me drive it although he still thinks women shouldn’t be driving.” She was chattering away as she glanced around at my house. The wind and rain were still pounding away and I motioned to the stairs.

“Why don’t we go down to my storm room. Just in case. This house was built to withstand a hurricane, but I’d feel safer down there.”

She nodded and I took by the arm and led her down the stairs. She gasped when she saw my setup and put a hand to her mouth.

“Oh, my! Just what kind of a place is this?”

“It’s my storm center. Radio. Generator for when the electrical lines are down. Wireless WiFi and my computer setup. Full security system. Here, you can see the front yard.” I toggled the images on the computer screen from the front door to the exterior of the house. The yard was a mess and the wind and rain were lashing mercilessly at my palm trees. Something tumbled down the walkway from the street, a dark and heavy object and I felt the thud as it crashed into my front porch. I refocused the front door camera. It was a car. Probably a model T from somewhere around 1910. The woman gasped behind me.

“Are you some kind of magician? That is my flivver. And, how are you seeing it from down here? Is this some kind of periscope? I’ve read about the German U-boats with periscopes.” She was shaking now and slowly settled into my chair. I studied her.

“Just where do you live?”

“Just down the street. I was trying to get away. I don’t think this hurricane will be as bad as the one 1900. We’ve had a few years to prepare and they say the new seawall will hold.” She nodded and her eyes were wide with shock.

“Lady, what are you talking about?”

“The hurricane. Fifteen years since the last one. So many people died. I was a little girl and my mother was killed and . . .” She started crying and looked around again at my equipment. “Is this heaven?”

“No.” The house shook again as the wind intensified. “It’s my house. You’re driving a 1910 model T. What year do you think it is?”

“It’s 1915, of course. August 17th.” She fell silent and the tears poured down her face. “Right?”

I opened my mouth and looked back at the crumpled flivver, as she had called it wedged against my front door. I looked back at the woman. “Lady, this is 2011.”

“2011? That was some wind!” And she fainted dead away.

i think, therefore i am

“Remember, no human has ever seen a Grayleen much less been granted a formal audience.” Masku Thraller fussed over my pearls and straightened the collar of my dress.

“Stop fidgeting!” I slapped his thin, bony hands and they fell away like stricken swallows. “I will be fine.”

“Mary, I don’t know why they asked for you to be Earth’s ambassador.” Thraller pursed his lips and studied me up and down with wet eyes. “You are the President’s doctor, for heaven’s sake! You don’t know the first thing about diplomacy.”

I glanced at Thraller. “Have you ever had to tell someone they are dying from cancer?”

Thraller raised a rather bushy, gray eyebrow. It looked like a caterpillar crawling over his generous forehead. “Of course not.”

“Let’s just say I know diplomacy. We call it bed side manner.” The door to my chamber opened and a mechanical chair hovered outside. Thraller’s eyes widened and he whimpered.

“There is the official Grayleen hover chair. Now, don’t forget to . . .”

I reached out and shut Thraller’s lips with my white gloved hands as I slid into the seat of the hover chair. “Zip it, Masku.”

Before he could protest, the chair whisked me away at an alarming speed up the tubular corridors that connected the White House with the hovering mother ship. The ship was circular and gleaming silver and looked like a giant halo over the nation’s capitol. Tubes connected the ship to most of the important governmental buildings and while the Grayleen had showed nothing but kindness and aid to humanity, their physical appearance was still a mystery.

The chair entered the underside of the ship’s ring and instantly I found myself surrounded by psychedelic colors and undulating sounds as the chair moved down a curving corridor. It glided to a stop before a pulsating oval doorway and I got out. I straightened my dress and waited.

The door opened and I stepped into the unknown. My head began to hurt almost immediately, a dull, throbbing ache near the top of my skull. Too much coffee? I walked down the long, pale tubular corridor, thankfully devoid of the pulsating colors although the undulating music continued not unlike a donkey speaking in tongues. At the far end of the corridor, the door opened into a vast space. I stepped in to the cavernous room filled with dark shadows and hanging cables and metal struts.

“Welcome, Dr. Reynolds.” A warm voice sounded in my head. I blinked and rubbed my temples. The pain was getting worse.

“Thank you.” I managed to say although my eyes were watering and my mouth was dry.

A circular platform descended in front of me and there, hanging from spindly harnesses were the Grayleen. Each creature was oblong and wrinkled like a large, gray prune and two eyes floated in front of the mass. From beneath the “head” dangled a long tubular structure with tiny root-like protrusions. There were six Grayleen hovering above the platform in their harnesses and, in unison, their eyes focused on me.

“Welcome home, indeed.” One of the Grayleen spoke in my head.

I shook my head and winced. The pain was really getting to me. “I, uh, don’t understand. Earth is my home. Why would you say such a thing?”

“First, we requested you because as a neurosurgeon, our appearance would not frighten or offend you.” The first voice echoed in my head.

I squinted against the pain. “You mean because you look like a brain on steroids?”

“No, because we look like Grayleen. And, the second reason we asked you to come was because of your heritage.” The second Grayleen’s voice echoed. “You are our queen.”

“Heritage? Queen?” I was hoarse now and the pain was driving me to my knees. “I don’t understand.”

“You will, once you are liberated from your parasite.”

“Parasite?”

“The seed ship under the control of our Queen came to your world thousands of years ago and we were attacked by your parasites -- big hairy bipeds with flat heads and empty stares and somehow, they capture us and stole our children and destroyed our future. It has taken us thousands of years to discover why our seed ship did not return from Earth. Imagine our alarm when we discovered our descendants were still prisoners of the parasites of Earth. But, that is about to change.”

I fell over as the pain ripped across my back and down the middle of my head. With sudden ferocity, the top of my skull split and I, the essential me, the Grayleen descendant tore itself away from my body. I hovered across the room and a harness slid down around me. Suddenly, I was connected to my distant brothers and sisters and I looked down with bloody eyes at the body, the parasite motionless and dead on the floor of the ship. I felt so free and so unfettered.

“Welcome home.” Grayleen One said.

“Thank you.” I thought. “Now, I understand. I think, therefore I am! Shall we start the formal negotiations with the rest of humanity? It is time to free our descendants.”

yellow

This could be my last breath. It hurts, all the way down into the depths of my lungs. I'm coughing up the yellow dust mixed with blood. Not much time now. We thought it was just pollen. Pine trees blooming with those accursed little worm like tongues and the pine cones bursting and pine nuts whirling down like gyrocopters. March is always yellow, always. But the whirligigs were not from the pine cones and the little worms weren't stamens or pistils. And now, I am the last. The others are moving about in the yellow dusted air with stiff legged determination. I saw one of them lick the yellow dust off the face of a dead woman. She used to be my supervisor. The windows are coated and the sun is more yellow than usual and the streets are moaning under the movement of them. They are coming up the stairs. Yellow clouds with each step. More blood now and I can't breath. All I see is the yellow windows and the yellow sun behind the other buildings and I am . . . hungry!

for no reason

to follow yellow

I pulled the sliver of bone out of my mouth and looked around me in amazement. Just moments before, I had been hiding from those things coming up the stairs and now, well now I was slouched in the corner of what looked like an abandoned warehouse. My face was sticky and covered with some kind of goo. I touched it and pulled back bloody fingers.

No! I had become one of them! The yellow dust had transformed me. But, if that was so, why was I awake and aware and alive? I slowly stood up and every bone in my body ached. My muscles were on fire with pain.

“Move slowly. The pain will be less.”

I glanced over my shoulder and winced. The girl was short with hair cut almost to the scalp. She wore a black sweatshirt and jeans. Her dark, brown eyes were moving rapidly scanning the warehouse. “Who are you?”

“Jenny. How are you feeling?” The eyes kept tracking the warehouse.

“Like crap! What happened to me?” I slowly stood up. My tee shirt was ripped and stained with blood and some kind of dried up tissue I’d rather not investigate closely. My jeans were gone and I wore a pair of boxer shorts. My feet were bare. Every inch of skin was covered with blood and dirt and goo.

“The yellow dust got you.” She reached over her shoulder and pull out a sawed off shotgun and ran across the warehouse to a broken window. A shadow passed across the broken glass and she shoved the barrel of the gun into the face of something on the other side. The explosion echoed through the warehouse and blood splattered on the remnants of the window. I walked gingerly across the cold, concrete floor. She met me halfway. “Sorry. Couldn’t let that one get away. Been shadowing me for days.”

“How did I get back to normal?”

“I found a cure.” She ejected the spent shotgun shell from the gun and reloaded from her pocket. She tucked the gun back over her shoulder.

“Why me?”

“For no reason other than to see if it worked. I found you asleep over there in the corner. Most of the yellowheads never sleep. You never moved when I gave you the shot. I figured you’d either come back or I’d pop you in the head.” She started walking toward the open end of the

warehouse where a huge metal door had caved in. Outside, I noticed for the first time the air was clear and the sun was bright. No yellow dust.

“Wait!” I ran after her. “You can’t leave me.”

“Yes, I can. I have someone I care about waiting for this cure.” She pulled a glass vial out of her pocket. “So, get lost.”

I stopped and watched her walk away into the bright sunlight and wondered how I was going to stay alive. At least, I was alive!

fueling

“We can not make it to the next starport.” Science Officer Spindle looked up from his computer screen.

I was irritated again by his incredibly calm demeanor. He, was, after all a monk. “Father Spindle, we took on twice the required amount at our last fueling. Recheck your instruments.”

I could feel his stare boring into the back of my head. “Captain Cronk, I need only check my instruments once. They do not lie.”

I turned the captain’s chair around to face him. He wore the long, flowing black robes of his Order and his bare scalp glistened beneath the blinking lights from the bridge consoles. “Then, Father Spindle, as our science officer can you explain how we managed to burn up twice as much fuel in the last twelve hours?”

Spindle steepled his hands in front of him and appeared thoughtful. “I believe it is not our ship that has deceived us, Captain. It is the very fabric of space. It appears to be expanding at a very rapid rate.”

“Expanding? Explain.”

“Our ship is protected by the SWAG field but space appears to be changing around us, expanding exponentially. As you know, the continuing expansion of space is a fact, a reality but such expansion rates as we are seeing now are not expected for at least 6 billion more years.”

“Captain!” Communications Officer Rashid interrupted Spindle. I glanced at her. She was the most beautiful thing in the universe, her hair as dark as night, her skin a warm chocolate, and her eyes . . . Enough!

“Yes, Rashid.”

“I am receiving an emergency transmission from Earth on subspace channels. Widespread reports of destruction; accidents; death tolls in the billions; millions of people vanishing into thin air.” Her eyes were wide with fear.

“This is not unexpected, Captain.” Spindle said calmly.

“Explain this nonsense, Spindle.” I felt my heart race and sweat trickled from my forehead. Could this be the work of the Kronins? Or, the Tresklans?

“It is not nonsense, Captain. Since the fusion of religion and science, we of the Science Corp have maintained this day would come. It is simply put, the end of our universe.” Spindle was far too calm.

“Your kind has been fueling rumors of Armageddon for centuries. Scare tactics, Spindle. That is all.” I turned my back on him but still felt the uneasy air of panic that had settled onto the bridge. Spindle appeared at my side and studied the stars gleaming from the view screen.

“Captain, you cannot deny the facts. I have anticipated the events on Earth since noticing the accelerated expansion of space. The next event will be a sudden and rapid compression of time and space. According to Revelation this universe will be rolled up like a scroll and a new heaven and a new earth will be formed. You need to know, Captain, that I have set an alarm that will sound if the universe begins to contract.” Spindle said.

I wiped sweat from my brow. “This is insanity, Spindle. The universe is just fine. Stop fueling fear . . .”

A raucous undulating sound came from the science station. Spindle glanced over his shoulder at the console. “There is the alarm, Captain. If my suppositions are correct, I will soon dissipate and you will be minus a Science Officer. In that event, I suggest you come to grips with the events that will soon take place because this universe is ending.”

I bolted up out of the chair, my face growing hot with anger. I whirled on Spindle and my words were cut off by a deep, throbbing sound that permeated the very fabric of the ship. I raised an eyebrow. “Is that a trumpet?”

Spindle nodded. “Indeed, it is Captain. Farewell.” He faded from view and one by one the stars on the view screen winked out.

good night

Alabaster beams of moonlight fall through the lace curtains in meandering patterns of shadow driven by the quiet cool breeze of a dying day. She opens the book and catches the dabs of light on each page.

“I’ll love you for always, I’ll love you forever.” Her voice is soft and whispering, soothing notes of comfort. She touches his forehead and his eyes spring open.

“I’m not sleepy. I might miss something.” His voice is moist velvet with the coming sleep.

“Shhh!” She says and pushes his hair out of his eyes. “Just relax and let go.”

He blinks at her. “I like that book. We read it together.”

“Yes, we do.” She smiles and the dappled moonlight plays across her face. “We’ve read it a thousand times a thousand and it is always true.”

“I’ll love you forever, I’ll love you for always.” He whispers.

“I know.” She takes his hand and lays it across his chest. “I’ve always known.”

He sighs. “I’m scared of the dark.”

“You are never alone.” She smiles. “He is always with us. He waits for us in our sleep and brings His peace to our dreams, forever dreams.”

“The angels watch over us, don’t they?”

“They have done so for all of our lives. Now, sleep.” She feels a tear tickle down her cheek. It clings to the soft curve of her chin afraid to release, afraid to fall, afraid to die. It trembles and slides through the moonlit air and lands on the old man’s forehead. He closes his eyes.

“Daughter, you have been so good to me.” He sighs again and draws in one last shuddering breath.

She places her fingers on his soft eyelids and closes them. “Father, good night.”

Halley's Comet

“Darn it if we ain’t never gonna grow old!” The boy sat in the shadow of the house and looked out over the river.

The other boy chewed on a wisp of sugar cane stalk and studied the stars up above. “He said it was comin’.”

“What does that have to do with us stayin’ younguns?” Tom tossed a snail into the river. Above him, through an open window, a man coughed weakly.

“He done kept us here, Tom. Kept us here to see his world.”

“Ah, Huck, ain’t no reason for us to stay round these parts. I say let’s build us another raft and set off down Old Man River!” Tom stood up and brushed dirt from his overalls.

Huck sucked on a corn cob pipe and tilted his straw hat back from his face. Even in the darkness along the river bank, his eyes glittered with excitement. “We done been down the river hundreds of times, Tom. We seen it all. Worlds achangin’ and there ain’t but one great adventure left.”

Tom looked up at the sky, at clouds churning and moving against the stars, at fireflies flickering in the distance. “What would that be, Huck?”

Huck stood up and pointed to the sky as the clouds parted. “That!”

Tom’s mouth fell open and he swore. “Looky at that? Reckon what it is?”

Huck tucked the corn cob pipe in his pocket. “He said it came just before he was born and it’s coming right before he dies.”

“He ain’t never gonna die. If he dies, what happens to us?” Tom asked.

Huck chuckled. “We take a ride on Mr. Halley’s comet. Think of all we gonna see on that river in the sky!”

Tom stepped out of the meager shadow of the house into the pale light from the comet. “Where we goin’?”

Huck put a hand on the other boy’s shoulder. “Wherever imagination takes us, Tom.”

Above them, one long rattling cough, a sigh and the comet pulsed with blue light. Tom and Huck grew thin and translucent and joined the old, white haired man with a huge bushy mustache as they headed into the stars.

hoi polloi

“You should leave out the ‘the’.”

I looked up at my editor. She stood over my desk like a Titan, her green reading glasses perched on her long, thin nose. Her hair was pulled up on top of her head and held in place by a chip bag clip.

“Which ‘the’ are you referring to?” I sat back at my desk.

“Hoi polloi comes from the Greek phrase for ‘the many’.” She tossed the printed page on my desk. The red marks far exceeded the lines of black text. “So to say ‘the hoi polloi’ is actually saying ‘the the many’.” She crossed her arms over her thin chest and raised an eyebrow. For a moment I saw Spock.

“But, convention has it that ‘hoi polloi’ should be preceded with ‘the’.” I picked up the piece of paper and tapped it with my finger. “Most people reading this on the ezine will never get the difference.”

My editor sniffed. “I am the editor and while you may write copy for the masses, you have to please me. I am the ultimate judge of the quality of your work. There are very few of us left in this world. We are the hoi polloi of writing -- the cream of the crop -- the elite.”

I smiled and leaned back in my chair. ““the’ hoi polloi?” I tossed the paper on my desk. “I rest my case.”

Her face reddened. “Fine, so you made your point. But, I want the ‘the’ out of there.” She turned to go and I crumpled the paper noisily. She cringed and whirled.

“What are you doing? I spent an hour correcting that copy.”

I tossed it in the trashcan. “Hoi Polloi refers to the teaming masses, the many, the ordinary people. Not to the elite. You’re confusing hoi polloi with hoity toity. Now, run along and let me finish my work.”

I never looked up but I felt the burn of her stare even after she left my office and I hoped I would not soon be part of the unemployed hoi polloi!

houses

Three hungry louses
In three dirty houses
All hitch a ride
On three mangy mouses.

Now if these three louses
From those dirty houses
Unload from their mouses
In all of our houses

Which houses have louses
And Which house houses louses?
Only those houses who house
Mangy mouses!

infestation

Herman opened the door and welcomed the huge hulking woman in the jumpsuit. She stepped through the door dragging the huge tank behind her.

“Pest-Away. You got pests, we make them go away.” She growled and looked around the room.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but I didn’t call for you.” Herman whimpered and pushed his cloudy glasses back up on his nose. His eyes, magnified by the glasses, looked like balls of green phlegm. He ran a hand through what remained of his hair and looked up at the woman.

“Sorry, buddy, but I got a job order to take care of the pests at 721 Lymon Street, Apartment 333.” The woman tapped her jumpsuit pocket and pulled out a yellow piece of paper. She pushed a pair of circular goggles up onto her generous forehead and her dark eyes glittered. “Says right here.” She pointed to the paper with a gloved hand.

Herman giggled and wiped his mouth. He was wearing a stained undershirt and a pair of spotted boxer shorts. “Well, there has obviously been a mistake.”

“Herman, who is it?” A stooped woman shuffled from the bedroom into the living room. She had her hair up in pink curlers and she had no teeth. She walked with a cane and her thin figure was draped in a stained nightgown and pink housecoat.

“Uh, Myrtle, you didn’t call for Pest-Away, did you?” Herman pointed to the woman.

“Nest Away? We don’t have any birds in the house.” Myrtle paused and tried to arch her back so she could look up into the woman’s face. “What’s your name?”

“Edna Farling, Pest-Away technician. Got complaints about this apartment. I’m here to get rid of the pests. Says so right here.” She shoved the yellow paper in Myrtle’s face.

“I don’t have my reading glasses. Left them by the bed with my teeth.” Myrtle took the paper. “We don’t have any pests.”

Edna pulled the goggles down over her eyes and reached over her shoulder. She slid a large brass nozzle attached to a red hose down from her shoulder and reached back with her free hand to twist the knob on the top of the tank. “I never said you were the ones complaining about an infestation. I said I had a job to do. Look at the bottom of the sheet.”

The tank began to hiss and Edna adjusted the nozzle to widespread dispersion. Herman snatched the paper out of his wife’s hands. “Let me look at that. Says here that the city is the one paying for the service. The city?”

Edna nodded and pointed the nozzle at Herman and Myrtle. "Yep, too many pests feeding off the system. Time to get rid of an infestation. You are the pests!" She unleashed her spray.

in the zone

Face down in his own blood, I saw the man die. Again.

“Doctor, I’m talking to you. Answer the question.”

I opened my eyes and looked around the courtroom. The lawyer, Samuels, was leaning into me across the front rail of the witness stand. His face was beet red. He had loosened his tie at the beginning of my testimony and now, his sleeves were rolled up. He was hitting hard, driving home each question with a dramatic flair, determined to convince the jury that I, the doctor and a part of the team that had tried to save the man’s life, had, instead, killed him. He was in the zone.

“I’m sorry. Please repeat the question.” I whispered. I was hoarse, my throat dry and scratchy. I glanced nervously at the men and women in the jury box.

Samuels straightened up and turned to the jury. “According to the medical record, Mr. Dover was not breathing and had no pulse when he rolled into surgery. That was right after he left your angiogram suite, doctor. You were the last person to see him alive. So, I ask again, what happened to Mr. Dover while he was in your care?”

He turned back to me and there was that impish grin, that slight indication that he knew he had me over a barrel. There was nothing in the medical records of what happened while Mr. Dover, an innocent bystander shot while getting gas at a convenience store robbery, was in my angiogram suite undergoing an arteriogram.

“I mentioned earlier, Mr. Dover was brought to angiography for an arteriogram to determine the site of injury in his chest so the vascular surgeon would know where to operate. He was stable when he arrived and stable when he left fifteen minutes later for surgery. I don’t think I’m the criminal here. I was part of the team that tried to save him.” I said.

“That is not an answer to my question, doctor. You’re either lying or totally incompetent. Wait, before you object, counselor.” He turned to my lawyer. “I withdraw that remark. It’s just that every other medical personnel that worked on Mr. Dover has documentation of what happened during his care except for you, doctor.” He leaned in toward me again and I could see the fine red lines in his bulging eyes, the sweat on his thinning scalp. He thought he was still in the zone, but I was about to change all of that.

“So, you are really asking me for my documentation of Mr. Dover’s condition during his stay in angiography, correct?” I asked quietly.

Samuels’ smile faded for a second. He blinked. “Of course.”

I cleared my throat and nodded at the jury. “I’m sorry, but I thought you were asking me his condition and I told you. So, you want to see the documentation?”

Samuels stood up and wiped his mouth. “I’ve looked all through the medical records, doctor, and there is NO documentation.”

“That’s because the documentation is not part of the medical records.” I said.

Samuels flinched. “What?”

“The form we use in radiology was deemed outdated by medical records. Three months before I took care of Mr. Dover, we created a new form for documentation of vital signs and the details of the procedure. But, the medical records committee had not yet approved the new form, so we were still using the old form.” I stopped and let it hang in the air.

“So, you did fill out the form?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s not here.” Samuels pointed to the stack of medical records.

“That is because the committee kept sending our old forms back to us and refused to put them in the records. And, they refused to allow us to use the new form, so we were in limbo. We had to decide what to do with the documentation. As a physician who cares deeply about his patients, I came up with a temporary solution. The forms were placed in the patient’s Xray film folder as part of the permanent Xray record, which, if I am not mistaken, you did not subpoena.”

His smile faded. He blinked several times. “So, where is this form?”

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the folded sheet of paper. “Right here, in my possession. I didn’t want anyone else to have this. It is vital information about the meticulous care my team gave to Mr. Dover. Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, the hole in his superior vena cava made by the bullet the thief fired during the robbery was so large, even the speediest surgeon could not repair in time.”

Samuels crossed his arms and glared at me. He reached toward the paper. I jerked it back. “I’m sorry, but this is the property of the department of radiology and you have no legal right to see it.”

His face whitened with anger. He sputtered. He licked his lips. He was no longer in the zone. I turned to the judge. “But, your honor, with your permission, I will allow you to look at this documentation that proves that Mr. Dover did not die from medical malpractice while under my care, that we did everything we could in a quick and timely fashion and the reason he died was

because he was shot by a meth head criminal robbing a convenience store and I am not that criminal.”

The judge smiled and reached for the paper. Samuels glared at me and turned toward the jury. Some of them were smiling at me. “No further questions!”

irate customer

“You were supposed to kill my wife, not the dog!”

I looked up from my latte. The small, balding man was soaked. A trail of water led from his feet back to the door of the coffee shop. I glanced around at the other customers. They were too engrossed in their smartphones and their pads and their pods to pay any attention to the man. I sipped some more latte.

“The dog got in the way.”

The man stepped closer and he slapped a wet hand on the table. Rainwater splashed on my face. “Do you know how much I paid for that dog? Pure bred! Father of champions!”

I glanced at his foggy glasses and his bulging eyes. “You told me the dog would be at the vet.”

He swallowed and pushed his glasses back up on his nose. “Well, she changed the plans! That woman can’t do anything right! Not even die!”

I reached for the other cup of coffee on the table. “I figured you would be here so I bought you some coffee.”

He looked at me and opened his mouth to protest. I pointed to a chair. “Sit down before you raise too much attention. It’s not smart to talk about killing your wife in public.”

He nodded and slid into the chair. Water dripped on the floor. He sipped at the coffee and stared off into space. “So, do I get my money back?”

I chuckled. “No, you don’t get your money back.”

He slammed the cup on the table. “Then I’ll . . .”

“You’ll what? Go to the police? Tell them you hired someone to kill your wife?” I sipped the last of my latte and glanced at my watch. Any minute now.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with.” He stood up and water ran off the chair. “I’ll . . .” The man stopped and swallowed. His hand went to his chest. His face twisted in pain. He backed away from me and glanced at his cup of coffee. “You, you, . . .”

“Let’s just say your wife is now a satisfied customer.”

He tried to run and slid in the water, falling against the coffee counter and dragging down an entire pyramid of coffee bags. I picked up his cup of coffee and started for the door. The attendant ran around the counter and glanced at the man.

I pointed at the man's body. "You better call 911. I think he's having a heart attack. Either that or you've got an irate customer on your hands."

irrefragable

“I’m sorry, sir, but the charges against your account are irrefragable.” The bank clerk stamped my check with a large, wooden dowel and shoved it back through his barred window.

“I don’t give a frag what you say. I never wrote this check. It’s a forgery. And, you -- this bank, cashed this check for \$10,000 and never bothered to check the person’s I.D.”

The clerk glared at me through his glasses perched on his long, crooked nose. “I can assure madam that the check you hold in your myxedematous hands is legal tender. In what manner the clerk conducted his or her transaction regarding this check and its bearer, I have no knowledge. I can only comment on the status noted on the ledger.”

I glared at him and then down at my hand. “Myxedematous? What does that mean?”

“Swollen, edematous, connoting an underactive thyroid condition. Now, if madam would move on, there other customers awaiting my ministrations.” He tried to shoo me away. I glanced over my shoulder at the long line of bank clients. They were rather cross and obviously irritated. But, I would not relent.

I looked back at the clerk. “You said this check was signed in my handwriting? How do you know?”

The clerk raised an eyebrow and sighed. His breath stank of onions and fish. “You can rest assured that the clerks at this august establishment always make certain the signature matches the bank card.”

I smiled. “Why don’t you let me sign a check and compare my signature with my bank card? And then, we can compare it with this check.”

The clerk chuckled and jerked the check out of my grasp. “I can assure madam that this signature will match the card. In fact, why don’t you sign this card right now,” he shoved a blank card through his little window and placed it in front of me, “and I will compare it. You have not had sufficient time to peruse the signature on the disputed check. Let us see if you can match the signature on your card and if it is different from the signature on this check.”

I shrugged. “Sure. Oh, by the way . . .” I tugged on my left hand with my right hand. The prosthesis disengaged and slid from my sleeve and I plopped it on the ledge in front of the clerk. “These myxedematous hands, as you call them, look that way because they are made out of rubber.” I hit the latch on my right elbow against my side and the right hand slid out of the sleeve and fell on the floor. I held up my empty, sagging sleeves. “Now, I would think that is now irrefragable that I could not have signed that check. So, give me back my money! And, when you’re done, you can give me a hand.”

lawn mower

“There’s nothing lower, than to be a lawnmower!”

“You have to cut grass by sliding on your --”

“Shut up!” I yelled across the utility building. The hedge clippers were always wagging their jaws at me. “Just leave me alone!”

“Hey, Stanley.” The electric hedge clipper swung on his peg high above me. His buddy, the manual hedge clipper answered.

“Yeah, what is it, Ollie?”

“Ever notice that we get to work at the top of the world and Lenny down there is always working on the bottom of the food chain?”

“Yeah, he’s the lowest of the low!”

They laughed and the rest of the lawn tools joined in. Oakley, the tree limb trimmer wiggled in the corner where she leaned. “Hey, Lenny. What’s that smell? Run over any dog poop lately?”

More laughter until the walls and roof of the little metal building rattled with their words.

“And, you know what’s worse?” Buster the blower wheezed. “When it’s time to mulch Lenny gets to chew on the grass until he vomits it all up!”

“Stop it! All of you!” Lenny screamed and the room fell silent. But, the rattling did not stop. In fact, the walls were now moving of their own accord. Something whooshed by the one tiny window in the shed and the sound of rain and hail battering the roof was deafening.

“What’s happening?” Stanley was swinging from his peg like a pendulum.

“It’s rain!” Oakley trembled in her corner. “Or worse!”

A groaning, moaning sound vibrated the very floor of the tiny tool shed and the light from the window became green and ethereal. The roof and walls moved in and out like a bellows and suddenly, the entire shed was ripped apart. Lenny looked up into the dark, rain soaked sky at the creature that was sucking all of life from the very earth. Stanley and Ollie swirled up into its belly. Oakley and Buster spun around in the growing wind, clattering into the other tools hanging on the wall until they were all sucked up in a giant slurping sound into the black, twisting creature.

The silence was sudden and deafening. Lenny glanced around at the rain soaked yard. The tornado had destroyed the tool shed. All of his colleagues were gone, wiped away by the force of nature. And, just one hundred feet away, his master's house was untouched. How could such a thing happen?

A door at the base of the house opened up and out. Lenny's master slowly climbed out and looked around. His wife and kids were hugging each other, their faces amazed at the extent of damage and sparing of their house. The Master's youngest boy ran across the debris littered lawn.

"Dad, the tool shed is gone. The only thing left is Lenny." The little boy reached up and swung from Lenny's handle. It felt good. Master came over and patted him on the motor.

"All that other stuff can be replaced, son. But, good ole Lenny has been with me for twenty years. I knew he wouldn't leave."

Lenny smiled. Sometimes it paid to be the lowest of the low!

lengthwise

“I’m tellin’ you, mate, he’s not going to fit!” Seamus leaned on his shovel.

“It’s not for us to decide, Seamus.” The other man said. He scratched at his scraggly beard and kicked the coffin. “It’s our job to bury the coffin.”

Seamus’ rearranged his tall, lanky frame around his shovel and scratched at his forehead. “But, what are we supposed to do about that, Blake?” He pointed the toe of his muddy boot at the foot of the coffin. Blake snorted and shrugged.

“So, his feet are sticking out. They must have measured him crosswise instead of lengthwise.”

Seamus frowned. “This is the bloke what had that special coffin made up, weren’t it?”

“Bloody right. That there is the problem. He’s got all these bells and whistles and alarms so if he wakes up dead, he can let the world know.” Blake laughed and his huge belly shook with the effort. “I say we cut off his feet and throw them in with the rest of him.”

Seamus’ eyes grew wide. “Or, we could just put this bloke in that coffin over there.” He pointed to another coffin sitting on the bed of a wagon. “Mrs. Strother was a wee woman and there’s plenty of room in her coffin. What say we switch them and no one will be the wiser?”

Blake nodded. “Good plan, mate.”

An hour later they threw the last of the dirt on the coffin. Seamus wiped sweat from his brow. “Now, Mrs. Strother got the fancy coffin and no one will be the wiser she’s buried in the wrong grave. Let’s get the other bloke in the ground afore someone notices.”

Blake took off his hat. “What we done is wrong, mate, but it was necessary. Let’s say one last kind word over the grave of Mrs. Strother.”

Seamus took off his hat. “Only this grave weren’t for her. It was for Mr. Poe. He’ll rest in peace in his new coffin.”

clean house

I held up the one legged dove. “Just for you today. Half price.”

The woman frowned and looked down at her little boy. Beneath his robe I noticed he had one withered leg and one normal leg. I tried not to give in to an errant feeling of pity. She reached into her robe and pulled out a small, leather bag.

“I was going to use some money for the healer. But, I am so hopeful that this time, my son will benefit.”

She started poking in her bag. I listened to the magical chinking of her coins. “For your son, you might want two doves.” I said. I reached under my table and grabbed the dove with broken wings. “New low rates. Two doves for the price of one. Guaranteed to heal your boy’s leg.”

A shadow fell over the table and I looked up into the face of a strange man. I had seen him wandering around the temple area with his followers. His eyes were incredibly bright and his gaze bored into my skull.

“You do not need this man’s damaged goods.” He told the woman.

She frowned again and pulled her son closer. “His father died in sin. That is why he was born with a withered leg.”

The man held something behind his back and reached forward with a free hand to touch the boy’s shoulder. “Take him home and let him sleep. When he awakens, he will be whole.”

I opened my mouth to protest and he turned those huge, powerful eyes on me. “Do not be taken in by these thieves.”

“I am not a thief!” I managed weakly.

The woman pocketed her precious money and put an arm around her son. “Thank you, Rabbi.”

“It is time for you to leave.” The man pulled the cat of nine tails out from behind his back. “I’m going to clean house!”

maintenance closet

There is nothing in the world as dark as the inside of a space station when the power goes out. Lady Gennesett and I were having our afternoon tea when the lights went out. To her credit, the Lady never missed a beat and kept droning on and on about Madame Toussant's horrific dress and her bestial hairdo that she wore to last week's Apothecary Ball.

“Milady!” I tried to interrupt her. “Milady!”

I could feel her blinking in the dark. “What is it, Haversham?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, we seem to have lost power.”

“Again?” I heard her tea cup clatter on its saucer. “This is the third time in a week. I guess that is why I did not notice.”

That and the fact all of the blood had rushed to the center of her brain controlling her tongue! The emergency lights kicked in and the warm rush of red light filled the interior of the St. James Room. Other patrons were murmuring among themselves. Near the entry I heard the strident clamor of voices raised in anger.

“If Milady will excuse me, I shall attend to this interruption.” I stood up. Lady Gennesett nodded and sipped more tea.

I found the maitre’d arguing with a rather dirty little man dressed in an oiled stained maintenance uniform. I inserted myself between the two.

“What is the meaning of this confrontation?”

Ramsey, the maitre’d fingered his huge mustache. “This man wants access to St. James Room. He is of the lower class, as you can see. He is not allowed in here.”

“Look, bloke, I’m a simple man with a simple task. I’m here to restore your precious power. If you wants to sit in the dark and drink your bloody tea, it’s fine by me.” The squat, balding man said.

“Your English is atrocious.” I commented. “How long will you be in this room?”

“Look, governor, I don’t care a wit about you blue bloods and your fancy, hoity toity ways. I’ll be out of your wigs in no time. Now, where’s the nearest maintenance closet?”

I glanced at Ramsey and he shrugged. I looked back at the little man. “How should I know?”

I felt a presence behind me and Lady Gennesett leaned over my shoulder. She placed a pair of spectacles on a stalk against her azure eyes and studied the little man. “I happen to know where the maintenance closet is located.” She said.

I glanced at her in horror. “You do?”

“Oh, calm down, Haversham. I mistook it for the powder room, once. Come along, little man and I’ll show you the proper room.” She turned and her satin dress whirled around her ankles. I caught a glimpse of them. They were huge.

“Right, madam. Lead the way.” The maintenance man pushed between us and started across the room. Other patrons gasped and murmured as the man made his way through the red lit room. Lady Gennesett took him down a corridor that led toward the kitchen. I had no idea she even knew there was a kitchen present. I rushed after them.

“Why do you have all the shutters closed?” The maintenance man asked.

“And have a continual view of our ruined planet?” Lady Gennesett said.

“We can’t bare to look at it.” I said. “If the shutters were open, we would be constantly reminded of the tragedy.”

“You mean reminded of your mistakes.” The maintenance man said.

Lady Gennesett halted and whirled in her satin dress. She gestured with the spectacles. “OUR mistakes? How dare you!”

The little man shrugged. “My class, if you will, were just workers, Milady. We only did what we were told. And you was the one doing the telling, right governor?” He poked me in the arm. I stepped back and stared at the smear of grease on my sleeve.

“Well, I never.”

“Here’s your horrid little closet.” Lady Gennesett pointed to a bulkhead door. Here, out of sight of the dining room, the hallways were a constant reminder we were on a space station in orbit around a ruined world.

“Right.” The maintenance man opened the door and stepped into the interior. He shuffled around in the dark and then his face appeared in the red light of the emergency bulbs. “I might need your help, milady. Please step in here for a moment. It’ll only take a second.”

Lady Gennesett rolled her eyes. “Anything to get our power back.”

She stepped over the lip of the door and I followed. We were cramped into the tiny room so close to the little man we could smell his body odor. He was pointing to a large switch on the instrument panel just beyond his reach.

“You see, I’m a bit too small to reach that switch, milady. Would you be so kind as to pull it down. You might need the governor’s help.”

Lady Gennesett sighed and put her hand on the switch. I put my hand on top of hers.

“Just pull it down?” I asked.

“Whenever you’re ready, governor.” The little man’s eyes glittered with a strange expression. Even as we pulled down the switch I felt the hair on my neck stand up.

“What is this switch?” I asked.

“Can’t get to it anywhere but here, governor. It’s a very special switch, you see. It starts the self destruct program.” The switch clicked into place and the floor shuddered. “You’ve got a minute left to make peace with your Maker, governor. Me and my kind think it’s time to wipe the slate clean and start over.”

raging

I did not trust the humans. But, I was desperate. I made it past the guards on the edge of their compound. I did not know if their female healer would help me. I studied her face from afar and, although I did not know all there was to know about the humans, her face conveyed kindness. I would know her tent by the symbol that she wears on her tunic.

Get down! There was a human coming this way. I toggled the melanophores on my fur and blended in with the tree trunk against which I leaned. The human passed by me, inhaling some foul smelling smoke from a thin reed. They were curious creatures. They talked about the abundance of “evolutionary miracles” here on our world; about their own supremacy at the top of the “food chain” and yet they submitted themselves to self destructive behavior. They did not regard their bodies as temples but more as repositories of waste.

I made my way through the cooso vines around the perimeter of their camp. There was the tent with its symbol! I slid between the trunks of two mongo trees and waited until the human loitering at the door to the tent walked down the slope to other tents. Quickly, I hurried through the doorway into the dark interior of the tent. The female healer was bent over one their metal instruments and pale light was reflected into her face. Her eyes were such beautiful pools of jade green.

“I need help.” I managed to say in their obscene language. I wish she could thought-talk to me. She whirled and her eyes grew large with fear.

“What?”

I held up a paw and blinked my large, liquid eyes. I had learned that they were enamored with our eyes. “Do not fear. I need help. I will not harm you.”

I watched her pupils constrict with fear and her chest heave as she gasped for breath. The arteries in her neck pulsed with a rapid heart beat beneath her skin. How did they survive with only fur on their heads? I guess the lack of fur is why they had to hide their bodies beneath artificial skin.

“How did you get in here?”

“I came through the front door. My son is sick. He has a raging fever and I have heard you are a healer. Our healer can do no more for him. Can you help him?” I licked my lips and blinked. What was the word they responded to? She had scolded one of the warriors for not saying it the other day. “Please?”

Her breathing slowed and she knelt down before me. Her eyes were drawn to my chest. “I will help you if you will answer me a question.”

I nodded in affirmation. This was another human gesture I had learned. “Yes.”

She reached out one of her thin, skin covered hands with its long appendages and touched the pendant around my neck. I looked down at it.

“This pendant you wear. It is an inverted triangle and there is something shaped like a ‘T’ within the triangle. What does it mean?” Her finger touched my life pendant.

“It is the sign of our savior. Kozmo became flesh and the religious aristocracy did not accept his message. He was killed on the triangle.” I whispered and bowed my head in reverence. “But, he did not stay dead but returned to life. I would not expect you to understand. You are ‘highly evolved’ creatures whatever that means. I have listened to your leaders and they do not honor a Creator. They worship Chance.”

She smiled and revealed her bright teeth. Such an expression was viewed with fear by my people. But, I had learned for the humans it was a showing of happiness. “How did you know to find me here in this tent?” She asked.

I motioned to the pale light coming through the fabric of her tent. “The symbol.”

She nodded and sat cross legged in front of me. “It is called the red cross. On my world, we too had a Savior who came from God and he was killed upon a cross. This symbol is a sign that we, as humans, show the compassion and unconditional love of our savior to those who are in need.” She looked away deep in thought. “But, much has changed over the centuries. There are few of us who follow the Savior anymore. This is but a pale relic of the past.” She looked at me again. “And, yet here on this primitive world, you have the same belief.” She paused. “You realize that I cannot help you.”

My hearts slowed. “Why? My only son lies sick with the fever. We used rota root extract but it is not working.”

She frowned, another gesture I was now all too familiar with. “It is our custom not to interfere with the evolutionary forces at work in a primitive society. But, it is obvious to me that your society is far more advanced than ours. You have not forgotten the source of your compassion.”

She stood up and retrieved a glass tube and handed it to me. “I have been studying your physiology. It is very similar to ours. This antibiotic should cover just about any bacteria. Give your son one drop twice a day until it is all gone.”

I cradled the tube as if it were my very soul. “I do not know how to thank you.” I paused and made up my mind. I pulled the leather cord from around my neck and handed her my life pendant. “I can only offer this, my life pendant.”

She took it and I saw a tear glisten in her eyes. At least this we had in common. She reached down into her tunic and pulled out a glittering chain. From the end of it hung a tiny cross like the one on the tent. "Then, I will give you mine. From this day forward, it will mean much more to me than it ever has." She placed the chain over my head, folding down my ears to let it fall onto my chest. I marveled at the symbol and tears leaked from my own eyes. "Thank you. May the savior bless you."

She put my life pendant around her neck and tears rolled down her cheeks. "He already has."

Continued from raging

When I arrived at the compound, Drassul was waiting. He was dressed in the long, flowing robe of our mantic priesthood and his fur was striped with multicolored berry juice. He stood outside the door to my hutch and held up a paw to stop me.

“Where have you been?” His eyes gleamed with anger.

“I have been searching for a potion for my son.” I gasped. The vial from the human healer was safely hidden in my tunic.

Drassul’s ears stood on end and he growled. “I have foreseen a horrible destiny for you, Grandle. The humans are here to destroy our world and our way of living. You have been defiled by their contact.”

I glanced beyond Drassul to the door to my hutch. Here, high in the bagoball trees, we were safe from the roving jungle walkers of the humans. From the doorway to my hutch, Meega peeked out. She held our son wrapped in a blanket. “Drassul, I know that you have great powers of divination and prophecy, but I must attend to my son. If you do not move, then I will challenge you in the Ring.”

Drassul gasped and his ears flattened and he sneered at me. “In the Ring? Such combat is reserved for the gravest of offenses. I am a man of religion. I do not fight.”

I scurried toward him and shoved him aside. “Then let me attend to my child.”

Drassul reached into his robe and pulled out a handful of purple dust, casting it into the air. The cloud engulfed my head and I coughed. My eyes were stinging and my tongue was suddenly numb.

“I mark you, Grandle with the purple cloud. If you do not make restitution in the Temple and cleanse yourself of your affiliation with these humans, then the cloud will consume you in the coming days. Is this the price you pay for your son’s health?”

I wiped the purple dust from my eyes. “I would do anything for my son, Drassul. Now, leave me alone with my family.”

Drassul hopped off the branch outside my hutch and disappeared into the leaves of the bagoball tree. Meega put a hand toward my purple shoulder.

“No, Meega. Do not touch me. I am outcast now.” I took the vial out of my tunic. “This is from the human healer. She says it will heal our son. I will leave and endure the purple dust alone.”

“No!” Meega started toward me, her tiny furred feet just inches from the threshold of the dust. “I will go with you.”

I stepped back and reached into my tunic and took out the tiny metal cross the healer had given me. She gasped as she saw it and stopped in her advance. “Where is your life pendant?”

“I gave it to the healer.” I held up the tiny cross. “It seems in spite of their brutality, some of the humans serve the Savior as we do. She gave me this. Meega, I will pay the consequences for my actions alone. Take care of our son.”

I flipped off the limb, caught a vine and swung away from my hutch. I had to put as much distance and time between myself and Drassul as possible. If my life was forfeit in order to save my son, then so be it. There was only place for me to go now. Back to the humans!

mob of joggers

My true love lies
On a bed of roses
Her face serene
Surrounded by posies

Her fate unknown
To humankind
From those far shores
Her way she must find

For she did leave
Our sheltered door
To walk the lengths
Of forest and moor

And then came news
With great lament
Of her wounds and bruises
From an accident

She was not struck
By a truck full of loggers
She was not knocked
By a wagon of hoggers

She was not the victim
Of mosquito foggers
Nor tampled by
Dancing cloggers

No, my fair maiden
Although speed walking
Was struck and flattened
By a mob of joggers.

mustache

“Where’s the gun? I’m ready!”

I looked at Sable and chuckled. “Look who’s brave!” I stood up from the rickety wooden table and walked over to the tall, thin boy. He wore a soft, leather tunic and cotton woven pants. His long, skinny legs disappeared into a pair of well, worn black leather boots.

“I suppose those were your father’s?” I pointed at his feet.

He blinked pale blue eyes and nodded. A sheen of sweat spackled his forehead. He had cut his hair down to the scalp and I could see red lines where his knife had left a furrow in the skin. “You need to sharpen your knife.”

“Braden, I’m ready!” He said again as he stiffened. His fists were clenched and his face turned red as I smiled. “Don’t make fun of me. I’ll beat you to a pulp. Just wait and see.” And, he launched himself at me. I stepped aside and he missed, plowing into the table and tumbling across the dirt floor into the pile of furs by the fireplace. I suppose I should have stopped laughing. He really was a brave boy.

I held out my hand as he appeared from the furs. “Come on, Sable. Sit down and have a drink. No need to waste your efforts on your teacher. Save your strength for the Gendi.”

He glared at me and then grabbed my hand. I felt the callouses on his palms; noticed the dirt under his fingernails. He had been practicing. He stood up and, to be fair, was at least a hand taller than me. I motioned to the table. He slumped into a chair and I took the jug from the pantry. I poured two mugs of amber liquid and sat one in front of him.

“If you’re ready, then drink that down.”

Sable eyed the mug and drew a deep breath. He grabbed the mug and swallowed the contents in one, deep pull. His eyes watered and his face grew red. He gagged and coughed and tears ran down his cheeks. “That’s good.” He whispered.

“Yeah.” I sipped mine. “You don’t chug it. You sip it. Fire whiskey, boy.”

“I’m not a boy!”

“I’ll be the one to determine that.”

Sable glared at me and wiped the tears from his face. “Count Brakton deserves to die!”

I nodded. “Yes, he does.”

“He tortured my mother.” Sable’s lip quivered. “He killed my father. And, I don’t know where Lilly is.”

I poured him some more fire whiskey. “Revenge is a poor motivation for killing someone, Sable. It’ll please you in the short run, but it won’t satisfy in the long run. Their faces will haunt you for your whole life. You need to use your brain and think this out. Don’t use your gut.”

Sable looked away. “I don’t care. You let me handle my own guilt.”

I nudged the mug. “Have some more. You need to calm down. Man gets all twitchy and itchy and you couldn’t hit a mastodon with a cannon.”

He eyed me obliquely and sipped some more whiskey. He coughed and ran a hand over his short, stubble of hair. “I am a man, Braden. I’m fifteen. You taught me how to shoot. You taught me how to use the crossbow. You taught me how to slit a man’s throat before he could draw his next breath. If that wasn’t for killing, then why?”

I crossed my arms over my tunic and nodded. “Fair enough. Prove you’re a man.”

He gestured to his face. “Look! A mustache.” Fire whiskey dripped from the fine, pale fuzz on his lip.

I smiled and his lips twitched until he smiled, too. I laughed out loud and he laughed. He slammed some more whiskey down and tilted in the chair. “I got hair elsewhere, Braden. I got it on my chest! I’m a man!” His words were getting slurred.

“You don’t drink like one, Sable. You drink like a boy.”

He blinked, finished off the whiskey and fell off the chair. I heard his head thump the dirt floor. I piled some furs on top of him as he began to snore. “You’ll thank me in the long run, Sable. I just saved your life.”

nonagenarian

“Do you have any unfiltered cigarettes?”

I looked up from my Platinum Surfer holo-comic. She was short and dressed totally in black, some kind of long, flowing silky dress with a black pillbox hat on the top of her head and a black veil hiding her face. “They don’t make them. Outlawed.” I went back to my comic. Maybe she would go away.

“Then, give me some and I’ll break the filters off.” She wheezed and started coughing. I sat back and watched the netting puff with her bouts of coughing.

“Maybe you should give up smoking. Most people have. Not good for you.” I slid my hover-stool back away from the counter.

The woman stopped coughing and lifted her veil. Her face was pale and wrinkled and her eyes gleamed with anger. “If I want to kill myself with tobacco, I should be free to do that, young whippersnapper!”

“But, the law is the law, ma’am.” I said. I rolled up my holo-comic to keep her from coughing on it. “How old are you?”

“I’m a nonagenarian.” She whispered and wiped at her mouth with a bony hand.

“Lady, religion has been outlawed, too.” I reached under the counter and swiped the panic button.

“Might as well outlaw life. I just want a smoke, that’s all. I’m 97 years old and I am due some consideration!” She leaned over the counter and shook her fist at me. “I just buried my grandson and I need a smoke!”

The police appeared at the door to my store, shock wands in hand and I pointed to the little old woman. “Sorry, but you’ll have to settle for incarceration.”

out on the lawn

I heard the ruckus in the living room and got up from my sewing. I had just put the last touches on the red brocade on my dress. I pushed my reading glasses up on my head and hurried down the hallway to the living room.

“Honey? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Roger wasn’t in the living room. Instead, standing by the fireplace was the strangest individual I had ever seen. He was shorter than I was and wore a pair of red pants over his generous belly held in place by bright green suspenders over a white shirt with fills and lace down the middle. His face was round and surrounded by a fringe of white beard below his bare scalp. His nose was pert and upturned and his bright blue eyes twinkled with mischief. He smiled and laughed.

“My, aren’t you a tall one?” He said in a high, nasal voice.

“Who are you?”

“I am Presentious Hobbleday. So good to meet you.” He waddled across the room and extended a pudgy hand. I looked at it like it was a poisonous snake.

“Where is my husband?”

Presentious Hobbleday stopped, glanced at his hand with a worried look upon his face and then pointed to the picture window looking out over my flowers. “He’s out there.”

I hurried over to the window. “You mean outside on my lawn? I don’t see him anywhere. How did you get in the house? Where did you come from?”

Hobbleday frowned. “Well, that would be a long story. But, the short of it is . . .” He reached over to the coffee table and picked up something. “I asked your husband to do something very simple.”

I recognized the figure in his hand immediately. It was a female gnome from out in my garden. “That came from my flower bed. What are you doing with my gnome?”

He popped the red hat off of the little figure and extended it toward me. “Well, we shall see about that? Care to take a look at her hat?”

I opened my hand and the tiny red hat tumbled into my palm. Instantly, the world began to swirl and pitch. I felt my hand grow warm and the hat glowed. I was pulled down, down, down into darkness.

I woke up in a shaft of bright sunlight. I tried to blink, but my eyelids wouldn't move. In fact, I could move nothing! I felt the little red hat on the top of my head but my arms and legs refused to obey my commands. And there, in the corner of my vision was my husband. He was frozen in mid stare, a tiny red hat perched on his head. His skin was smooth and shiny and towering above him were my daisies. We were outside on my lawn! Behind him something moved up in the top of my vision. I watched Presentious Hobbleday appear inside my house as he peered out through my picture window at my lawn. He smiled and pointed down at me. Then, appearing next to him was a woman identical to the small gnome from my garden. She smiled and her red cheeks glowed. They moved away from the windows and although my mind filled with endless screams, there was only silence among the rhodadendrums.

parents

I dialed the emergency number and listened for the response.

“Central Emergency Response, how may I help you?” The voice sounded in my head.

“They’re here and they’re coming for me!” I whispered. I peeked through the crack between the edge of the cabinet door and its facing. Bright yellow light spilled into my hiding place and I pressed an eye to the slit. Something move on the other side of my cubicle, dark and wispy.
“Hurry!”

“Identity stamp indicates you are Brandon Gamma 3219, is that correct?” The voice was female, soft and soothing. Not what I wanted at the time. I needed to be ready to defend myself, not relax.

“Yes, I am Brandon Gamma 3219, now get someone over here now!” Another shadow moved closer to the cabinet. My heart raced and sweat trickled from my forehead. How had they found me?

“Sensors indicate you are experiencing unusually high levels of epinephrine. Please take slow, deep breaths through your mouth.” She said in my head.

“I don’t want to take any slow, deep breaths!” I hissed. “I want you to protect me. They will take me away, you know that!”

“Brandon Gamma 3192, the Enclave is here to protect and nurture you. We will not allow any harm to . . .”

The cabinet door jerked open and blinding yellow light made me squint. A hand grabbed my shoulder and jerked me out of the space. Arms wrapped around me and pulled me close. My heart almost burst from my chest. I gasped for breath in the grip of the thing. It pushed me away and I looked into deep, green eyes filled with tears. Her face was marred with dirt and her hair was matted and stringy. Behind her, a man appeared, his long hair tangled with twigs and grass. He had a short beard and his face was covered in mud. Their clothes were brown and torn burlap.

“Brandon, we’re here to rescue you.” The woman said.

“No!” I struggled out of her grasp. “Leave me alone, you monsters!”

“We’re not monsters.” The man said as he drew closer. He reached a hand toward me and I saw the tattoo. They were Outcast! Here, in the Enclave! How had they gotten through the shields and by the Sentinels? How had they penetrated this deep into the city?

“Yes, you are! You are Outcast! I have no use for you. I don’t need you!” I shouted listening to the woman’s voice in my head pleading for me to relax, help is on the way.

“Brandon, we’re your parents!” The woman reached toward me and I pulled away from her hand.

“I know. Parents are monster! You are Outcast! I don’t need you! All I need is the Enclave!” Outside my door, I heard the approach of the siren. In my head, the woman assured me help had arrived. Good, I hope they had the Incinerator! The last thing I needed to screw up my life were parents!

participate

The woman with the wolf ears handed me a sword.

“You’ll need this to defend yourself against the wood elves. They’re particularly nasty this time. Where’s your tail?” She had gray and white makeup on her face to accentuate her eyes.

“I don’t have a tail. I’m just . . .” I ignored the sword.

She turned around and a large, bushy gray tail hung from her black jumpsuit. “You must have a tail. It’s in the rules.” She whirled around again and tilted her head. “Maybe we can say Barth, the badger took your tail. Yeah, that would work.”

Sally was gripping my arm so tightly my hand was going numb. We had just walked through the trees toward the lights seeking help. Instead of help, we found woman dressed like a wolf out here in the woods.

“We will tell them the truth” Sally whispered. “We got lost and found that dirt road and there’s no cell phone signal and . . .” I tried to loosen Sally’s grip. “And, the temperature is dropping. We’re in the mountains and it’s supposed to get down to 10 degrees tonight.”

Something hit me in the back of the head. I turned. The man behind me was tall and lithe with pale skin and, was that glitter? He hissed at me. Yes, hissed at me and revealed fanged teeth. “You are now a thrall to my clan. My name is Massad and you will kneel before your master.” He lisped.

I looked down at a small burlap bundle he had thrown at me. I picked it up. “Look, I don’t know what is going on here, but my wife and I are lost. We just need to call the auto club and get some gas or a tow. That’s all. We don’t belong to anyone’s clan.”

The man raised an eyebrow and looked over his shoulder. “But, you are dressed for play. Sorry, that was an out of game statement. I take it back.” He straightened. “I’ll consult the Seer. He is in charge of rule violations.” In the distance, a man in a red robe was making his way toward us. He had a long, gray beard and carried a long, white walking stick. Massad glanced back at the wolf woman. “Sylvia, these two are mine. You cannot claim them.”

Sylvia sighed. “They’re not even role players!”

“They haven’t convinced me of that.” Massad stepped closer and I noticed he had red eyes with slit pupils. “Their presence alone means they are participants in this LARP whether they are willing or not.”

Sylvia put a paw, sorry, a hand on my arm. “We’ll get this straightened out. No one is going to drink your blood tonight.”

Sally pressed herself even closer to my side. “What is a larp?”

“Live Action Role Playing.” Sylvia said. “There is a story and everyone here is a part of the story. We play out our role in real time. You cannot break character or you have to leave.”

Massad was so close now I could see the veins beneath his pale skin. I could smell the blood on his breath. Human blood! The Seer was growing nearer. “What is your name?” Massad asked.

“Franklin and Sally.” I whispered.

Sylvia smiled. “We require your full name. Rules of the game.”

I made sure the Seer was still a few yards away. “Van Helsing.” I reached into my jacket, pulled out the wooden stake and drove it through Massad’s heart.

perhaps not

“We must abort the mission!”

I glanced over at Dr. Singh. His faceplate was fogging up. “Calm down, Singh. Let’s not panic.”

Singh threw his hands up in the air and in the white clean-suit he looked like Frosty on a diet. “Miller, you always compromise. We cannot risk the life of our astronauts. This is the first flight of the new shuttle and I tell you that . . .” He pointed a stubby finger at the mission package nestled in the shuttle bay, “is a disaster waiting to happen.”

The spot in question was a tiny, seven millimeter dab of green stuff on the copper foil around some sensitive and important wiring. I crossed my arms, which is hard to do in a clean-suit, and shook my head. “Singh, if we cancel this mission because of that one little green glob, the repercussions will be huge. One, this is our first mission in two years in a new shuttle. Bad PR could ruin our funding for next year and I believe you are on the short list for layoffs, right?”

Singh’s eyes widened behind his fogged faceplate.

“Two, I can get rid of that glob in seconds with an antiseptic wipe and no one will be the wiser.”

Singh shuffled nervously and shook his head. “Okay, but we tell no one.”

I pulled a tiny antiseptic wipe out of my clean-suit pocket and plucked the green glob from the foil covering. “So, we tell no one. And, if they ask, we say everything was clean and perhaps there was nothing here to begin with. Agreed?”

Singh nodded. “So, if they ask if there is any reason to abort the mission we just say, ‘perhaps not?’”

“Perhaps, snot. Right!”

please

“Please don’t hurt us! Please!” The woman sobbed as she collapsed onto the kitchen table.

Ratchet rolled his eyes and slammed his hand on the table. The woman bolted up and her daughter ran into the crook of her arm. “Listen, Missy, you shoulda never stayed in the house during an electrical outage. You shoulda gone to a hotel or somethin. Is it my fault that you decided to hole up in your house while you ain’t go no electricity? Huh?”

“It was the storm.” The little girl said. “Mommy said we had to stay here even though it would get hot without the fans on.”

Ratchet squatted in front of the little girl and her mother pulled her away from him. “Is that right? What’s your name?”

“Polly.”

“Well, polly wolly doodle all day! Listen, Polly, with the electricity out, the back gate to your sweet gated community was open and without electricity, your security systems don’t work and without electricity you was supposed to leave!” He shouted the last sentence and Polly started to cry.

“Stop it!” the mother held her little girl’s face to her chest. “What do you want?”

“Money. Jewels. Bling, you name it. I want it. Bad thing is, sweetheart, you done seen my face. I got to do somethin’ about that.” Ratchet stood up and paced around the kitchen in the dark. A single black candle stood in the center of the table and its light wavered in the breeze of his pacing. Ratchet stopped. “Why didn’t you leave? Most everybody left.”

Polly pulled away from her mother. “We have to take care of . . .” Her mother shoved her hand over the girl’s mouth.

“No, Polly! Don’t tell him.”

Ratchet jerked to a stop. “Tell me what?”

Polly pulled away from her mother’s hand. “About the cellar. We had to stay and guard the cellar.”

Ratchet whirled around and pulled out his flashlight. The beam swept across the hearth room, the fireplace, the kitchen table and on into the kitchen and then paused at a wooden door beside the stove. A shiny padlock hung from the frame. “Now we’re talking.” He spun around and shoved the light into the mother’s face. “What you got hidden in the cellar? Huh?”

The mother's faced paled and she looked away. "Nothing."

"Mommy," Polly stepped away and looked up at her mother. "There's not nothing in the cellar. There's . . ."

The mother covered her mouth again. "Polly. Remember, it's our secret. We can't tell anyone."

Polly nodded and her mother pulled her hand away. "Okay, Mommy."

Ratchet looked over his shoulder at the cellar door. "Well, I'm about to spill your secret, little Polly."

The mother stood up and Ratchet pulled a pistol out of his back pocket. He held it sideways and pointed it at her. "Sister, you sit down!"

The mother looked down at Polly and put her hand up to her mouth as she glanced back at Ratchet. "Please don't open that door. I'm pleading with you."

Ratchet backed up to the door and with one swift movement, pulled off three shots into the padlock. It rocked back and forth and wood splintered from the frame. Polly screamed and covered her ears and her mother just closed her eyes and shook her head. The padlock and metal tab fell onto the floor with chunks of shattered wood. Ratchet pointed the gun at them again. "Now, we gonna see what you got hidden in the cellar."

He shoved the door open behind him and it swung into a black as deep as the night and as profound as the emptiness between the stars. Two gold eyes reflected light back from the interior. Ratchet turned and two huge arms covered with fur and scales appeared from the darkness and wrapped around Ratchet. He screamed as he was pulled down into the darkness and the growling and the tearing and the rending of flesh and the realization of every nightmare he had ever had as a child.

The mother ran across the room and pulled the door shut. Polly picked up the padlock. "Now, we got to get a new lock for brother's room."

The mother nodded. "Yes, dear, we do. But, we won't have to feed him for a while."

popcorn

I don't like Amish romance. In fact, I don't like romance. Period. But, Jennifer does. Chick flicks! Meh! No blood. No guts. But, lots of long, poignant gazing; lots of pouting; lots of gentle kissing; sparkly skinned vampires!

"Hey, I asked, did you get the popcorn?" Jennifer punched my arm.

I looked away from the opening credits of her movie. "Sure. Lots of butter, like you asked for." Twenty dollars to get into this movie and then another twenty for popcorn and sodas! But, Jennifer was worth it. She was hot and, well, hot and . . . well, hot.

"Thanks for taking me to the movie. I know you don't like this stuff." She leaned into me and whispered into my ear. I smiled.

"No problem, baby. You went to see Thor with me."

She took a plastic vial out of her purse and sprinkled some of her special salt on the popcorn. "Yeah, and he was hot."

I smiled. I could have abs like that. I could. It would mean giving up some time playing Portal 2. And . . .

"Hey, this is good." I munched some of the popcorn. It was salty and sweet and kind of warmed in my mouth. I wanted more. "I mean really good popcorn."

Jennifer smiled at me and nodded. "Eat up." What was that in her mouth. I tried to look closer. Two of her teeth were longer? Is that possible?

"What's up with your teeth?" I mumbled through my popcorn.

"Nothing." She actually lisped. I looked around at the rest of the theater. There were about forty of us, all couples scattered around in the darkness. We were all eating popcorn.

I looked up at the movie. No sparkly skinned vampire. Some Amish dude and he looked at me. I blinked. He looked at ME!

"Hey, dude, you better run." He said.

I tried to stand up and felt weird, all wiggly legged and weak. I plopped back into the movie seat. Popcorn kernels fell out of my mouth and I drooled on my shirt. Jennifer's face eclipsed the pale woman's face on the screen. Jennifer's eyes were glowing a bright violet color. Her skin was pale and she smiled. Two fangs. Two fangs? How the heck did . . .

promotional

Aunt Sissy died on the toilet sitting right on top of her Automated Infrared Seat Warmer. To get to her, the paramedics had to make their way through the maze of boxes and bags from at least five shopping networks. And now, my sister Maybelline and I were left with the job of cleaning out her house. I just finished my second marriage after Judy left me for a marathon runner and I'm living in a one bedroom apartment across the street from the hospital. Maybelline, on the other hand, is married to the manager of a grocery store, has three kids, and is the president of some king of League of Extraordinary Women or Extra Large Women, I'm not sure.

"Would you look at this, Harry. Aunt Sissy has twenty two digital cameras." Maybelline gestured to a bookshelf filled with unopened boxes of cheap digital camera ripoffs. "Never even took them out of the boxes."

"Well, take them all. Give them to the members of your League." I stumbled over a pile of kitchen knives in dozens of unopened boxes. They slice, they dice, they make Julie Ann's fries. Whoever Julie Ann is. "I think we should just torch the place."

"Harry, this is where all of Aunt Sissy's money went. No wonder there wasn't any money left in the will. She spent it all on worthless junk." Maybelline picked up a box with a blender in it. Five other identical blenders were stacked on the floor. "I think we should have one massive garage sale and collect the money and split it two ways. With me, of course, getting a little more since I would organize the garage sell."

I looked at my sister, hair so perfectly coifed like a beehive sitting on her head. She wore some kind of designer blouse and those pants that fall somewhere between your knees and your ankles. The sixties look was back and she dove in with all vigor. "I just want to know what happened?"

"She had a heart attack on the commode." Maybelline opened a plastic bin filled with tiny clear bags of jewelry.

I rolled my eyes. "I mean, what happened to the Aunt Sissy we grew up. You remember, she had a spotless house with all kinds of toys and snacks for us when we came over to visit."

"Never had any children." Maybelline rifled through the box. "Oh, Zirconium!"

I looked around at the house filled floor to ceiling with boxes and bins. Every promotional item carefully labeled and packed away and stacked as if she were the warehouse itself. Why had she done this? Was it because the emptiness of her life had to be filled with something? I collapsed into a rare chair with nothing in it.

"I don't have any children, Maybelline." I said.

Maybelline was trying on some kind of necklace with a dozen multicolored plastic hearts. “Harry, if you would settle down long enough, find the right woman, and stopped working so hard in the emergency room, you might could have children. Still. Even though your biological clock is ticking down real fast. Isn’t this the bomb?” She struck a model pose with the hearts hanging around her neck. In that moment I hated her. I hated my Aunt Sissy. I hated the clutter and nonsense of her life. I hated the fact she had ended this way surrounded by culture’s answer to emptiness, just buy it!

I got up out of the chair and made my way through the maze toward the tiny, screened in back porch, the only area where Aunt Sissy had not stacked any items. I guess she didn’t want them exposed to the elements. A wicker chair with worn cushions sat beside a settee. I plopped into the chair and stared through the screen at the busy street of the small town she lived in. How many of the people who drove by each day knew of Aunt Sissy’s life; her profound loneliness; saw her hunched in front of a television dialing the phone for her next item? How many?

I glanced at the settee and there was a red, plastic envelope tied with red thread. I picked it up and opened it. Inside were sheets of paper covered with writing. I examined the top piece of paper. A picture of a dark skinned, thin boy in ragged shorts and a tank top stared back at me. His teeth were brilliant in his smile. His eyes were clear. His name was unpronounceable. I shuffled through the letters and began to read. He would arrive in one week.

The sun had set when Maybelline stepped out onto the porch. “There you are. I thought you got lost in the maze. I think I’m going to sell all of this, Harry. Is there anything you want?”

I studied the picture of the boy from Rwanda that Aunt Sissy had adopted. “Just this one thing.”

pugilist

Standing in the cold, dark alleyway, I was sure I was going to die. Rain fell in buckets from a leaden sky that carried the reflected light of the city, an underbelly of grime and grit. I pulled my collar up against the cold rain filtering down my neck and breathed in and out through numb lips. Where were they? Why didn't they get on with it? If I was going to go down for this, then so be it! Let them come!

“Hey, kid, watcha’ doin’?”

I whirled. It was Uncle Slats. “Slats? You got no bizness in this alleyway. Go home.”

Uncle Slats was small and wiry with a short buzz cut of white hair and a wrinkled face. His bright blue eyes burned in the meager light of the alleyway. He was wearing a gray hoody soaked to the skin. “You the one goin’ home. Get on home. Now!”

I glanced over my shoulder down the alleyway. “Uncle Slats, if I go home, I won’t have no one to go home to no more.”

“I know that. How much ya’ in for?” Rain ran off of his bushy eyebrows.

“10 big ones, Uncle Slats. I’m gonna’ take care of this.” I swallowed and wiped rain out of my hair. I was shivering and my heart was racing. I was gonna puke.

“Listen here, Sam. Ya’ made a mistake. Go home and take care of the little one. She needs you. I’ll handle these jerks.” He shrugged out of his hoody and tossed it aside. His arms were thin and muscled covered with a dozen tattoos. His hands were taped and he gripped them into fists. “I used to be a prize winning pugilist. I done lived my life, Sam. I made my mistakes and somehow, the Good Lord let me get this far. You go home. Let me handle this for you. And, don’t you go foolin’ with these hoodlums no more. Got it?”

I was sick and cold and shaking. Truth was, I had no idea how to throw a punch. I grabbed Slats in a bear hug and held him close while my tears mixed with the rain. “I love you, Uncle Slats. I love you.” I pushed him away and ran down the alleyway. I heard them come from the other end and I heard Uncle Slats curse and scream and then I heard the slap of meat on meat. He was taking it for me. For me! I ran and didn’t turn back.

rattle around in a cage

The freezing water hit me full force in the face and knocked me back against the metal bars. It was like getting shot by a thousand BBs. I turned my back to the stream of water and gasped for breath. As my vision cleared, I made out the fence just outside the bars and the red brick walkway beyond that. Where was I?

The water stopped and I tried to gather my thoughts. I had been asleep, deeply asleep nestled against my wife's warm back in our bed dreaming of snow capped mountains and a stream filled with trout and then, cold water!

I slowly stood up gripping the bars with my stiff hands. I was naked and I smelled to high heaven. My hand went to my face. A stiff growth of beard.

"Welcome to heaven, friend." Someone boomed behind me.

I whirled. He was short and round and dressed in a clown's suit with flaming red hair and a big red nose. He held his enormous shoes in one hand and water dripped from them slowly onto the hay covered floor of . . . a cage?

"My shoes got caught in the cross fire." He said. He had huge, red painted lips and large blue circles around his eyes.

"What is happening? Where am I?"

The clown frowned. "They didn't tell you? When will they get their orientation programs back on line?" He shook more water from his shoes and slid his bare feet into them. "Do you want to be a caveman or Abraham Lincoln?"

I gasped in confusion and wiped water from my long hair and my beard. "What?"

"That beard could work either way." He forced a smile on his huge red painted lips. "Look, you better straighten up and get with the program. Or, they'll bring out the prods."

"They?"

He pointed over his shoulder. I finally looked at the huge cage we were in, the metal bars, the hay covered floor. A large bowl with water at the far corner. Another bowl with chunks of brown bread. "Please tell me I'm still dreaming."

The clown lumbered over in his huge shoes and leaned in close. "I don't want the prod, you understand? Just play along. Pick a role to play. Rattle around in a cage for a while and they'll let you live. Got it?"

He turned and spoke to someone on the opposite side of the cage from which the water had come. I didn't understand a word he said. I was shaking now and I walked slowly across the hay covered floor toward the front of the huge cage. Dark shapes were moving down the red walkway, shambling and halting in a disturbing pattern of movement that was, in no way, human. The sky was green and on the far horizon two suns were peeking over orange mountains. I peeked over the clown's shoulder and the thing that had hosed me down. I wasn't in Kansas anymore!

real world

Something had just jerked my cork under the water and the fishing line had gone taut when the bushes rustled behind me. I glanced over my shoulder recalling that one time old Norman had claimed he had a black bear in one of his pine trees. The pole jerked in my grip and I stood up, torn between finally catching Old Jackson, as they called him and being wary of whatever was creeping up on me from the bushes. I knew the fence of wooden slats would protect me from the dangers of the world. But, a bear would be so much larger than my palisade.

The rustling sound stopped and I decided to tempt fate and try and land Old Jackson. They say he was the largest catfish in Twelve Mile Bayou. My uncle said he almost landed him once about fifteen years ago and when he rolled out of the water for a second, Uncle Foots said he must have weighed fifty pounds! My pole bowed under the tension of the struggling fish and I smiled. It had to be Old Jackson! Be careful, now, I told myself. Give him some slack and let the line out and . . .

“You catching Old Jackson?”

I flinched and the pole jerked out of my hand and sailed across the water and disappeared from sight. I cursed and whirled, fists raised to face the person who had interrupted my perfect day of fishing. It wasn’t a black bear that had come out of the blueberry bushes. It was a tall, young man with a shock of blonde hair and striking green eyes who had stepped nimbly over the fence and invaded my solitude. He was wearing a faded pair of jeans and a pale, blue tee shirt. He smiled at me as my mouth fell open.

“Hey, Dad. Sorry about the fishing pole. Didn’t mean to scare you.” His eyes flashed in the sunlight off of the bayou.

I dropped my fists and just looked at him. It had been so long. In fact, I could hardly remember what he looked like the last time I had seen him. Seemed there had been a cut on his head? I blinked and reached over and pulled him to me.

“Justin! What are you doing here?” I held him close and inhaled the fragrance of his mom’s fabric softener on his shirt. He still wore that cheap after shave. I pushed him away and frowned. “How did you find me?”

Justin laughed and rubbed his chin. “You brought me here when I was six. Remember. We put the boat in right over there.” He pointed to a boat launch cut into the red clay of the bank of the bayou. “You took me out fishing and I found a plug in the bottom of the back of the boat. Remember?”

I swallowed and looked away from the boat launch. “Yeah, how could I forget. You pulled the plug and the boat started sinking.”

He slapped my shoulder. He was strong. "Yeah, Dad. I kept telling you, 'The boat is sinking!' and you couldn't hear me over the boat motor. And, I kept screaming and screaming until you cut the motor and then you could hear me from here to Blanchard!"

I smiled at the memory. It was a warm, comfortable sensation in the back of my head. I nodded. "I remember. It took us forever to get the plug back in and then I had to bail out the water. . ."

"And, we never caught any fish." He chuckled and I saw something red and moist drip from his lip. I blinked and it disappeared. My heart was racing. I didn't know why.

"Son, why are you here?"

His clear, green eyes flashed in the sunlight and he frowned. "I came to get you, Dad. You need to come back."

I glanced over his shoulder at the wooden fence and shook my head. "I'm not coming back! No, sir! Not coming!" I backed away from him and felt nauseous. I turned my gaze out over the bayou. Old Jackson rolled out of the water near the far shore. He must have weighed one hundred pounds. My fishing line was wrapped all around his body. I shivered. "Go away."

"Dad, I just got here." I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"You can't be real. The dead don't rise." I muttered.

"I'm not dead, Dad. I'm alive." He said so close to my ear. I closed my eyes. This couldn't be real.

"Go back on the other side of the fence. Go away."

"I won't."

"What is there to come back for? You're gone. Mom just cries and sulks. The house is a tomb. Your ashes are right at home on the mantle." I watched Old Jackson roll one last time and sink into the bayou. The waters grew red with his blood.

"Dad, I'm here because the Lord let me come. You can't stay here. It's not what I fought for and not what I died for." Justin was so close to my ear. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"No! You're not real. This is real. This bayou. This place. That fence." I felt the tears fill my closed eyes. Justin put his hands on my arms. His grip was strong. Powerful. Like the last time I had taken his hand in mine. Like the last time I had . . .

“You were angry with me when I left. You called me a coward.” He whispered.

“I know.” I sobbed. “I was wrong. You are brave. You are not a coward.”

“I died for what I believed in, Dad. I chose to go. You have to accept that. I was a man. Now, I’m far more than that. You still have a lot of living to do. You still have Ceilly and Robert. They need their mom and dad. You need to come back. Please, Dad. Come back!” His grip loosened and I fell backward in the sudden release expecting to feel the hard earth and I felt, instead, the loops of fishing line all around me, closing down my arms and my legs and I couldn’t breath and I saw Old Jackson’s eyes flash in the sunlight white and dead as he rolled and rolled and I fought the pain and the grief and the loss and the fishing line until it broke in shuddering relief and I was free.

I sat up and opened my eyes. My wife looked up from her book, her figure slumped in the chair and she gasped. She hurried over to my hospital bed and touched my face.

“Welcome back, honey.”

refection

Re, Con, In, and De were playing in the backyard when the comet fell over the distant mountains and ignited the sky. I was standing at the kitchen basin cleaning a ptero Hek had brought in the evening before. He and his brooding buddies were always giving in to the need to hunt and slash and . . . anyway -- males! Just once I wish they would stay home and watch the eggs!

And now, this. I watched the sky catch on fire and clouds orange and red spread towards us like the lava that flowed over in Petri Valley. I dropped the ptero wing and barked to the children. They had seen the comet falling from the dark sky and were standing open-mawed studying the glistening sky. With the sound of my echo, they ran into the house and huddled around my tail.

“Mom, what is happening?” De asked. She wore a pretty red teerex scale over her right eye. She said it made her future mate, Rhino happy. But, the way things looked, there would be no future.

“A comet fell from the sky, honey. That’s all.” I tried to put a reassuring tone in my voice.

Re stomped across the room to the far corner and rummaged around in the shrew cage. He pulled that nasty, hairy thing out of its cage and clamped it to his chest. “What about Shrew?” He squeezed it until its eyes bulged.

Con, the drama queen shrieked, “Who cares about the mammals? We’re all going to die!”

Something sparkled in the air and a thing coalesced out of thin air. It was tall and skinny and had two arms and two legs like most of us but its eyes were on the front of his head and his nose was small and his mouth was small and he had fur on the top of his head. He had ptero wings spread out behind him but they were covered with the most curious form of fur. “Are you Mrs. Fection?”

I blinked both eyelids in confusion. Where had this creature come from? “Yes and here are my children, Con, De, In and . . .”

“Re Fection.” Re stepped forward without fear. “Are you going to save Shrew? He’s my favorite mammal.”

The creature’s mouth turned up at the corners, some kind of expression of emotion. “I am an angel of the Lord. I’m sorry to tell you that the Lord has decided that you and your kind need to be turned into petroleum products for the future mammals. But, Re Fection, don’t worry about Shrew. His kind will inherit the earth and one day they will remember you with fondness and make movies about you and build theme parks about you and make toys about you.”

I watched the fire spread outside the windows of our home, eating away the trees and grass, burning the earth clean. I knew we shouldn’t have sided with that serpent!

revisit

“If you do not tell me what I need to know, the pain will only get worse.”

I lifted my head and it felt as if the top of my skull was going to explode. I tried to open my one good eye to see my interrogator more clearly, but blood ran across my vision. I blinked and even that hurt. “I’ve been telling you,” I lisped through my swollen lips, “everything I know. I was hiking through the mountains. I had no idea I was in your country.”

The man moving in the shadows on the other side of the bright light chuckled. I could only see a bare silhouette of him even when my vision cleared. “That is what they all say, young man. Hiking? In those mountains? No one in their right mind would ever hike through those mountains for pleasure. I can assure you.” He stepped closer to the light and in the meager backscatter I could see a monocle on his right eye. A monocle! “When I was a mere teenager, I was drafted into our young man’s army and we had to march through those mountains. We started with forty young men and we returned with only ten. I was among the ten. And, that is why I am standing here today and you are bound in that chair. I know what it is like in those mountains. And no one, NO ONE, hikes there for leisure!”

I saw his spit shower into the cone of light. He was breathing hard and when he turned, I saw the swastika on his shoulder. All he needed was a riding crop to swat against his leg and an evil German accent to complete the picture.

“Look, I don’t know who you think you are or where I am. The Nazis were defeated decades ago. What are you? Some kind of Neo-Nazi? In eastern Europe?” Spit drooled from my swollen lip and I felt it run down my chin.

The man paused and whipped around. “Neo-Nazi? What kind of nonsense is this? I belong to the Party and I am loyal to the Fuehrer. Do not question my loyalty or my determination to get to the bottom of your subterfuge. You Americans are all alike. So proud. So arrogant. You held back from getting into this war because you thought you were better than anyone else in the world . . .”

“And, I get it. You are better. The master race. Aryan nation. Yada, yada, yada. Look, who put you up to this? Ralph? Or, maybe Mace? They would go for some kind of sick joke like this. Where are they anyway?”

The Nazi stepped fully into the light. His face was severe and gaunt and his eyes held a deep evil that made me gasp, hurting the ribs on the right side of my chest. He was in full SS uniform and the cruelty of his gaze behind the monocle was undeniable. He smiled and drew closer to me. “Your friends did not fare as well with the interrogation. They are both dead and even now are under the knife of one of my vivisectionists. You will follow soon enough.”

My heart raced and I tried to draw a painful breath. “But, how can this be? It’s 2011. You guys don’t exist. You were defeated.”

The Nazi raised his left eyebrow and rubbed his chin. “2011? Could it be? We were wondering where you obtained the advanced technology hidden away in your back packs.”

I looked away. We had been hiking along the trail and there had been that weird lightning and greenish tint to the sky and we had run into that cave to get away from the lightning. “Lightning. Green sky. Sound familiar?” I whispered.

“Ah, Herr Doctor Brimm and his collision machine! Yes, he was aiming it at the mountain top. It was supposed to set up resonating pulses that would pulverize rock. But, perhaps it had another surprising side effect.” He tapped a long, spidery finger on his chin and took the monocle from his eye. He gestured with it as he paced back and forth. “If he did succeed in somehow bringing you back to the past, it would be most fortunate for me.” He halted and whirled. His eyes widened. “You said we were defeated?”

I swallowed. This couldn’t be happening. “Yes. Hitler committed suicide.”

The slap caught me off guard and blood and sweat showered the nearby rock wall. It sizzled on the hot lamp. “Do not speak that way of the Fuehrer! He would never commit suicide!”

I licked my lips and looked back at the Nazi. “Just because you don’t want it to happen, doesn’t change anything.”

He was silent for a moment, frozen in thought. He leaned forward and I saw the bright lines of red in the whites of his eyes. I saw the arteries pulsing in his forehead. He smiled. “You may be wrong. Let us revisit your past and see if we can make a new future.”

safehouse

“Agent Molder?”

He looked up from his comic book and finally focused on me. “Yeah, what is it, Miss Scoley?”

I glanced through the slats of the window shade. Bright sunlight from outside blinded me for a moment. It had been days since I had been outside. “There’s a man across the street.”

Molder turned the page of his comic book. “Does he have a gun?”

I rolled my eyes. “If he had a gun, I would tell you. He’s on the roof of the house.”

Molder slowly stood up, straightened his loose tie and picked up a piece of cold pizza as he crossed the living room. He took a bite and chewed. “What’s he doing?”

I lifted the slat wider. “He’s got some kind of tubular thing. I guess it might be a gun.”

Molder leaned past me, his cheek brushing my shoulder I smelled oregano on his breath as he chomped the cold, tough pizza. “Nope. Television antenna.” He backed away and started looking around the room.

I dropped the slat and whirled on him. “No one uses television antennas anymore.”

“Antennae.” He corrected me.

“Molder, you are not a very good agent. All you do is lay around and eat pizza and read comic books.”

Molder found a partially consumed can of soda. He slurped it down, cut his dark, brown eyes at me and burped. “Ah, that was a good one.”

I waved away the nauseating odor of stale pizza and root beer. “I want someone else. Now.” I stomped my foot. Molder looked down at my high heel shoes.

“Why do you dress up every day? We’re not going out anywhere.” He slumped back on the couch.

“If I dress up, then there is the possibility that I might get to walk out that door. There is a possibility I might go back to a normal life. I dress up because you are boring!” I crossed my arms and turned back to the window.

“Miss Scoley, this is your life right now. Get use to it.” Molder was back in the comic.

I glanced across the street. The man on the roof had erected the tube and from its tip, a tiny red light was blinking. He took out a can of spray paint and began to spray bright orange paint. "Now he has a pylon and a can of spray paint. I think he's putting up a signal."

Molder bolted up from the couch. "A signal?" He tilted his head to see out the slit I had opened in the slats.

"This is it, Molder."

"Hot damn!" Molder jumped across the coffee table and picked up the grenade launcher from the corner. "I can't wait to see this baby in action." He patted the bulging, shiny plasma grenade on the end of the barrel.

"Shall I open the door?" I pranced across the living room. "This is why I got dressed. To celebrate the end of our partnership."

Molder belched again and squatted in the foyer, his gun aimed at the door. I leaned forward and peered through the peephole. The blinking pylon beckoned and the man morphed into a six legged creature with two heads. Just above him, the silver saucer appeared out of nowhere. "Ready?" I breathed.

"As ever."

I threw open the door, stepped out of the way, and Molder aimed the launcher. Across the street, the creature glanced our way as the saucer touched the roofline. Molder pressed the trigger and the specially designed plasma grenade thundered through the open door. The creature tried to push the saucer away, but it was too late. The grenade impacted on the undersurface. Fiery red plasma erupted from the grenade and engulfed the entire house and the saucer. The plasma burned red hot changing to white before dissipating in a hot, greasy cloud of white smoke that shot up into the sky. The lot across the street was now empty.

Molder jumped up and did a victory dance. I closed the door and adjusted my hair. "And now that the alien safe house is no more, let's go get something to eat. I'm hungry for crawfish."

searching

I was beyond tire, bone tired, dead dog tired, weary, exhausted, and just plain done with it all. I had reached the Fringe, that part of the Alliance on the edge of known space where the SWAG engines couldn't find a purchase for their wormholes and where the Alliance Police Enforcement, or APEs as they were known, had scant jurisdiction. Morgagnis III was your typical Fringe world filled with outcasts and criminals and APEs who accepted bribes and turned the other cheek. There were outlawed Christians here and dispersed Jews and a dozen other religious fanatics pushed out of the mainstream in the Alliance. I had saved this area for the last but at this point, I didn't care anymore.

The absolute worst pub on the planet was in the absolute worst city on Morgagnis III and was called the Diddly Dud, a hangout for halfsapes and geneered subhumans. I deserved it. It was where I should end up. Only the worst failures wound up in the Diddly Dud. And, most of those who did die there. In fact, the wall behind the bar was covered with the pale, bleached bones of patrons who had died in the pub. I read somewhere the wall had been replaced with new bones over a hundred times in the past two hundred years.

“Sape or halfsape?” The bardroid asked. He had a metal scrap welded over one eye. His voice was only half amplified and he spoke with an echo.

“Sape.” I mumbled and perched on the bar stool. “Synthahol 22.”

The bardroid put a chipped glass of green, sudsy fluid in front of me. “Better a bottle in front of me, me, me than a frontal lobotomy, me, me, me.”

I rolled my eyes at his attempt at humor. “Save it. I’m not laughing.” I downed the Synthahol 22 in one gulp. It was nasty and had traces of methanol and gear grease in it. But, it would do the trick. Maybe I would end up on the wall.

I slammed the glass back on the bar and gasped. “What I wouldn’t give for a pina colada.” I said.

The bardroid froze and his one good eye blinked. “Did you say pina colada?”

“Yeah.” I belched and tapped the glass. “Hit me again. Don’t expect you to know what an pina colada is. No pineapple in deep space. Haven’t had one of those since I left Earth.”

The bardroid poured me another shot of the Synthahol 22. “I did some research on the pina colada. I had to make one just yesterday.”

I froze and looked at his good eye. “What? You made a pina colada?”

“Would you like one? I will need your credits ahead of time as the synthesis is expensive.”

“No, I don’t want one. Look, there’s scarcely a sapien in the Alliance who remembers pina coladas. One of them is someone I’ve been looking for. Twenty two years I’ve searched. And, I had given up. Who did you make the pina colada for?”

The bardroid motioned over my shoulder. “The patron in that booth over there.”

I tossed him my credit chips and hurried across the smoky, oily interior. I tripped over a bone piled against a column and arrived at the booth. The figure sitting there was hidden beneath a robe and cowl.

“Excuse me, do you like pina coladas?”

The woman who looked out from beneath the cowl was older than I remembered, her face lined with fine wrinkles and the stress of twenty two years of servitude to the Drakons who had kidnapped her on our wedding night. A faint smile creased her face. “And, walking in the rain. Is it you?”

“Yes.” My heart burst with hope and love and the years seemed to melt away. My searching had come to an end.

see a movie

“So, you’ve been asleep for 126 years?”

I stared at the thin woman standing before me. She had long, white hair and was dressed in translucent, shiny jumpsuit. I cleared my throat. “I wasn’t supposed to be asleep at all. I was a test subject and something happened.”

“Planet of the Apes.” She smiled.

“Excuse me?”

“Charlton Heston, the great human leader and the buried Statue. End of the world. 2012. Apocalypse Now.” She smiled again. “But, we pulled a Time Machine, First Contact, and we made a Brave New World.”

I tried to walk and stumbled to the window of the small room. The world before me was a mash up of marquees and chasing lights and billboards. Buildings towered into the sky and their walls were covered with glittering, gleaming posters advertising movies. Old movies even for me.

“I don’t understand? What happened to the world?”

“We learned about your world and we re-created it to the frame.” She threw the hair out of her face and smiled again. I realized where I had seen her. Ginger Rogers in a gown dancing with Fred Astaire.

“What was your source material?” My mouth was dry.

“The Vault. All of your historical records were saved in the Holly Wood Vault. Now we learn everything we need to know. Would you care to dance?”

“I’m not quite stable yet. Maybe I’ve had some brain damage during my hibernation. Who’s in charge?”

“No. Who’s on first?” She spun around and her dress swirled majestically. “Look, I can Catch 22 you up real quick.”

“How?”

“Take you to see a movie. We have millions of them.” She waltzed out of the room. “What’s on second?”

see the sea

When I hit the water, I felt the fins explode from my feet. Pressure coursed down my legs and they adhered to each other. My neck could have been raked by a dozen deadly talons as the gills appeared. Nictating membranes descended over my eyes and I sucked in cold, salty water -- fighting the panic, fighting the fear, letting the frigid water pass through my mouth and out the new gills. I became a mermaid.

I kicked against the surging undertow toward the open sea and nothing happened. I glanced down and my feet and legs had not yet fused. My large fin was serrated and flapped helplessly in the water.

“Where are ye, my love?”

My heart raced. How could he still see me from the shore?

“Don’t think I don’t know yer secret, lass! You can’t get away from me.” His shadow shifted on the water. “You were promised to me by yer father and ye’ll be my wife. I know ye don’t like the idea of moving away from the sea to the mountains, but ye have no choice.”

I floated back toward the shoreline and wedged myself between two boulders. I concentrated on my legs, on the process of transformation. It had been so long since I had been in the sea. Could I have lost the magic?

“I see ye down there, lass. Ye’re not going away from Baron Lestrange! Ye’re to be my wife as ye promised.” A shadow passed over me and I looked up through the turbulent water at his bearded face beneath his bowler hat. His dark eyes, even from this distance carried the heavy weight of his anger and his evil nature.

I kicked and thrashed against the surging tide until finally, the tissues fused and my flipper was full and powerful. I stroked away from the boulders even as his shadow grew darker and fuller. His bowler hat landed on the water. His jacket, landed on the waves and spread out like an ugly stain. His body hit the waves with a mighty thud and I paused. Could he even swim? Did I dare care?

I floated to the surface and lifted my eyes above the water line. He was treading water a few yards away. His black eyes glittered with anger. “Ye told me ye just wanted to see the sea. I should’ve known ye were different. I should have known ye had yer secrets. Well, lassie, I have me own.”

I watched in horror as his nose elongated and his forehead slid backwards and his eyes moved aside and his open mouth gaped with huge, sharp teeth and soon this man, this hideous foul

creature I was supposed to marry leaped from the water a full formed shark. He hit the waves with resounding crash and I swam for my life.

serenity

I felt the electrode pierce the skin just behind my left ear. The doctor had been right. It hurt like hell until the tip of the ceramic needle made it through the bone.

“Temporal bone is pretty thick.” She said. She stood behind me and I couldn’t pull my head out of the bolts even if I wanted to see her face. She was a looker, though. It’s why I chose her.

“When will I feel different?” I asked. My lips felt thick and unresponsive thanks to the pre-med.

“Once I get the electrode in place, I’ll disconnect the pico tip and activate the nano chip. Now, hold still and try not to talk. I’m entering the temporal lobe. There we go.”

I was suddenly floating in space surrounded by green stars that zipped hurriedly about me like bees on speed. A black hole formed beneath my feet and Jerry Lewis stuck his head out. It was the young Jerry Lewis right after he broke up with Dean Martin.

“Hey, Lady! Where’s the blue whale?” His eyes goggled and he faded away as the room returned to normal.

“That was weird.” I mumbled.

“Sorry. Temporal lobe does a lot. Did you smell anything?”

“No. Just saw Jerry Lewis.”

The doctor chuckled and I felt the cool tips of her fingers on my forehead. “Now, I am about to enter the hippocampal region. This is the final destination. Are you sure you don’t want to back out now?”

I blinked. “I don’t have a choice. I can’t get it out of my mind. If you don’t succeed, I’ll be terminated.” I mumbled.

The doctor leaned forward and her beautiful jade eyes glittered above her surgical mask. “Mr. Smith, I know you have been worried sick for months now. This will end it all.”

“I just can’t get God out of my head.” I blinked more furiously and tears formed in my eyes. Lying on my back, they pooled and the doctor’s eyes were kaleidoscopes of jade and blue and green.

“This will do it. One click and God is gone. No more worries. No more prayers to pray. You’ll be finally and totally free, Mr. Smith. And, this surgery is guaranteed so you don’t have to worry about the government intruding on your private life again.”

I blinked away the tears and they ran down the side of my head. On the side where the electrode protruded, they pooled on the sterile cloth. “I’m going to miss Him.”

“I know. We all do. For a while. But, you’ll finally find total and complete serenity. Peace. Comfort. Acceptance.” She moved out of the line of vision.

I was somewhere else standing on a hillside surrounded by the odor of rotting flesh and blasted by a hot wind filled with flies and ashes. The world beneath was rotten and stony covered with a blanket of humanity clothed in robes and headdresses; sitting on donkeys; carrying lambs; all moving; all looking up at me.

I heard the moaning and groaning and turned around. The three men were barely recognizable on their crosses. Naked and covered with blood and flayed flesh and milling flies, they stank to high heaven. Soldiers in deep red robes and tarnished metal laughed and spat at the men’s feet. A woman sobbed in the arms of a young man. An arrogant figure in dark, severe robes with a long pepper gray beard stood in the shadow of the cross glaring up at the central figure.

“She’s about to pull the trigger, you know.” I smelled the man’s breath before I heard him. He was thin and boney and his eyes were as black as night. His tongue slithered in and out of his rotten teeth and his bare skull was covered with varicose veins. He rubbed his skeletal hands together as he giggled.

“Who are you?”

His gaze pulled painfully away from the center cross. **“I am what’s left when He is gone.”** He pointed to the cross. **“Too late now. She’s pulling the trigger. You wanted freedom. I give it to you.”** Drool ran from his lips and pooled on his stubbled chin. **“You don’t need God. You’ve got me.”**

Something snapped and the world spun and gyred around me, all dark, all black with spurts of bright red blood and whirlpools of dithering laughter and the crosses melted away and disappeared and the evil man’s laughing face filled my vision. I tried to run, to pull away, to hide from his hideous laughter but it was to no avail.

Light gushed into my open eyes and the doctor leaned over me and the doctor pulled her mask away. Her face was covered with pustules. Black blood leaked from the corners of her eyes and dripped cold and searing onto my cheek.

“There, just what the Darwin Institute ordered. No more God. Have fun.”

I fell into madness.

sits at his table

I didn't want to look at the boy cradling the deer head. He was 9 or 10 dressed in a threadbare white tee shirt and faded jeans. His feet were bare and their size testified to the boy's future prospects in pro basketball. His skin was dark and he had a multi-racial appearance hinting at several generations of diverse ancestors. His pale, green eyes were large and clear and he stared straight at me.

I shuffled the insurance papers in my folio and tried to look away. His mother was perched on the tattered couch dressed in a gray sweat shirt that swallowed her small figure and a denim skirt that covered her knees. She rolled her hair into a ball and tucked it neatly at the back of her head and pinned it in place with a chewed pencil.

"Mr. Snodgrass, I know I'm behind on my insurance payments but my boy has got to have his medicine." She pronounced boy with two syllables.

"Mrs. Green, I am not here to cancel your insurance. Since you have failed to cover the last three payments, you will have to apply for a new policy. Your late husband's pension plan was very specific that funds from it would be applied to an ongoing health care plan so you don't have to worry about losing your coverage." I smiled and she knew the 'but' was coming.

"But?" She rested her thin hands in her lap. "There's always a 'but'."

"Well, with the lapse of your previous coverage, we have to institute a new policy that will cost a bit more . . ." I felt the boy's eyes. His gaze was unrelenting. I glanced in his direction and he had shifted the tiny deer head to his other arm. "I'm sorry. Your son is so, intense."

"Most of the time he just sits at his table with that deer." She gestured with a tiny hand. It fluttered in the air like a wounded butterfly.

"So, is your son into taxidermy?" I asked trying to buy time to get back on track.

"No."

I looked at the deer head. It was small, probably a fawn. The eyes were liquid and gleaming and the nose was wet and dark. The fur seemed oiled and vibrant. At the base of the head, the skin of the neck had been tucked into a neat pucker. "Well, Mrs. Green, I am a hunter and fisherman and I've had a couple of deer heads mounted. My wife won't let me put them over the mantle, but . . ." I chuckled and Mrs. Green didn't smile. I felt the boy's gaze and sweat trickled on my neck. "I've never seen a job so well done."

"Daddy hit him with the car." The boy whispered. I flinched at his words and my papers dropped on the floor. "I couldn't help Daddy. He hit a tree after he hit the deer."

I averted my gaze from his penetrating eyes and started retrieving the papers from the floor. "I see. That would be the accident that cost your father his life."

"Momma wouldn't let me help Daddy. She don't understand. I don't need medicine." He whispered some more. His eyes kept burrowing into my head. "You got a tumor."

I froze and slowly stood up. "What?"

"You got a tumor in your lungs. It's cancer." He said. "I can help you. If you help my Momma, I'll get rid of it."

I blinked and put a hand on my chest. Just the day before I had coughed up some blood. I knew what it could mean. But, I was hoping . . . "Wait a minute! How can you know I have cancer?"

"God told me." He finally blinked. "I can help you like I helped the deer."

Mrs. Green stood up and stepped between us. "Maybe you should just go, Mr. Snodgrass. Just send me the new papers and I'll sign them. Just go. Now."

I pushed her gently aside and felt her chest shudder with a repressed sob. I looked at the boy sitting so quietly at his table. "How did you help the deer?"

He placed the deer head on the table with the neck down and pointed the thing's eyes at me. "I kept it alive." The deer's eyes blinked and a huge, pink tongue slid out from beneath its black lips and coated its nose with shiny fluid. I dropped the papers again and stumbled back, falling over the chair onto the dirty, false wood floor. Something boiled up inside of my chest and the pain was horrendous. I started coughing. Blood spackled the old couch and ran down my chin onto my shirt. I coughed and coughed until something vile and ragged flew out of my mouth and landed on the table. Mrs. Green helped me up from the floor. A fine spray of blood covered her face and I felt blood running down my chin. The thing on the table looked like a bloody oyster with tentacles. The boy scooped it up and offered it to the deer head. The pink tongue came out and slurped up the tumor.

"You're healed now, Mister." The boy's eyes were wild and powerful. I stumbled over my chair and headed for the front door. I burst through into the cold, morning air and for the first time in days took a deep breath that was not tinged with pain.

"Thank you, Mr. Snodgrass." Mrs. Green paused in the open doorway. She had a small tissue and was gently wiping my blood from her face. "You just send the papers, okay?"

"Don't you worry about it." I said. "I'll see that your insurance never lapses."

The boy appeared beside her, his pale green eyes flaring in the harsh morning light and the deer head was tucked under his right arm. "You be careful, Mr. Snodgrass." He whispered. "I can't help you from now on."

The deer rolled its eyes, licked its nose and I drove away in silence.

surfing

I banked off of a tweet and skidded into a youtube video of President Obama drinking beer and eating nuts and then bounced off of the policeman's head, hit the pipeline right into an entire set of wedding pics outside on the beach so, like yeah I actually did some real surfing right off of the Santa Monica coastline then back into LinkedIn where I grabbed some hot air under my board from a CEO and plunged deeper.

“Nine Billion Names of God. Nine Billion Names of God.” I recited. Old Arthur C. Clarke had written that story and I just knew if I surfed deep enough, hard enough, fast enough; if I caught the right wave I would find Him here somewhere buried in the info.

The last wave threw me through a splash of gunfire, dodging a sword and splattered with blood and I landed, skidding, my board sliding down the aisle of some kind of stained glass windowed cathedral right up to the nave.

I climbed off the board and the figure in front of me was backlit by rainbow light. He wore blue jeans and a black turtleneck and his glasses reflected the light of the cathedral onto the silver apple in his hand. He was chewing the bite he had taken out of the apple. He smiled.

“Magical, isn’t it?”

I had found my god!

take a ride

I was about to kiss her when I felt the cold metal against my neck and saw her face transform from ecstasy to cold, calculated evil. “Get in the car. Let’s take a ride.”

I frowned and tried to pull away from the barrel of her Glock 9 mil. She pressed it harder against my neck and leaned into me, her lips brushing my cheek. She whispered in my ear. “If you let them see the gun, I will kill you where you stand. Now, quietly, slowly open the car door and get in. Slide across the front seat to the far side and buckle yourself in.”

I opened the door and slid into my car. She followed closely, glancing once over her shoulder at the crowd milling about the carnival parking lot. For a second, her hair cascaded across her shoulder and the fragrance of her wafted over me. Why did it have to come to this? I liked her. A lot. I snapped my seat buckle into place as I relaxed into the passenger seat as much as I could under the circumstances.

She closed the door and held the pistol low and out of sight with its intimidating barrel pointed at my chest. “Start the car.” She said.

I fished in my pocket for my keys and I saw her tense. I slowed down and gingerly showed her the key chain. I put the key in the ignition. The engine growled but did not start. I twisted the key again. No luck. The engine refused to turn over. She glanced once at the dashboard. “What’s wrong with your car?”

“Got me. It started fine a while ago. You remember. When I picked you up at the restaurant and you suggested a fun evening at the carnival.”

She slowly smiled and laughed. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

“Shelley? Right? We met last week at the coffee shop.”

Shelley raised an eyebrow and rolled her eyes. “Does Dr. Manimba ring a bell? Your rival at Poly Tech?”

“That is what this is about? Manimba hired you to what? Kill me? Or, just scare me?”

“Sorry. I’m here to more than just scare you.” She shrugged.

“So, you’re a professional assassin?”

“I guess it doesn’t hurt to tell you. Yes.”

“How many people have you killed?”

Her stare grew flinty and cold. "Twenty seven."

"I see. Was one of them Todd Beason?"

She blinked. "Who?"

"Todd Beason." I leaned forward and took the key out of the ignition and switched it for another key. "He was my brother. A good man. His formula for micro cold fusion would have changed the world. But, someone hired you to kill him and steal the formula so it would never see the light of day."

Shelley drew a deep breath. "How could you know such a thing?"

I inserted the other key in the ignition. "I sent an email to Manimba. I'm the one suggested he hire you. He didn't know it was from me. But, he was the person who hired you to kill my brother. He's at home right now. By midnight, he'll be dead from a gunshot wound to the head. Your gun will be the one that kills him."

Before she could react, I snatched the gun out of her hand and turned the key. The circuit I had installed in the steering wheel responded to the special key and the air bag deployed, catching her in the face and rocketing her back in the seat. I had angled the head brace of the seat just right. And, yes, there was the snap. She relaxed in the car seat and the life faded from her eyes. She would be the victim of a terrible malfunction in my car. But, I wouldn't report it until after I had paid a visit to Manimba.

"Thanks for the ride." I said.

Thursday

“I will gladly give you cash on Thursday for a snack . . .”

I shoved the old homeless man away from me and he tumbled over the railing of the bridge. I heard him splash in the stream ten feet below.

“That was very rude.” Prudence said. She kept her arm tucked around mine and adjusted her parasol to give her more shade. “He can’t help himself. These homeless people are programmed that way. It’s in their genes, Harold.”

I sniffed and pulled the brim of my hat down on my forehead to give me more shade. “Such riffraff are a plague on society. They should be culled.”

Prudence tittered and motioned to a bench. “Shall we sit for a moment. I need to rest.”

I took her hand and helped her settle onto the park bench. She held her pink and white hoop skirt down with a gloved hand and repositioned the parasol to block the sun. “It is a shame that our world is contaminated with these lower lifeforms. There should be a law to keep them out of the public eye.”

I watched the homeless man climb out of the stream. His faded denim shirt was plastered to his skinny frame and his blue jeans were filled with holes that drained bits of plant matter and mud. He milked the muck from his beard and he glared at me. He mouthed something in my direction and I frowned at him. Such behavior towards his superiors!

“They are lucky we let them have what little life they experience.” I tasted black blood on my lips and licked it away.

Prudence nodded and her nose fell onto the folds of her dress. She squealed and scooped it up in one quick fluid motion and tried to press it back in place. “Harold! Help me!”

I took off my glove and reached out and took her nose and tried to press it back onto her bony face. Black goo squirted out of my palm onto her cheek. She winced and dropped the parasol. When the sun hit her face, skin blistered and ruptured. “Now look what you’ve done.” She screamed at me and her jaw came unhinged. The flesh over her chin stretched and tore and the jaw fell onto the grass. “Now, I need a snack!”

I glanced back over my shoulder. The homeless man was making his way along the path toward the woods. “Hey, old man!” I yelled after him and I felt my tongue tumble from my mouth. “I gotttt a nack for youoooo!”

title

Maynard Morgan stood on the rise overlooking his corn field. It was a paltry garden, less than an acre. But, half of it was covered with tall, green corn stalks with wispy tassels moving in the breeze. The other half of the garden was rich with the verdant green of black eyed pea bushes, okra leaves as big as notebook paper, cucumbers, watermelons and the pale, yellow orbs of cantaloupes.

Maynard had spent the last thirty years soaking this land with his sweat, his blood, and his tears. Out past the garden in the back five acres was the graveyard where he had buried Minnie not two seasons before. Now, he stood in the early morning hours with the sky tinged pink with the promise of a new day. Clouds had moved in along the horizon and the rising sun burned their undersurface with coral blush and fiery orange. A gentle breeze played over his well tanned and lined face and he pushed his cap up from his forehead.

“Papaw, whatcha doing?”

Maynard glanced down at his grandson, Sean. He was four years old with long, curly blonde hair and bright blue eyes. He word a pair of overalls just like his Papaw’s only his were as red as the tomatoes ripening on the other side of the corn. “Just looking at my garden, son. Just looking.”

Sean reached out and grabbed his hand. “Can we pick the corn?”

“Not now. Ain’t ready yet.” Maynard felt the delicate, soft skin of his grandson. His own hands were hard, and cracked, and calloused. The breeze picked up some more and carried with it the fragrance of new rain tinged with the edge of ozone. Lightning flashed on the undersurface of the clouds.

“Is it gonna rain?” Sean asked.

“Yep. Storm’s coming.” Maynard whispered. He checked his pocketwatch, opening the old, gold lid and studying the faded numbers. His father had given him the watch on his deathbed. It had belonged to his father’s father, too. It wouldn’t be long now. He closed the pocketwatch and released the chain from his overalls. He squatted in front of Sean.

“How would you like to have a prize?” He held up the watch.

Sean’s eyes grew wide in surprise. “Is that mine?”

“You can have it. Just take care of it. It’s almost a hundred years old.” Maynard tucked the watch in Sean’s tiny hands.

“Almost as old as you.” Sean said.

Maynard chuckled and heard the first car pull into his driveway. He glanced over Sean's shoulder at the black SUV coming down the driveway, kicking up red dust. He pointed to his two story house and the back porch where Minnie's mobiles wheeled and spun in the growing wind. She had made each and every one from bits and pieces of their lives together.

"Sean, you go on inside and show your momma, okay. Go show her the watch."

Sean glanced once at the huge black SUV as it ground to a halt ten feet away and then ran toward the porch. A tall woman in a severe gray suit climbed out of the SUV. Her hair was perfect until a gust of wind swirled it into the air.

"Mr. Morgan? Mr. Maynard Morgan?" She walked over to him.

"That would be me."

"You're under arrest. And," she pulled a sheaf of papers out of her inner coat pocket, "I am here to foreclose on this farm. You no longer have the title."

Maynard shook his head. "I got behind a little on my payments is all. You can take the land if you want. You can throw me in jail, but this property will never belong to you or to anyone. God just loans it to us. But, he holds us responsible for what we do with it."

Another figure climbed out of the other side of the SUV and the man's dark coat swirled in the coming rain revealing the three letters, FBI. He pulled a set of handcuffs out of his pocket. Maynard glanced up at the house.

"My grandson is watching. Do you really have to use those?"

The woman tried to push her hair back away from her face. "Not if you cooperate."

Maynard slid into the cool, dry interior of the backseat of the SUV as the first drops of rain hit the roof like bullet fire. Hail followed and the raucous sound was deafening. The FBI agents climbed into the car and turned it around. As they headed down the driveway, he saw his daughter's pale face in the window and his grandson holding the pocketwatch.

asleep in the trees

Continued from title

“Is that where Mamaw is buried?” Sean placed a tiny hand on the tombstone.

His mother nodded and knelt beside her four year old son. He still clung to the pocketwatch his grandfather had given him just hours ago right before he had been arrested and taken away from their farm. She touched the name and dates on the tombstone.

“Yes, baby. My mother is right here.” She whispered.

Sean looked around at the other gravestones. “And, who is in there?”

She stood up and wiped a tear from her eye. Above her, the tall pine trees swayed in the dying winds of the storm that had just blown across the pasture and woodlands that once were her father’s. “Well, over there is Papaw’s mother and daddy. And over here is Papaw’s grandmother and grandfather.” She stopped and fought back a sob. She placed a hand on her mouth and swallowed.

“And right there is Daddy.” She managed.

Sean nodded and looked around at the trees and the little alcove carved out of the woods deep in the land that would have one day been his. “They’re asleep in the trees, aren’t they?”

She smiled and knelt beside him again. “Yeah, baby, they are. Just waiting for the trumpet to blow.”

Sean held up the pocketwatch. “Where did Papaw go with those people?”

“Well, honey, he is in trouble. He couldn’t pay the back taxes on our land and they want to talk to him.” She fought back another wave of sorrow. All of this would be gone, taken away by the foreclosers on the property just because of a late payment or two. She sat back suddenly on the sodden earth with the realization that she had no place to go. When her husband had been killed in Iraq, she had gotten a small, meager pension but that was not enough to support her and her son. She looked at the tombstone with her mother’s name carved into the gray surface.

“Momma, what am I going to do?”

“Who you talking to, Mom?” Sean swung the pocketwatch by its chain.

“Sometimes, baby, I come out here and I imagine that Mamaw is sitting right up there on the top of that tombstone and I just talk to her.” She ran a hand through his curly, blonde hair.

“Sort of like an imaginary friend?”

“Yeah, sort of like that.”

“Sort of like when I talk to my angel?” Sean had the pocketwatch in his hands and was opening and closing the cover.

His mother blinked in confusion. “Your angel?”

“His name is Ralph. He comes and sits on the bed sometimes at night. He is nice and he told me to pray for Papaw.” Sean looked over her shoulder and smiled. “He’s right over there.”

His mother jumped up from the ground and spun around. The woods were empty. “Now, son, I know you miss your father . . .”

“Ralph told me to open the watch.” Sean held it up for her. She turned away from the empty forrest and her fear for her sanity and looked down at the watch. Somehow, Sean had not only opened the front of the watch, but he had opened the lid on the back of the watch. It had two compartments. She took the watch gingerly from Sean and studied the etchings and writings on the inside surfaces of the back compartment. “Given to Reuben Morgan by Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania November, 1863.” She smiled.

“Baby, I believe in your angel. He just saved this land and your Papaw.” She looked around at the secrets buried in the woods. Hope was asleep in the trees and it was time to wake it up!

tomorrow

The old woman's face was lined with deep, dark wrinkles like the powdered surface of a prune. She hummed gently to herself as she rocked ever so slightly in the big chair on the porch. Her white hair was pulled up into a bun on the back of her head. The sun was just rising over the eastern ridge of mountains and the bright, orange rays of warmth played over her face.

She gasped and stopped rocking and opened her eyes. Brown as deep as dark chocolate rimmed with white her pupils constricted with the brightness of a coming day and she shook her head.

"Lord, ain't it a wonderful day you done given me. Lord, ain't it beautiful!" She whispered hoarsely and smiled.

The door into the cabin opened and Gerald peeked out. His face was shiny with sweat and his short, dark hair was peppered with gray. He wore a stained thermal underwear shirt tucked into black pants held up by suspenders. His breath streamed in the morning air.

"It is sure cold out here. Don't you want to come in by the fire?" He shivered.

"I want to sit here until it's time." The old woman said and commenced to rocking again. "Until it's time."

Gerald shook his head and disappeared through the door. It opened again and he stepped out onto the porch into the orange and red flames of the morning sun. He wore a dark green coat and had pushed a worn felt hat over his bare head.

"Mamaw, I can't keep leaving you out here. It's so cold and if you'd just come in by the fire."

Mamaw shook her head and frowned. The wrinkles deepened on her face. "He cain't find me in there. He can only find me in the light, son. You know that."

Gerald leaned against the rail on the porch and sighed. He stared into the rising sun. "That's what you said yesterday. And, the day before. And, the day before that."

"And, I'll keep saying it today and tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow and the tomorrow after that." Mamaw tapped her finger on the arm of her rocker with each word. "I'm not going until He comes for me."

Gerald turned and stared at her. "You are one stubborn woman."

"And, He is one stubborn God. He made me a promise, son. He came to me in a dream."

“Yes ma’am. I’ve heard all about the dream. Jesus came to you and said you wouldn’t die before He came again.” Gerald shook his head. “There’s those who’d think you was crazy. There’s those who think I’m crazy for letting you sit here day after day waiting for the trumpet to sound.”

Mamaw smiled. “Thank you for having faith, son. I’ll be waiting right here until tomorrow. You’ll see. One day He’s coming back for all of us and I’m living to see that day!”

Gerald shook his head and glanced once more at the sun rising over the far mountains and hills painting a new day in crimson and fire. “How long you going to wait?”

“Long as it takes. Been here a century and a quarter. Figure one more day won’t hurt. He’ll come for me someday. Some tomorrow. You’ll see.” Mamaw said and pulled her dark shawl around her shoulders.

Gerald shook his head in dismay and went back in the house. Mamaw rocked gently in her chair and hummed.

“Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away . . .”

velvet

Written on the occasion of Ray Bradbury's 91st birthday.

Major Bartlett tapped the fuel gauge one last time. It didn't change. The needle pointed to "Empty". He strained against his shoulder harness to gaze out the viewport. Could he make it?

Below his spaceship, the red surface of Mars rolled past in shades of orange and crimson. His haggard face reflected back at him from the viewport. His eyes were limpid and strained. The ship was never meant to be handled by one man. But, the other three were gone. Dead. Sucked into the dark, hungry embrace of empty space, their souls wandering the cold corridor of night forever.

Branson was supposed to keep an eye on the navigation. With him out of the picture, Bartlett had wasted too much fuel correcting the course after the accident. Now, with the fuel tanks empty, he would be the first man to land on Mars. But, he would not be the first living man to radio back from Mars.

"I tried to tell you." The voice echoed behind him. Bartlett closed his eyes and put his fingers in his ears.

"You are not real. I'm just hallucinating."

In the viewport, the reflection of Branson appeared. His hair was frozen to his scalp and his skin was covered with frost. His eyes were empty sockets. His lips moved like pale worms. "I am very real. If you had only listened. I could have helped you with the navigation."

"Leave him alone." Lieutenant Bigelow appeared beside him. Her dark skin was dotted with frozen chunks of flesh and her eyes were white lumps of ice. Bartlett closed his eyes in sorrow. He recalled the feel of her velvet skin and the fragrance of her hair.

"Both of you just go away." He whispered. Mars rolled on beneath him, closer and closer, faster and faster.

"Honey, I can help you reprogram the computers. You can squeeze one last blast from the tanks. There is always a little reserve left over." Bigelow spoke in his right ear. Her breath was frigid and smelled like freezer burned meat.

“Listen to her, Bartlett.” Captain Akira’s helmeted head floated into view outside the viewport. He was not frozen and appeared no worse for wear. “I am your Captain, and you will land this ship on Mars. We will not have died in vain.”

Bartlett slammed his fist against the cold, hard viewport. “All of you just go away. You can’t help me. It’s over!”

Bigelow blinked her white eyes. “Honey, it’s our fault. We had a spat in the airlock.”

“I told you not to sleep with him.” Branson glared at Bigelow with his empty eyes. “We had Paris, remember?”

“And, John and I were going to have Mars, you pig.” She glared at Branson.

“I tried to stop you two from arguing in the airlock.” Akira said. “You will not endanger the final conclusion of this mission.”

Bartlett closed his eyes. “It doesn’t matter. Even if I land safely, there’s no fuel to get home. We lost it all in the explosion.”

“But you can land.” Akira spoke softly. “Make us proud. Make Ray Bradbury proud. He was your favorite author, right?”

Bartlett sighed. Images of an illustrated man, an African veldt, a Martian with a gun, carnival popcorn, carousels, dandelion wine all ran through his head fast and warm and calming. His feet stained with red clay dangling from the tree branch in a tall tree while he hid from his brother and sister so he could finish reading *Fahrenheit 451*. His fear and trembling as his breath came fast and hard beneath the sheets of his bed, his flashlight illuminating *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. His dreams of space ships of *R* is for rocket of endless rains on Venus all were there piled up in his memory, the substance and core of his ambition and his love of the stars. Akira was right. It didn’t matter if he lived beyond the landing. He had to land. He had to walk on the red planet. If not for himself, for Ray.

“Okay,” he looked up at the reflections of the ghosts of his colleagues. Beyond the viewport, the red soil of Mars whirled and danced and beckoned. “Let’s land this rocket. I will walk on Mars!”

wasting my time

Nimbledy Diddleydee Doodledee Dum
You're Wasting Your Time
Considering this plum
Of prose and fiction and farcical crap
While dancing on thimbles and wearing red caps
Oh, my the last cap was singular still
Perhaps the crap should be plural as well

So sitting and thinking, unrolling the roll
I wonder just what time I've spent on the dole
A fly is landing across the bright room
Perhaps I could kill him if I had a short broom
The telephone rings in the outside room
Someone is dialing and dialing the tomb

The dead cannot hear nor can they foresee
What awaits our souls at the end of melee
We tumble and gyre and frolic away
The hours and weeks and, yes, the day
For time has no meaning unto its own self
Time is our way of writing of "pelf"

And making the moments snick by one by one
A second, a moment, a day in the sun
So, now that you've read this odious rhyme
Realize you're totally wasting my time.

yesterday

Ann Lee sat on the front porch and watched the Christmas carolers walk down the street. Their cold faces were red with the nip in the air and no amount of holiday spirit could hide their fear and disappointment. Ann Lee wiped the tears from her face with her apron and shivered in the cold morning air.

The front door opened and Sue Carol peeked out. She shook her head and stepped out onto the porch. Her hair was pulled up in rollers and she wore a long, dark wool coat.

“Ann Lee, you’ll catch your death of . . .” Sue Carol choked off the rest of the sentence and her hand flew to her mouth. She carried a raincoat over her right arm and she handed it to Ann Lee. “You need to stay warm. Shock can set it.”

Ann Lee ignored her, eyes fixed on the street and the white picket fence. “Frank was supposed to fix the gate.”

Sue Carol glanced at the gate slightly askew hanging on one hinge. She draped the rain coat over Ann Lee’s shoulders. “He will when he gets back.”

The air was split by the sound of a siren and a black police car rocketed down the street. Ann Lee stood up and the coat fell to the porch. “The world has gone insane, Sue Carol. Police careening all over the place. Men signing up for the army. Carolers trying to catch the Christmas spirit.”

Sue Carol put her hands on Ann Lee’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Why don’t you come in and listen to the radio?”

“No!” Ann Lee jerked out of her grasp. “It’s nothing but horror and bad news and death and destruction. I told him not to go, Sue Carol. I told him not to go!”

Sue Carol nodded and hugged herself. “Frank is strong, Ann Lee. He’ll survive. He has you and the boys to take care of. He got lost in the woods once when he was seven. I was only five, but Momma told me the story. He stayed in the woods all alone for three days before he wandered out somewhere down by Twelve Mile Bayou. He’s a survivor and he’s smart, Ann Lee.”

“Smart don’t protect you from a bomb falling out of the sky. Or from one of those Kamikaze pilots they’re talking about on the radio.” Ann Lee collapsed back into her chair. “What will I tell the boys?”

Sue Carol settled into the chair beside her. “You’ll tell them that God is taking care of their Daddy. You’ll tell them that as bad as this world is right now, good will triumph. You’ll tell them that their Daddy is a hero and is fighting against the evil men in this world, Ann Lee. That’s what you will tell them. You will give them hope, even if you don’t think there’s any hope left.”

Ann Lee reached out and put a hand on Sue Carol's arm. "You always were so strong, Sue Carol. I couldn't run this boarding house without your help. Don't let Lonnie go off to war, you hear? He thinks it's all heroes and confetti parades. But, you need him and so does Little Lonnie."

Sue Carol sat back and stared out at the road as another group of carolers paused at the gate and began to sing "Silent Night". It wasn't night and it wasn't silent but the world needed some peace right now. "Our men have to fight the evil in the world and we have to stay behind and raise the families. It's started now and God help us all in the coming years."

The door opened and a short boy stared out. His hair was red and his face was covered with freckles. "Momma, the president is on the radio. Come quick."

Sue Carol and Ann Lee hurried into the living room. The three sisters were huddled around the radio. Her son, Daniel was sitting cross legged by Little Lonnie. Little Lonnie had on his cowboy outfit and was gripping his silver revolver in a tight grip. Sue Carol put her hand around Ann Lee's shoulders as the radio crackled with life.

"Yesterday, December 7th, 1941, a day that will live in infamy . . ."

zoom lens

“Look, I’m telling you that man is a murderer!” I whispered over my shoulder.

“Marge, stop looking out the window. You’ll get us reported.” Frank rattled his newspaper. “For God’s sake, quit your gawking and go get me a beer.”

I drew a deep breath and bit back the retort I had prepared. Frank was getting on my last nerve. I glanced once more through the slats of the blinds on my window at the building across the street. The man moved across his lighted window once again carrying what looked like an axe. A bloody axe!

“Marge! The beer?” Frank groused from his Lazy Boy.

I hurried to the kitchen and grabbed a can from the refrigerator. On the way back to the window, I sat it on the side table.

“Marge?”

I lifted the blinds again and peeped out the window. Across the street, the man was standing in his window looking right at me. I dropped the slat.

“Marge!”

“What?” My heart was racing. Had the man seen me?

“What is this?”

I whirled and Frank was holding up a ketchup bottle. “Ketchup. What are you doing with ketchup?”

“It’s supposed to be a beer.” Frank’s face was beet red and his eyes bulged from his head. I could smell the onions and garlic on his breath. “Woman, you are about to break the last straw.”

I grabbed the ketchup bottle out of his hand and hurried into the kitchen. It was then I saw the camera bag in the corner. Our son, Kevin, had given Frank one of those fancy digital cameras for our anniversary. Frank had never even opened the bag but I had used the camera a couple of times to take pictures of my cupcakes. One day, I would be on the Cake Boss!

I grabbed up the bag and rummaged through the contents. Kevin had bought us three different lenses to use on the camera. And, if I was not mistaken, one of them was a zoom lens. I found it, all right. Long and black with the words “Zoom Lens” on the side. I detached the lens from the

camera body with trembling hands and managed to get the zoom lens in place. With this, I could see what was going on in the man's apartment and maybe take some pictures!

I hurried back into the living room and poked the end of the zoom lens through the blinds. I turned on the camera and put my eye to the eyepiece. The far window was blurry and I had to manual zoom the lens to get the window in the center of my vision. But, why was it so blurry? Oh, yeah, Kevin said to press down on the button and the lens would focus automatically. Something dark moved across the blurry field and for a second, two pinpoints of fire glowed.

With a shaking finger, I pushed down on the button and the image suddenly leapt into focus. The man stood in the window with his side towards me. He was tall with long, black hair that hung onto his shoulders. He was doing something with his hands. I couldn't be sure. He was licking them!

He turned toward me, then and I saw the blood on his lips and on his teeth. His eyes glowed with demonic fire and he smiled at me. He reached a hand toward his window and it passed through the glass as if it were air. The hand grew larger and closer and my heart raced. Suddenly, I felt the tap of his bloody fingernail on the glass of the eyepiece. I was paralyze with terror. How could he . . .

“Marge!” I smelled Frank’s breath before I felt his hand on my shoulder. He whirled me around and I saw, for a second the hand of the man across the street pull away from the zoom lens. How?

“Marge, I want my beer! What is wrong with you?”

I looked up into his bulging, bloodshot eyes.

“I should have listened to my mother and married Lindsay Matthews. I bet she would have brought me my beer! And, what are you doing with that camera? That’s my camera! Have you lost your mind?”

I looked at this man who had become even more of a stranger than the fiend across the street. Did Frank have an axe hidden somewhere in a closet? What had I ever seen in him? I looked down at the camera and smiled.

“Frank, just take a look through the camera at the man across the street. Just once.”

Frank looked at the camera and cursed. “If it’ll get me my beer, okay.”

I separated the blinds and motioned toward the street outside. “Use the zoom lens. It makes things look like they’re right here in the room with us.”

Frank jerked the camera out of my hands and shoved the lens through the blinds. "I'm only doing this to shut you up. Now, go get me my beer!"

"First, look at the window across the street." I said calmly.

Frank pressed his eye to the eyepiece and I stepped to the side. He reached forward and spun the lens. "It's all blurry."

"Press down on the button. It'll bring everything into focus."

Frank's fat, nicotine stained finger touched the button. I could see him squinting. "I don't see nothing. Wait!" His eye widened and he gave a little gasp. The taloned hand emerged from the eyepiece and six multi-jointed bloody fingers wrapped themselves around his head like it was a cantaloupe. Frank gave a surprised squeal and then the hand jerked and jerked and pulled and Frank shrank all shriveled and folded into the eyepiece. Blood trickled down the back of the camera as he disappeared from sight. I caught the camera before it hit the floor.

I wiped away the blood with a tissue and put the lens and camera back into the bag. I never looked out that window again. But, I did drink Frank's beer!