

THERE ARE NO DEAD

By Terry Bisson

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"The Key to Oz and Always be Thine."

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"Bee-Men. Now cover it up with that rock."

"Rock?!"

"First the rock and then some leaves."

"We'll never find it again!"

"When we need to, we will. I made a map. See? But hurry. I think it's late."

It was late. While Nation arranged the rocks and leaves, and Pig Gnat carefully folded the map, Billy Joe scrambled to the top of the culvert. Across the corn stubble, in the subdivision on the other side of the highway, a few early lights gleamed. Among them, Mrs. Pignatelli's.

"I see a light," said Billy Joe. "Doesn't that mean your mother's home? Maybe we should cut across the field."

"You know better than that," Pig Gnat said. "He who comes by the trail must leave by the trail."

Billy Joe and Nation both grumbled, but agreed. They were at the fabled head of the Tibetan Nile. The trail followed the muddy stream away from the highway and the houses on the other side, down the culvert, along the steep side of what became (if you squinted; and they squinted) a thousand-foot-deep gorge. Where the gorge was narrowed by a junked car (a Ford), the trail crossed the Nile on a perilous high bridge of side-by-side 2X4s. It then left the stream (which only ran after a rain) and crossed the broomsage-covered Gobi-Serengeti toward the distant treeline.

Billy Joe led the way. Pig Gnat, who had moved to Middletown from Columbus only a year ago, was in the middle. Nation, who owned and therefore carried the gun (a Daisy pump), brought up the rear, alert for game, for danger. "Hold!" he said.

The three boys froze in the dying light. A giant grasshopper stood poised on top of a fence post. Nation took aim and fired. The great beast fell, cut almost in half along its abdomen, its legs kicking in dumb agony.

Nation recocked the Daisy, while Billy Joe put the beast out of its misery. Like rogue tigers, these magnificent man-killers had to die. "Good shooting," Billy Joe said.

"Luck," said Nation.

The desert ended; the trail tunneled through a narrow tangle of brush and old tires, then looped through the Black Forest, a dark wood of scrub locust and sassafrass, then switchbacked down a steep clay bank to the gravel road that led back to the highway.

"Tell me the name of the cliff again," said Billy Joe as they started down.

"Annapurna," said Pig Gnat.

They single-filed it in silence. One slip meant "death."

It was dark when they said their goodbyes at the highway's edge. Pig Gnat ran to find his mother, home from her job as Middletown's librarian, fixing supper and expecting him to keep her company. Billy Joe hurried home but to no avail; his father was already drunk, his mother was already crying, and the twins were already screaming. Nation took his time. Each identical house on his street was lighted. He often felt he could choose one at random and find his dinner on the table, his family hurrying to finish in time to watch "Hit Parade."

They grew apart as they grew up. Billy Joe started running with a fast crowd in high school, and would have spent a night or two in jail if his father hadn't been a cop. Nation became a football star, got the Homecoming Queen pregnant, and married her a month after graduation. Pignatelli got into Antioch where his ex-father (as he called him) had been a professor, and lasted two years before the anti-war movement and LSD arrived on campus the same semester.

The sixties ran through America like a stream too broad to jump and too deep to wade, and it wasn't until their tenth high school reunion, in 1976, that all three were in Middletown, at the same time (that they knew of). Nation's wife, Ruth Ann, had organized the reunion. She was still the Homecoming Queen.

"Remember the trail to the Lost Wilderness Shrine?" Billy Joe asked. He was drunk. Like his father, he was a law-man (as he liked to say) but an attorney instead of a cop. "Of course. I made a map," said Pignatelli. He had returned to the reunion from New York, where his first play was about to be produced off off off Broadway, and he was hurt that no one had asked about it. "What're you two talking about?" Nation asked. He and Ruth Ann had just joined them at their table. Pig Gnat whispered: "Come with me." They left the girls and slipped out the side door of the gym. Across the practice field, across the highway, where the cornfield used to be, shopping center lights gleamed under a cold Moon; beyond were endless coils of night. The door clicked shut behind them, and with the music gone, they imagined the narrow trail, the dark between the trees, the high passes to the secret Shrine, and they shivered. "We're supposed to stick to high school

memories, remember?" Nation said. Billy Joe tried the door but it was locked. He was suddenly sober. The Homecoming Queen leaned on the bar, opening the door from the inside. "What are you guys doing?"

"BJ, it's time to go home," said Billy Joe's wife, a Louisville girl.

Two years later Pignatelli gave up playwriting (or set it aside) and took a job at Creative Talent Management's New York office on 57th St. That October he came back to Middletown for his mother's sixtieth birthday. He stopped by Nation Ford and was surprised to find his friend already going bald. He was under a car, an unusual position for Assistant Manager of a dealership. "Dad and Ruth Ann run the business end," Nation explained. He washed up and they found Billy Joe at the courthouse, and drove to Lexington where Pignatelli's pony tail didn't raise so many eyebrows. Billy Joe had hired a friend to handle his divorce. "It's like a doctor never operating on himself," he said. "We should go camping sometime," Nation said. "The original three."

Two years later, they did. CTM was sending Pignatelli to LA twice a year, and he arranged an overnight stop in Louisville. Billy Joe met him at the airport with two borrowed sleeping bags and a tent, and they met Nation halfway between Louisville and Middletown, and hiked back into the low steep hills along Otter Creek. It was October. Billy Joe gathered wood while Pig Gnat built a fire. "Did you ever think we'd be thirty?" Nation asked. In fact they were thirty two, but still felt (at least when they were together) like boys; that is, immortal. Pig Gnat stirred the fire, sending sparks to join the stars in Heaven. They agreed to never get old.

Two years later, again in October, they met at the airport in Lexington and drove east, into the low tangled folds of the Cumberland Mountains, and built their fire under a cliff in the Red River Gorge. Nation's twin daughters had just celebrated their "Sweet Sixteen." Pignatelli was dating a starlet whose face was often in the supermarket tabs, and beginning to wonder if he was supposed to have kids.

The next October, they backpacked into the gorges of the Great South Fork of the Cumberland River, almost on the Tennessee line. These were real mountains; small, but deep. At night the stars were like ice crystals, "and every bit as permanent," Pig Gnat pointed out. They stayed two nights. Billy Joe's lawyer had married his ex, moved into the house she had won in the settlement, and was raising his son.

They met every October, after that. BJ would pick up Pignatelli at the Louisville airport, and Nation would meet them in the mountains. They explored up and down the Big South Fork, through Billy Joe's second marriage, Pignatelli's move to LA, and Nation's divorce. The Homecoming Queen kept the house on Coffee Tree Lane. They settled into a routine, just like the old days, with Nation picking out the site, Billy Joe gathering the wood, Pig Gnat building the fire. They skipped their twentieth high school reunion; their friendship had skipped high school anyway.

The year they turned forty, it rained, and they camped at the mouth of a shallow, dry cave where they could look up at a sky half stone, half stars. "How old do you guys want to get?" Nation asked. Forty had once seemed old to them; now even fifty didn't. Funny how time stretched out, long in front, short behind. Nation's girls were both married, and he would be a grandfather soon. BJ did the paper work on his second divorce himself. The year Pignatelli's mother died, he found a hand-colored map in a drawer when he cleaned out the house. He knew what it was without unfolding it. He took it back to California with him in a plastic bag.

Some Octobers they tried other mountains, but they always came home. The Adirondacks seemed barren compared to the close, dark tangles of the Cumberlands. The Rockies were spectacular but the scale was all wrong. "We're too old to want to see that far," Pig Gnat said. He was only half kidding. He was forty six. There are no long views in the Cumberlands. There are high cliffs overlooking deep gorges, each gorge as like the others as trees or years are alike. The stars wheel through the sky like slow sparks. Sometimes it felt that in all the Universe only the three of them were still; everything else was spinning apart. "This is reality," Pig Gnat explained, poking the fire. "The rest of the year just rises up from it like smoke."

When Nation's father died he found the Daisy, filmed with rust and missing its magazine, in the attic. He cleaned it up and left it in Ruth Ann's garage. She had come back to run Nation Ford; she owned half of it anyway. "Still the Homecoming Queen," Nation laughed; they were better as friends than as man and wife. How Pignatelli envied them. They were camped that year among the sycamores in a nameless bend of No Business Creek. "How old do you guys want to get?" Billy Joe asked. It was becoming like a joke. Nobody wants to get old, yet every year they get older.

The year two thousand found them walking the ridge that leads north and east from Cumberland Gap like a road in the sky, while the wind ripped the leaves from the trees all around them. Two thousand! It was the coldest October in years. They slept in a dry cave floored with dust like the Moon, where footprints would last a thousand years--or at least forever. Life was still sweet. Billy Joe married again. Nation moved back in with Ruth Ann. It was not yet time.

Somewhere there are pictures that show how they looked alike in the beginning, in that way that all boys look alike. Later pictures would show how they diverged: BJ in blue suits and ties; Pignatelli in silk sport coats and hundred dollar jeans; Nation in coveralls and "gimme" hats. After fifty years they looked alike again, sitting on the edge of a limestone cliff high over the Big Sandy River, thin in the hair and getting thick in the middle. That was their last October. One week after Christmas, Nation died. It was very sudden. Pignatelli hadn't even known he was sick, then he got the call from Ruth Ann. It was a heart attack. He was almost fifty-nine. How old do you want to get?

Pig Gnat took out the map, which he kept in his office, but didn't unfold it. He had the feeling he could only unfold it once. Billy Joe and his young wife picked him up at the Louisville airport, and they drove straight to Middletown for the funeral. Billy Joe was

angry; his wife seemed apologetic. After the burial there was a reception at the house on Coffee Tree Lane. Pignatelli went out to the garage and two little girls followed him; all Nation's grandchildren were girls. He spread out the map on the workbench, and sure enough, the old paper cracked along the folds. He found the Daisy under the bench, dark with rust and smelling of WD-40. The girls helped him look but he couldn't find the magazine or any BBs.

Back in the house, he kissed Ruth Ann goodbye. He wondered, as he had often wondered, if he would have married if he could have married the Homecoming Queen. Almost all the mourners had left. Billy Joe was drunk, and still sulking. "We waited too god damn long!" he whispered. Pig Gnat shook his head, but he wasn't sure. Maybe, maybe they had. He felt sorry for Billy Joe's young wife. They left her at the house with Ruth Ann and the last of the mourners. In January it gets dark early. The cornfield was now a shopping center, had been for forty years, but the woods and the broomsage were still there behind it like a blank spot on a map. The road that led back from the highway was still gravel. They parked the electric (no one had ever been able to call them "cars") by an overflowing dumpster at the bottom of a steep clay bank.

"Tell me the name of the cliff again," said Billy Joe.

"Annapurna," said Pig Gnat. "You okay?"

"I feel like shit but I'm not drunk anymore, if that's what you mean."

The narrow trail switchbacked up the bank to the Black Forest. One slip and they were "dead." It was spitting snow. At the top the trail led into the dark, dark trees.

Billy Joe carried the Daisy. Of course it was useless without a magazine. They came out of the woods, through the brush, into the field. "Here begins the deepest and most mysterious part of the trail," Pig Gnat said, from memory. "Here we begin our journey up the ancient Tibetan Nile." They crossed the gorge (the Ford was long gone) and followed the great river to its source in a culvert, now almost hidden under a broken slab at the rear of the shopping center. "All Kneel," said Pig Gnat.

They knelt. Pig Gnat raked away the leaves with a stick. "Don't we say something, or something?" Billy Joe asked.

"That's after. Give me a hand with this rock."

Billy Joe set down the Daisy and they heaved together, and slid the big stone to one side.

Underneath, in the dark brown earth, a two-inch ruby square glowed. "Hadn't it oughta say press me or reset or something?" Billy Joe joked nervously.

"Sssshhhhh," said Pig Gnat. "Just press it."

"Why me? Why don't you press it?"

"I don't know why. That's just the way it works. Just press it."

Billy Joe pressed it and instead of pushing in like a button it sort of pushed back.

There.

"Now, all repeat after me," Pig Gnat said. "Oh Secret and Awesome Lost Wilderness Shrine."

"Oh Secret and Awesome Lost Wilderness Shrine."

"The Key to Oz and Always be Thine."

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"Bee-Men, and so forth. Now help me with this rock."

"Rock!"

"First the rock and then leaves."

"We'll never find it again."

"When we need to, we will. Come on. I think it's late."

It was late, but still warm for October. While Nation and Pig Gnat pulled the rock into place, Billy Joe scrambled to the top of the culvert. The funny feeling in his legs was gone. Across the corn stubble, in the subdivision on the other side of the highway, a few early lights gleamed. Among them, Mrs. Pignatelli's.

"I think your mother's home," said Billy Joe. "Maybe we should cut across the field ..."

"You know better than that," Pig Gnat said. "He who comes by the trail must leave by the trail."

The trail followed the great stream away from the highway and the houses on the other side, down the culvert and across the gorge on a high, perilous bridge of 2X4s.

Billy Joe led the way. Pig Gnat was in the middle. Nation, who owned and therefore carried the gun, brought up the rear, alert for game.

"Hold," he said.

Three boys froze in the dying light. A giant grasshopper stood poised on top of a fence post. Nation took aim. Billy Joe squinted, imagining a rogue tiger. Pig Gnat kept his eyes wide open, staring off into the endless coils of night.

end