

OTHER TOYS

By Steve Perry

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THE FEAR SITS IN MY BELLY like a lump of rock from the bottom of the sea, cold, icy, indigestible, stretching my bowel, weighing me down. Worse than pain, worse than death, worse than anything—the thought that God has forsaken me clutches at me with claws so sharp they pierce to my very soul, causing my essence to spew forth like a fount of spiritual blood.

God has forsaken me. I am doomed.

Doomed.

What could I have done? What vile act could be worth this, this the ultimate curse? Surely I am a sinner, never have I claimed otherwise, but surely my crimes have been in the doing of small sins, never drawing near the murky swamp of heresy, never veering from True Devotion, nary a misstep from The Path. This I can attest to, this I can affirm, for in my heart I know. I am not — never— have I felt moved to the slightest apostasy; always have I kept the Faith, always, by my life...and yet —

And yet, God no longer answers my prayers. I am abandoned and the thought of never feeling His light upon my worthless self again tears asunder my being. Please, my Lord, forgive me for my errors! In Your infinite mercy, pity me, for I do not know what I have done to deserve this, the worst of all punishments.

Please!

If he hadn't been on vacation, John Cartas would never have noticed the piece. The article in the paper was short, a filler, really, buffed in the back pages under the ad for tires and the new woman sportswriter's column. In what the city editor called the "Science Section," trying to keep a straight face while he said it. No byline. They either pulled it off the wire or had one of the drones hack it out:

ANNA-BY-THE-SEA — A team of visiting paleontologists from the University of Arizona have made what one representative terms "an amazing discovery" in a cave near the town of Anna-by-the-Sea.

According to Professor Peter Lipton, head of the team, the searchers have uncovered the remains of a new and unique dinosaur.

"It appears to be the entire skeleton," Lipton said, "we've never seen anything quite like it before."

Lipton's team hopes to complete the excavation of the dinosaur before winter

sets in.

If he'd been on the beat, dealing with the scum of the city, he would have been too busy writing the news to read it. He was a good reporter, if getting long in the tooth at forty-five to still be on the cop shop; still, good reporter or not, he got most of his news when he was working from the tube. Dan Rather. Peter Jennings. Even Tom Brokaw, when the cable sometimes went out and he had to tune the damned set manually.

Cartas leaned back in the rickety cane-bottomed chair that had belonged to his grandmother. The wood was old, the screws had pulled halfway out on one side, the caning was stretched by too many fat asses over too many years. He reached for the cup of coffee and sipped at it, but it had gone cold, the cream giving it a sickly and almost rancid paleness. He put the cup down and looked at the piece again. It didn't mean anything, didn't mean anything at all. He was on vacation. He was forty-five, bald, thirty-five pounds overweight and sitting alone in his matchbox of a kitchen in his rented house, drinking too much coffee. Who would have ever thought it would be like this? He'd had such big plans, once upon a time. A long time ago. It had gone south somewhere along the way, one day he'd looked up and half his life was over. He'd lost it somewhere and damned if he knew where. Or when.

So, some scientists found some bones, big fucking deal. It didn't matter.

Peter Lipton wished he had a gun. Better, one of his more Neanderthal football-playing students with a machine gun, standing outside the cave, ready to blast anybody who got too close.

“Professor?”

Lipton pulled himself away from the fantasy. Might as well wish for the royalties to Jean Auel's next novel, while he was at it. He looked at the speaker, his post-doc assistant, a long-haired boy of twenty-six who bore the rather absurd name of “Ocean Cummings.” Most of the time he went by O.C. His parents had apparently been hippies in the sixties and inflicted much upon him as a result of their rather solipsistic new age cant. Some of it must have stuck, for he wore his hair in a long braid that nearly reached to the middle of his upper back.

“We've found another one,” O.C. said.

He held his hands out as might a man offering gifts to a king.

Lipton had seen sixty-eight of the things by now, they had that many whole ones, plus fragments of maybe fifty others, but each time seemed like a miracle. It was greenish, almost a jade color, veined with dark red twisted lines just below the surface. This particular specimen was the size of a saucer, roundish but irregularly so, perhaps the thickness of a fifty-cent piece and slightly curved.

“You have it tagged and located?”

“Sure, Doc. You think being in a cave has made me stupid?” Lipton smiled politely.

“Uh, one other thing, Dr. Lipton. I dunno if I ought to even say anything about it, it’s only a rumor, something I picked off the computer net when I was online last night.”

“Go on.”

“Well. Noel, out in Montana, I get the impression he’s planning on heading this way.”

Lipton felt his stomach lurch. As a boy in New Orleans, he had spent more than a few happy hours at Lake Ponchartrain, back when the Zephyr was still the scariest roller coaster in the country. He’d never enjoyed that ride, though teenage bravado made him climb on it every time he went to the park. His stomach felt now as it always had right after that first big drop on the Zephyr. Noel!

“I will personally box the man’s ears if he shows up,” Lipton said. He meant it, too.

O.C. laughed. “Hey, we were here first. When you get your paper done on this, Noel will be begging to polish your shoes.”

Lipton’s smile was larger this time. Now there was a pleasant thought indeed.

I must be in error; I am mistaken. Surely it is so. God is busy, He has so much to do, it is selfish of me to think that I among all His creations deserve His presence more than another. He has not forgotten me, rather He has winds to direct and stars to place in the Heavens, myriad chores I cannot begin with my limited, small mind to understand. How dare I hope to fathom the mind of God?

This is surely a test, a simple one of my Faith, and All Knowing as He is, God has seen that in my fear I had begun to fail. I allowed my fear to create doubt and down that path lay reason for my panic. But no more. I shall abide, I will stand fast. My life will go on as it normally would, I shall do those things for which I am designed: I shall eat and sleep and pray and maintain my purity and upon me God will smile once again, once He sees my love is true. He cannot have deserted me, his most faithful of servants. It is beyond belief.

Cartas called the desk and got Kohler, who was stuck on rewrite.

“Kohler.”

“Hey, dickhead.”

“Well, well, John-boy. What are you doing callin’? I thought you were on vacation.”

“I am, but I need you to look up something for me.”

“What — is there a sign on me that says ‘lackey?’”

“Come on, Kohler, deadline is passed and you don’t have jackshit to do.”

“All right. What?”

“We ran a short piece in the Sport-Science section this morning, about some scientists out at Anna-by-the-Sea.”

“Hold on.”

Cartas heard the sound of the keyboard clicking as Kohler called up the file.

“Yeah, I got it. So?”

“Is that the whole piece or is there more?”

“Looks like the whole pyramid, Jackie, baby.”

“Nothing on the log?”

“Oh, yeah, right, we’ve sent four guys and a camerawoman out to do a layout for the Sunday mag. Buncha diggers from the U of Geek rummaging around in fossils, hey, that’ll blow Thanksgiving right outta the paper.”

“Your sarcasm needs work, Kohler.”

“You’d know, you’re the expert.”

Kohler cut the connection and Cartas cradled the phone and stared at it. He sat there for a long time before he sighed and shook his head. Fuck it. What else could he do?

IT IS NOT right! It cannot be fair! I have been faithful, I have obeyed His every command, His every whim and my reward for selfless devotion is that I be tossed aside? To be shrugged off as one without value? To be of no more concern than the scat of a recent meal?

No! Damn Him! I will have have it! I will turn my face away from Him! If he ever returns I will spit on Him! I will huff my defiance at Him and no matter what He does, I will not repent!

How dare he abandon me? This is not how the world should work, it cannot be so if there is any justice under the heavens!

No God of mercy could behave this way!

Damn Him!

Damn Him!

“We’ve got the measurements on the skull, Doc. Looking at two meters, three, from snout to the base.”

The air in the cave was damp and smelled of seaweed and salt spray, the late autumn winds had freshened and, coming off the water, they drove into the hollow sometimes with a force to make the crags and crannies howl. Like blowing across the mouth of a Coke bottle, Lipton thought.

There were only five students in the cave now. It was late, and while the lamps on their stands kept the darkness well at bay, the night’s cold touched them with bolder fingers.

Lipton walked over to where the half-excavated skull lay. The bone was nearly clean where it was exposed. Even though the remains had not been there very long, the damp air and rot had done their work, and small scavengers had taken their share of the thing’s flesh.

It seemed to Lipton that the beast wore an Archaic Smile, and he said as much to O.C., who stood aiming the laser tape at the skull.

“Archaic Smile?”

“The term for the expression on the faces of many Greek statues from the Archaic period,” Lipton said. “From around 750-500 B.C. Some schools of thought have it that the smile resulted from the Greeks’ belief that the expression reflected perfect health; others believe that the smile simply represented a certain amount of technical difficulty in carving a curved mouth around a rather block-like head, which was all the rage at the time.” O.C. nodded. “Interesting.”

“Our friend here seems to be wearing an almost Mona Lisa-like smirk.”

“Yeah, it does kinda look like that. Wonder what he was thinking about?”

“That we’ll never know. But when the world finds out what we have here, we’ll have reason for plenty of smiles of our own.”

Truly, Lipton thought, as O.C. continued his measurements. While every reptile was unique, more or less by definition, no one had ever seen a creature like this before. And it had not lain moldering here for tens of millions of years, either. This was his coelacanth; this was going to set the scientific world on its ear! His career, steady but undistinguished, was made. His students’ careers were made. He was at the scene of the biggest find in history and no one would ever be able to take that away from him! Not even the despicable Noel.

I am going to die. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep, I cannot stir myself even to defecate. I lie in pools of filth, waiting for the end. Forgive me, dear Lord, for my blasphemy. I was weak, I know, I found anger where there should never have been any. I deserve this state. I deserve to die for having raised my voice against You. I ask that You consider my pain as an excuse — not really a justifiable excuse, I know, but all my withered mind can offer. When you have frolicked with God, to be left alone is a wound from which you cannot easily recover. It made me mad, there can be no other answer. In my grief and pain and fear, I cried out, and thus condemned myself.

You know this. Of course You know, You who are All Things.

I ask for Your forgiveness even as I am east down into the depths of The Pit.

I was unworthy of Your love; I failed You, and I will spend Eternity in sorrow and regret for my weakness. Forgive me . . .

Cartas found the cave. The stink of seaweed permeated the air, and it was getting really cold. The wind cut at him, found the openings in his worn leather jacket, polished his bare head as it passed. Fog was forming and rolling in.

He felt the sense of dread he’d been expecting but he pushed on. He saw the lights from inside, a couple of kids leaving carrying plastic coolers and green plastic trash bags as they left. They were laughing enjoying themselves, full of life and youth. He couldn’t remember feeling that way.

Cartas moved closer, picking his way across the rocky shoreline. The tide was in and the path was narrow. He slipped a couple of times on the slimy rocks, nearly fell, but managed to keep to his feet. By the time he’d gone up the slight incline to reach the cave’s mouth, he was cold and out of breath. Twenty years ago he could have made it without breathing hard. Fifteen years before that he would have danced across the treacherous rocks at a run and never worried about falling. Nor would he have fallen.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

A tall, thin, ruddy man with salt and pepper hair, dressed in a windbreaker over a T-shirt and blue jeans stood there, staring at him.

“I’m Jack Cartas,” he said, finally getting his wind back. “I’m a reporter-”

“Out, out!” the man said, shooing at him as though he were some kind of small pest. “We aren’t ready for the media, this entire area is off-limits!”

A second man, much younger, wearing braids and a questioning look, came up from the depression behind the older man.

“Are you Professor Lipton?”

“Yes, I am, but you’ll have to leave. You have no right to be here.”

Cartas nodded. “Boy, that’s true. But I have to take a look at him before I leave.”

“Impossible. The site cannot be disturbed!”

But Cartas had come too far to turn away now. He knew he shouldn’t have made the trip, it wouldn’t solve anything, wouldn’t make anything any better. He started up the incline, smiling vaguely at the professor, so as not to seem menacing.

“Stop! You’ll step on something!”

Sure enough, he did, not two seconds later. He stopped, bent, picked it up. Held it up and stared at it.

“Put that down!” The Professor seemed as if he might have a stroke. “You have no idea what you are fooling with!”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Cartas said. He waved the mostly-flat but slightly curved greenish plate. “This is a scale. It came off your dinosaur, there in the pit behind you, right? Thirty-seven years ago, I’d guess.”

Cartas moved up the slope. When Lipton moved in front of him, he put out one hand and moved the man aside. He reached the edge of the shallow depression and stopped. Stared clown into it. Shook his head.

“Ah, Jesus. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I — I didn’t know. I was just a fucking kid. Forgive me.”

He turned around and looked at the two men. The younger one’s face wore a shocked expression, his eyes wide. He knew.

Too late, Cartas thought. For you. For me. Too late. It had all started to go downhill then, he knew that now. One day thirty-seven years ago. No going back now. Shit.

He walked out past the two scientists. He did not look back as he left. Old, tired, used up, worn out.

Lost.

“Oh, man,” O.C. said. He shook his head as the fat and bald little man left the cave.

“He took one of the scales,” Lipton said. “We’ll have to call the local authorities, the police.”

“Well, he’s got a right, if he wants it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Jesus, Dr. Lipton, don’t you know who that was? What this thing is we’ve found here? Oh, man.”

Lipton stared at his assistant. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s been here before,” O.C. said. “Haven’t you heard the song? Christ, my parents were old hippies, I grew up listening to it from the time I was a baby.”

“Song?”

“And his name, he told you what it was, didn’t he?”

“He said it was ‘Cartas,’ that would be Italian, I believe.”

“Yeah. ‘Jack Cartas.’ Cartas is Italian. It means ‘papers.’”

“So?”

“Jack Cartas. What might you call an eight-year-old version of him? Jackie?”

Despite his general myopia outside academia, Lipton was not stupid. “It can’t be,” he said. But his voice was not much above a whisper and the little boy inside him who used to ride the Zephyr knew beyond any doubt that it was so. Jackie Papers.

And that same little boy in Lipton also knew what the scientist would still try

to deny:

That wasn't a dinosaur behind him at all.

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Steve Perry is mostly a novelist these days, although he occasionally gets what he calls “wild hair stories” — short story ideas that must be written or else. We were lucky enough to grab a previous wild hair story. “The Master of Chan Gen,” and publish it in our September, 1992 issue

Of this story, Steve writes, “One afternoon while trying rather ineptly to play my old guitar, a vague idea for ‘Other Toys’ popped into my head. Naturally, as it seems with all the short fiction I’ve done in the last ten years, I was up against a book deadline and had no time to write it. Less than no time, since I was behind on my schedule. I filed the somewhat muzzy idea away, not expecting to get back to it for a couple of months at the earliest.

“Two days later at midnight, while I was out walking my dog, the story dropped out of the clear and cold sky on me all of a piece

“Some things in this biz you can’t ignore.”