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Aliens, Minibikes and Other Staples of Suburbia
by M.F. Korn
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Speculative Fiction

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For Savannah Hart Korn

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About the Author

An Introduction by Sherry Decker

This fine collection of short fiction, plus novella, are a nostalgic return to childhood when we all had innocence, faith and imagination. Decades

have passed with the writing of these varied tales -- some written in the mid 1980s, some more recent -- all of them fascinating in their own way.

While reading, you'll be picked up and dropped straight into your own history while visiting various, imaginary neighborhoods and worlds. What an amazing pageant of dates, details and deja vu in this collection! We glimpse a carnival that set up camp in a small town -- here today, gone tomorrow -- leaving behind a list of missing children. We enter a bizarre junk store filled with truly 'impossible' things. We experience a fish tale about discovery and loss -- a slice of life wrought with childhood disappointment, yet a grain of promise. We're questioned, "If you could bring back a famous person from the dead, whom would it be?" And we're then reminded, be careful what you wish for. We accompany a guy named Rick in a downward spiral toward insanity -- or is he right, and the world has taken cloning to a point beyond the extreme? We read on and shudder to ourselves: don't mess with them video manipulators! Then comes a tale with a question and a twist ending -- Will Daddy show up to take you to Disneyland?

I thoroughly enjoyed every story in this collection, but my favorite would have to be the novella, "Aliens and Minibikes" -- a story about a neighborhood and some very believable boys and girls. It's a science fiction and puberty cocktail, that first amused me, pulled me in, then scared me. Won't tell you the ending, but it was good!

I recommend this collection. You won't be sorry you read it. It's nostalgia at its finest.

The Spectral Carnival Show

Crandall and I rode around Hammond arguing about what restaurant we would pick for lunch.

"You're the businessman, you know the best spots for chrissakes," he said.

"But I don't live here, you do."

He was a professional magician, he really was fun to be around even if he didn't drink. I sighed. It was the Saturday before Easter Sunday. Were we going to drive by the college again to watch coeds walk by, unseen by our carnal stares through Crandall's tinted windows?

"Hey, a carnival!" I said.

"Ah YESS..." he said in his best W. C. Fields voice. On every other day it was an abandoned shopping center parking lot. Now it was a conundrum of machinery, rides for the kiddies bolted together too fast.

"I drove by yesterday and this setup wasn't here," Crandall said as his Hawaiian shirt billowed about his flabby arms and he turned the wheel. We parked and looked.

In the bright sun I saw snooker tables, nudger machines and bronzed barkers. Children were strapped into the swirling rides of steel and screaming. The haunted house trailer with the sheet metal whirring skirt blowers, tilted floors and spooky interior lights was towards the back. I wanted to be scared by the apparitions flying at me run by gearshifts and conveyor belts.

Even from a distance the people running the show looked tough-skinned and countrified.

"There isn't much of a crowd here," Crandall said.

"Yeah."

"Let's stop by the games and see the setup," Crandall said. I knew he was going to ask the folks running the games and booths how the profits were going. He looked at me as he pulled the parking brake up and opened the door of the car. "It's not the rides that make them the most money. It's those games, believe me..." he said and pulled up the sun visor, "...they really rake up on those..."

* * * *

There were folks sleeping in old peeling trailers. A tied up pit-bull was begging for food from a pale fat biker. He gawked at us and muttered

something.

We walked down the barker strip.

"We're making a big mistake walking this way with no money..." Crandall said.

"I don't see what you mean..." I said.

Two kids were throwing darts at balloons for prizes. Hung up in the booth were Heavy Metal wallets and framed beer mirrors. A kid was trying to snag a ring onto a Coke bottle. More kids were pitching pennies into shallow dishes.

Across the highway I saw mothers going through the garbage that the Goodwill Store had just thrown out for the day.

"Hey man! Buy somethin' for your woman!" a ruddy man yelled at us.

I looked down.

A kid managed to get a penny in a glass. The man gave him a cloth beanbag instead of the glass. "You gotta get beyond the rope, you was leaning over."

Hammond had lots of Georgian houses that cut the sky in quaint ways. Cupolas came out their gambreled roofs. Shadowy alcoves of huge oaks were full of moss. Kids would swing on wrought iron gates and picket fences. I suddenly remembered listening to a choir when I used to walk to the college, crossing over the railroad tracks, thinking about my youth.

There was something about this carnival. I thought I heard a muffled conversation between two women at the goat barbecue stand. "Lotsa pickings here." A huge man in a Harley t-shirt held an folded shotgun, cleaning it carefully sitting in a lawn chair by his trailer. He glowered at me with more than a usual country way-of-knowing. Tinny strains of Kitty Wells resonated from an ugly trailer with contorted figures painted on its side.

I smiled. "They have a side show?"

"It's closed," said a skinny man with lines all over his leathered face. I thought I heard crying from somewhere.

What hucksters out to rook and cheat people. Damn! I wanted to see a side show.

Crandall went over to talk to the fellow running the BB gun shoot, a fellow with one arm gone tattooed all over, a stump of mauve and aquamarine ink.

"How are the profits going?" The man didn't answer.

I was standing right by a fat crooked-smiling lady in double-knit polyester slacks talking with a skinny black woman with gold teeth, both holding onto their children. "When they sent up that space shuttle God got mad and flooded Denham Springs." "Oh, yeah lard..." the black lady smiled.

"I heard it in the Ponchatoula Pentecostal Church." I smiled. Little black boys by the video games were brushing up against the suburban boys maybe to steal their wallets as they played Zaxxon and Galaxia.

Crandall told the stumped fellow that he was a professional magician. "We're both in the same business..." I saw the barker's eyes and I realized something in the boiling hot sun. This clan of folks were all one incestuous family. They had a pall of plain sinister trashiness. Even amidst the happy young children.

"Go away!" the one-armed barker snarled and spit as he handed a kid a loaded BB gun. "Ain't none of your business." We turned and laughed and left, right as a couple of kids were placing dollar bills down for some rats racing on a spinning board. It was an invisible cloak of black death, I thought, upon seeing the rats. It was a nice day before Easter Sunday, community basking in an ordinary way. I thought of the generations of squirrels eating acorns in the park under the gazebo, where a barbershop quartet sang "By the Sea" once. We drove in silence.

We went inside "Brady's" to sit down away from the heat. I gave sidelong glances at the stuck-up waitresses from the college in their Irish green. Crandall for the first time didn't ask me to be the patsy in his neverending quest for the perfect card trick. He looked at me and smiled. He

did a couple of tricks with his tallyho fan cards and I was the mark. We drank our sepia colored iced tea with no lemon under a bronzed ceiling and I craved alcohol but always managed to fight it off well enough.

"They were kind of on the mean side."

He nodded.

The soiled flapping banner had been painted 'Spectral Carnival Show.'

"Did you notice how trashy those people looked?" I asked.

"It wasn't that. They were dangerous."

"What is a rotten carnival like that doing here the day before Easter Sunday?" This was even better than when the mall had chickens dancing on hot plates for a quarter, or when I played Tic-tac-toe with a rabbit. When Crandall had tried to talk to them, they had something besides loose change in their crooked staring eyes. Something that courted death. I finished my meal. Crandall just fanned and shuffled the cards.

We went to the mall and caught the five thirty matinee. While we walked around the mall it seemed word had spread about something like electricity. In the car Crandall tuned in the local radio station:

"Several children are apparently missing that had attended the carnival ... Police at this hour are looking for seven youngsters, apparently the kids had strayed from their mothers' care. Authorities are still combing the area now in an attempt to retrieve the unfortunate kids, ranging from 5 years to 13 years..."

Then a commercial, "Sundayyy! Sunday! At state capitol dragway ... Don Garlitz's Funny Car..." He turned it down and looked at me and I shook my head.

We hauled through the tiny arteries of pitted roads, traversing subdivisions, streets leading to dead ends only to find another shortcut. At twilight I expected to see the load cranking generators feeding juice to the joy machines swirling like a kaleidoscopic art picture in neon lights. It had turned into something almost supernatural beneath the veneer of the golden garden spot of magical wonderment.

Instead was an empty parking lot. The carnival had already skipped town. We were too late. There were a few police cars around the vast stretch of terminal pavement and concrete graveyard of empty bottles. The carnival and seven toddlers vanished like a large phantom.

How could such an event fold up as quick as a magician's setup stand, as fast as Crandall could make a card disappear behind his hand or as fast as flash powder spectrally poofed in a blazing inordinate blink of molted fire?

* * * *

A few months went by. I heard the authorities didn't find those unfortunate kids. The mothers must have mourned their babies' disappearance in the Ponchatoula Pentecostal Church. Maybe that band of Gypsy beggars had found a certain use for the kids. Maybe they were going to raise them. Teach them the ways of the circus. The rituals that were foretold by the creaking of the rooking bastard's bones, the glint of malignant and clearly discerned unnaturalness. Kids tied up with knotted rope, dressed up surgically as experiments in the upcoming mutant freak show that we never got to see. They enticed kids to run away with them, to snatch the kids from their mother's nurturing breast like the unfortunate boys that were bad whose ears turned donkey-like in Pinocchio. It was not anything Toby Tylerish, to participate with a chicken biting carnival freak show geek and be his apprentice, to be an unwilling victim of some sort of black mass ritual as old as Bible times that would leave them maimed, mutilated, or worse.

Crandall laughed when I told him this.

The dark carnival of blinking and winking seemed one step ahead of the law and of the childless mothers. I told Crandall I reckoned they were out West somewhere by now, in the desert, past Nuevo Laredo, or Matamoros. They dismantled that twisted machinery of instant joy fast. I thought of the revolving rides and twisting teacups that made me dizzy when I was a kid. They were back into their trailers and out of town before the sun went down; they

were not of anyplace Crandall and I, nor anyone of these parts would ever understand.

I would see carnivals again, but that pre-Sabbath carnival was not coming back here next year...

How Soothing Are My Anachronisms

Guy Basehart walked into the old brownstone building under a neon sign that faintly said, "Curiosities and Oddities." He had never noticed the building really before, the sign was so small and barely lit. It was a cool autumnal late afternoon, perfect for a stroll to glance at whatever one fancied. When he stepped inside, he noticed several racks of odd looking bric a brac, antiques, art deco, and what looked like plain ordinary junk.

"Good afternoon, sir, have you come as a browser or are you genuinely interested in the obscure?"

"No, just browsing." The odd looking old man with unkempt facial hair and a bespectacled countenance of bronze tan frowned to himself.

"Well, just feel free to look around."

And that is what Guy Basehart did. He saw cheaply manufactured trinkets and old belt buckles, what looked like a fake antique gun collection that said, "Property of Jesse James Once." Here over by the knives was a knife that said, "Jim Bowie's knife." And on and on, a phonograph record of an ampico piano roll recording by Brahms, letters of Abraham Lincoln that looked too crisp and clean to be real; it offended one's sensibilities. Guy Basehart knew he wasn't going to fall for these cheap fakes and the quite ostentatious prices that accompanied the curios.

"Are all these things really real, Mister?" he asked the man.

"Why," he said, "of course they are." Just then his eyes glimmered with ancientness, of knowledge and experiences that went past any man-of-the-world or sailor, any European traveler who crisscrossed hemispheres constantly.

So Guy Basehart thought he might question him about the ampico recording by Brahms. "I thought there weren't any known recordings by Johannes Brahms, because he died before anyone ever got the chance to record him."

"No, this here is the only known piano roll recording by the great master."

"Really?" said Guy, not believing.

"Are you still a browser, sir?"

"But you already asked me that." Outside the air was fresh but in here it smelled like an attic that was centuries old, where sun and moonbeams never entered, the smell of dust and ageless time was in here.

"I know," the bronze man said. "I am giving you another chance to answer."

Guy thought for a second.

"Okay, what was it you said before?"

"Genuinely interested."

"Yes, I am genuinely interested in the obscure!" He chuckled. Then the tanned man-of-the-world brought him to a small enclosed shunted room in the back, through some beaded curtains. Here the room was filled with unmentionable things that one wished were really true and existed, but were obviously forgeries and flukes and fakes.

In one corner was a kinoscope which the man turned on, and a silent celluloid footage newsreel of none other than Abraham Lincoln showed up on the screen before him. The old man said, "Eh?"

In another corner was a reel to reel recording which had a speech by Napoleon on it, at least that was what it said. He played that for a half a minute. By it was a videotape of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, that's what it said.

"Are you convinced?" the man asked Guy.

Guy thought, this is a place of anomalies and anachronisms, of what surely could not be true. None of it, just beautiful hoaxes, though the age of the peculiarities was evident in the tears and streaks and oldness of each

item. But how was it done?

"No, not really," Guy had said. And that was when the man had finally made him realize this was all true, though there was simply no explanation.

In the far corner he had pulled out a photograph. On it, on the polaroid snapshot was the shape of a man on the cross. A polaroid of none other than Jesus Christ. And that was when Guy knew this was all real. The man showed him out, telling him that none was for sale, he just enjoyed showing these things. And Guy Basehart walked out into the night air, whistling Brahms.

Catch of the Century

What Mr. Wayne Langouis didn't know was that the fish in his bathtub was one-hundred and fifty million years old.

He had been fishing in Old River Bayou near St. Martinville, Louisiana, an estuary that jutted out of the Atchafalaya Swamp. With crickets, shiners, and night crawlers, he kept on catching one Choupique after another. Those were ugly prehistoric fish with teeth snapping the hell out of one's fingers while one tried to unscrew the hook from their mean bony jaws and gills. He had just finished eating a ham sandwich and was right in the middle of his fifteenth smoked oyster when he had felt a tug on the line. He just knew it was another Choupique. Catching Alligator Gar wasn't bad because they got made into fried breaded gar-balls. Too many bones though with those Choupiques.

The line jerked and the water broke smooth into a splash and he had something on the line. But this one was like the ones that someone caught off the shores of Africa in 1938, proving wrong that the Coelecanth was extinct. When he saw it all he knew was that it was the ugliest looking fish he'd ever seen except for maybe a Doctor Fish he caught in the Gulf once. It made a Choupique's countenance compare like Tyrone Power to Rondo Hatten. It wasn't a Choupique so he wasn't just going to whack it with a paddle and toss it back in, shocked in the brackish water, unfit to ever try and eat. It was kind of streamlined looking. All rubbery and slimy, its eyes were beady like a shark, teeth like Dracula, and fins like a '57 Caddy. Mr. Langouis had looked at his stringer. He was going home with just a couple of ugly ass Catfish and a Bass, and this thing of grotesque beauty. His son would be able to identify this thing.

Wayne Langouis went home and put the fish in the bathtub and it was kind of still at first and then revived in the cool water and swished around a little. Sometime later he heard a scream from his son in there.

"Dad, you got an extinct fish from the Mesozoic era swimming in the tub!"

His father was busy watching red beans cook.

"Go get him some beer down at the store." Whatever the hell it was it weren't no better than a Choupique.

He drank malt liquor after his salted pork redbeans and Martha White cornbread.

The fish swished its fins lazily and seemed sluggish in the water. It pointed directly to the front of the tub, polarized. Some kids came over from across the tracks to see what they had heard about.

"God, it's so ugly."

"It's a Coelecanth."

"What's that?"

"It's supposed to be extinct." Wayne Junior smiled broadly in the small porcelain bathroom, sitting atop the commode in his dungarees. He had already contacted the Smithsonian, the local university, members of his science club and his Biology teacher, Mr. Hensley from Ben Franklin Jr. High. They said try and keep it alive if at all possible. Soon all the kids in the neighborhood had come round to see the ancient fish from the Mesozoic era.

"Why don't ya put nuther fish in there to keep it company?"

"Cause all I got is some tropical fish. It would eat em all," Wayne Junior said.

It was a marvelous fish. Dr. Sorenson from the Smithsonian had called and was going to get back with Wayne Junior of Avenue B in St. Martinville, Louisiana. The Newspapermen maybe were coming around tomorrow. All the kids had left for the day. The fish and he were alone in the room together. Wayne put his Angel Fish and Black Mollies and Guppies in the tub. Hopefully they would serve proudly in their sacrifice they were going to make to the scientific community.

Mr. Langouis didn't seem to care about no sluggish looking pike thing barely alive now, almost floating sideways in the tub. "How in the hell is any of us gonna to take a bath?" Wayne Senior asked him.

"Daddy, I contacted all the newspapers and the college and we've got to keep it alive. We can't put it inna toilet! I take a bath at Jimmy's house tonight."

It looked at them with cold ancient eyes.

"Downright evil-lookin. I don't want nothing that ugly in my house. Those men better come around here and get it."

"Come on."

"This ain't no aquarium, goddammit! You unerstand me boy?"

"Men from the college say they were comin by tomorrow to look." He smiled. "Don't you think it's wunnerful, pop? This fish that lived millions of years ago was found in that Bayou. Couple them doctors still don't believe. Said no such thing could be found around here. But I looked it up in my textbooks. I described it to Mr. Hensley."

"How in hell do Mr. Hensley know? How could a fish be hunnerts of million years old? This fish was born 150 million years old ago? Ain't nothing that old!"

"No pop," Wayne said as he stuck his brown pudgy finger in the tub. It had just eaten most of a small pesky angel fish.

"Did you see that? He just ate that angel fish! He's gonna live!"

"In dem old sewage ditches fish ain't even real fish. They don't go after worms, they wanna just jump right in the boat. Crazy fish! They eat sewage!"

"Pop, see, this fish ain't 150 million years old. No. See, this fish from that Mesozoic era, but it ain't but four or five years old."

Wayne Langouis burped up some malt liquor and patted his belly.

It seemed to look at them again.

"Creepy is what it is. Freaky thing in my tub. Shoulda whacked it with my paddle. Shoulda tossed it back in. Ain't no telling what's in that bayou ... Extinct fish from Africa my ass." The black man mused for a second in the heat.

He muttered, "Don't mind catching no Gar. I spend half my weekend whacking trash fish and throwin em back." He laughed. "I musta beat the same fish two hunnert times." Wayne junior touched the fin on the fish's back as it swirled around in the ruddy water.

"Put your hand back boy, it might bite it off."

"He wouldn't do that, I'm tamin him."

"You been spending too much time in the baffroom anyhow. And keep those neighborhood kids outa here. This here's my house!"

Wayne Junior shook his head.

"What I done told you bout bringin your friends round here. My house ain't no freak show! Go on an git me a six-pack down at Carl's grocery!" The boy took his hand away from the fish.

"When I get back I will add some more water cause all the oxygen cells is breathed outa this batch." The little boy smiled. "Watch my fish, Pop!"

His father shook his head.

Chubby Wayne Junior trod out into the patio and into the back yard. He hopped over Camellia bushes and through a field with his pop's wrinkled five dollar bill in his pocket. He thought wondrous things about the new adventure. This was better than playing ball and movies and Star Trek even. His tennis shoes stumbled him over gnarly oak tree roots sticking out like Octopus

appendages.

Down by the corner on this particularly hot day, the old men were sitting out by the store drinking beer, and speaking Creole until Wayne Junior came along.

"...Coldest beer in town."

"Yeah."

"Did you hear about the extinct fish my daddy caught in Old River Bayou?"

"Stink what?" They laughed.

One white-haired black man smiled.

"I didn't hear about fish. Your dad been keeping them shoe picks, no." All the men laughed. "Wayne Langouis whacks dem mean fish and throw dem all back in de pond." They laughed again.

"I calt de Smitsonian Institoot in Washington Dee Cee!"

The old man smiled, his eyes slits.

"You better not make no long-distance phone calls, cher. Yaw daddy'll beat your ass, boy!"

Wayne Junior adjusted his New Orleans Saints t-shirt went inside and the skinny white lady smiled at him with no teeth.

"Some beer for your daddy?" she warbled.

"Yes Ma'am." Wayne looked at the comic books on the rack near the live bait tanks. He smelled fish stuff and turtles and crawfish in the air.

"If your daddy wants some more night crawlers, we got some worms dug up last night near the graveyard. Tell him just let us know." She smiled again and pulled hard on her Picayune cigarette.

She probably didn't know about the great wondrous find that had the world on its ear. Tomorrow this time she would be watching him on television telling about the Coelecanth fish, found in the bayou. Extinct! He loped past the old men drinking little Millers, smoking King Ed cigars.

"Tell your daddy to start buying his fish from the Delchamps in Abbeville. He ain't ever gonna catch nothing worth eatin, dahlin!"

Haw, they jostled in the waning afternoon. It was lazy in these marshes. Wayne reckoned himself by telephone poles going to the horizon over the rice fields and catfish farms and crawfish ponds, into the orange, crimson soon to follow.

"You just wait till tomorrow, Mister Bergeron! You'll see!"

He went past his buddies playing basketball in the Church parking lot.

"Yo, hey Wayne! Can we see that historic fish again?"

"Yeah Wayne! I wanna show Leticia and Taenia!"

"I cannot," Wayne said reverently. "My old man ain't letting nobody come in the house. Cept the reporters and scientists tomorrow!"

They laughed. One boy said, "I seen a fish like dat before, yeah! Caught one like that before! Ain't nothing!"

"Give me da ball, Marshall!" It went in the rusty orange metal hoop from a cockeyed off key lucky shot. No swish of a net, no vestiges of a net.

"You lucky!" A boy took the ball out again. "Fifteen to six! Our Ball!"

Wayne was too busy to think about trivial things right now. He was in his mind thinking of prehistoric times when there were flying reptiles and dinosaurs and moas and big monitor lizards and sloths and slimy leviathans. He had studied all about it. He used to dream about finding a dinosaur egg. He would even spend hours in the gravel pits looking for fossils in the huge pile of rocks. He had seen weird skeletons of trilobite and ferns and stuff. Now he had a living connection with the past. There was probably a Brontosaurus skeleton in that swamp somewhere. Maybe fighting between a saber-toothed tiger and mastodon, fur flying! His favorite movie was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World where a baby dinosaur hatches at the end of the movie after the volcano erupted and it mews for its mamma. Journey to the Center of the Earth was good too. An awing wonder made him impervious to trickling sweat from the volcano ledge all through his musky Saints shirt. His brown face beamed in the direction of the rice fields, where beyond the fields lay the

skeletons of creatures just waiting to be dug up. The beer he was holding was sweating so he hurried up so his daddy wouldn't yell at him for goofing off.

He stomped onto the porch of the house.

"Daddy! I got yore Malt liquor! Can I have some red beans and rice?"

His dad was sitting in the lazy boy recliner thumbing through the cable guide.

"Bassmasters is supposed to be on this evening!"

"And it say in here they gonna be a movie selling aludinum siding! Got Damn!"

"Eat em up boy, they'll go bad in a couple days, yeah." He popped open a 16 ounce can of foamy elixir.

"Ah," he said as he found Dixie Wrestling among the cooking shows and real estate commercials.

Wayne came up to him. "How's my fish?"

His father didn't say anything.

"We gotta clean up for them reporters and the college doctors coming out here tomorrow round three."

"I ain't cleanin my house for some white folks coming to look at dat stupid fish!"

Wayne Junior went to his bedroom after touching the rubbery fish and stroking it with his left hand. There were a couple more guppies gone. He put a couple more inches of water in there, not too cold, not too hot! He closed the shower curtain on the find of the century. He went into his bedroom and read comics and then looked in the textbooks and drew Coelecanths swimming around in the ocean with Barracudas and Sharks and Whales with legs. He drew Old Man Bayou and then the Atchafalaya Swamp, and then the gulf marshes and then the gulf and then the ocean and then the coast of Africa. He fell asleep dreaming about Doyle's Lost World.

His dad was busy in the kitchen that night.

There was Wesson frying oil and Martha White corn meal mix all over the sink. Wayne Senior had gone into the bathroom and stuck the Coelecanth with his knife and brought it into the kitchen. It looked at him in a way which he did not understand. He gutted it and fillet it. Too many bones. He casually realized he was on his last beer before he would get into the gin. The blood and skin and scales were all over the garbage pail. This'll teach those fricking Choupiques! Ain't no different from a slimy old Choupique! The chunks of breaded fish dipped in egg and rolled in corn meal smelled delicious in the night air. Wayne Langouis knew what he was doing. He caught it, trash fish or not. He was gonna eat it!

He ate it along with some gar ball hushpuppies still hot from the fryer. He thought about those fishing shows where the white folks caught those twenty pound large-mouthed bass and threw them back! Damn shame!

Coelecanth ain't half bad! he thought.

Wayne found out the next day when he looked in the tub. He cried for two hours and then called the college up and apologized.

He thought to himself later. Maybe he would go fishing and camp out there and find himself a baby dinosaur egg if he was extremely lucky. If his dad could catch an extinct fish the same could happen to him. Old Man Bayou was like a time warp or something. Hollywood filmed that silent Tarzan film in Abbeville with Elmo Lincoln in the swamps in 1918. Wayne could live out there and search for fossils.

The kids in the neighborhood made fun of him. He took the bones out of the garbage and rearranged them and glued them and made a plaque and put varnish on it and painted the bones and looked into the Coelecanth's hollow eyes. It was nice looking skeleton and it seemed to be grinning at him.

He would romp through those swamps and find him another ancient creature and bring him back and keep it in the bathtub. A Moa or Crocodile. Alligator Gar or Choupique. They were prehistoric. He remembered when he went to Florida with his dad and mamma and saw a ten year old white boy holding up a big ugly slimy Choupique monster bigger than the boy.

He would make up for the adventure that went sour. The sun hung big in the thick humid air over the rice fields and the kids in the neighborhood finally told him they saw it and it was really true after all. He had the fish grinning from 150 million years of survival hanging on his wall to prove it.

He sat the next five afternoons in Old River Bayou on a cypress tree without a nibble on his cane pole. Then he caught a Choupique so mean and toothy and he brought it back and put it in the bathtub. His daddy let him keep it there for two weeks until it rolled tits up and died. Then Wayne buried it where he thought that big mound was really a Brontosaurus grave, having fallen and heaved its last breath and died and eroded and turned into a fossil.

Later on Wayne resigned himself to play basketball by the church every afternoon. It was a mystery as to how that Coelecanth wound up in Old River Bayou where they spoke Cajun and Creole French and ate Crawfish and Jambalaya and Ettoufee. All the stuff they caught in those green boggy waters where Time seemed to stand still like it had for millions of years, all the way back to the Mesozoic era, probably, Wayne thought for many nights after that.

A Digging in Providence

Little Tommy West was the biggest punk in Providence, the meanest SOB since the diabolist Aliester Crowley died. He popped fireworks in the Providence cemetery, he shot BB's at the neighbors' dogs and cats, he rang lots of doorbells. He was this close to going back to Juvvy.

He was busy shooting Roman candles and thinking about how much he hated his brother, that whining windpiping baby who was too sickly to attend school and yet managed to read voraciously and even get chemistry and astronomy articles published in the local newspaper. Nothing annoyed him more than being interrupted by his brother showing him architectural and old cemetery gravemarker photos while he was thinking of new crimes to pull. And his brother's room always stunk with those damned chemistry experiments he pulled. Well, he knew that his brother would make architectural walks endlessly, even through the cemetery, but wouldn't dare walk through while Tommy was there, popping off black cat firecrackers until the cops would show up from neighbors' complaining. He always got away.

You could say he was the literal antithesis of Herbert West, his big stinkin brother. And he was down to his last cigarette which he used to set off the fireworks. Somebody was walking down the path leading through near where he was. It was a boy. Wait, it was his brother, Herbert!

"What in the hell do you want?" Tommy West elicited. "I didn't expect you to be here at night."

"I have changed my ways, I've got something to show you." Tommy followed his big brother for about a hundred yards, through the matrix of gravemarkers in this Providence bone orchard.

"It better be something good, like a dead body or something," Tommy offered.

"Look down here, Tommy, what do you see?"

They were standing around what looked like a large opened grave with a tombstone bearing the three words, 'I AM PROVIDENCE.' Now where had Tommy heard that before? Something his damn brainy brother had showed him several times. The coffin was open. They looked into the darkness. There was nobody there. Why?

"Did you do this, Herbie? Shit, you're okay. Man, this beats the hell out of anything I ever did. What did you do with the body? My own brother, a frigging graverobber from outer space!"

"My dear Tommy, do you recognize this?" He pulled out a syringe with a fluorescent oozing green liquid contained within. "I've been experimenting in my lab."

"SO WHAT!"

Suddenly out of the grappling shadows of the trees festooning this Providence graveyard strode a man in a dingy faded grey suit, thin with a

lantern jaw and sensitive countenance, he resembled, well, nothing more than an accountant.

"Who are you?" Tommy harshly inquired.

"My name is Howard, humble sir." He was stumbling and his eyeballs seemed to bulge in accordance with his strange demeanor, his unearthly animation and nervousness.

Herbert West, big brother to Tommy, spoke up. "This is my friend, we have been taking architectural excursions only recently. You see, he's been away for a while, but now he's back."

"What is he, some queer intellectual friend of yours?" And then he remembered what the words "I AM PROVIDENCE" represented. One sunny day when invalid Herbert was doing some more of his cruddy voracious reading, he showed Tommy a photo of a gravemarker, of a semifamous horror writer, but he couldn't remember his name. And this was the gravemarker. The opened coffin, the dug-up goofer dust, and all that. There once was some writer guy who Herbert said was the literary and linear heir to Eddy somebody who lived 100 years ago here in Providence. His name was Howard, and he had seen photos of this creepy guy, and he remembered his stern lantern jaw in those aged photos, and the guy's grave was adorned with those three words.

Tommy had to go now. He remembered that his cruddy smart brother who wrote chemistry articles and astronomical dictums in an amateur style for the Providence newspaper had said he was on the verge of something that would reanimate dead tissue, but there was a bunch of horsepuckies. And he did it. He fled away, he had to get away, as Howard reached out for him, his rotting flesh torpid and stiff as he jerked his arm and lunged for him. Herbert had imitated this writer, and now had befriended the reanimated corpse as if he had gone to charnel houses and built him in a Wollstonecraft fashion.

He was running as fast as he could when another fellow, a queer looking one, grabbed him by the shoulder. His balding pate had frizzled hair on top of the enlarged hydrocephalic head and he was cloaked in an ancient coat and was wearing a suit that was at least 150 years out of style. What a stench! Tommy Ladshaw West cried out, fleeing for his life from the preternatural, and what managed to creep from his mouth was, "WHO ARE YOU?"

"I am Eddy. I am looking for Howard."

Little punk Tommy shrieked in unnamable horror unparalleled in the history of modern crime, and gasped as Eddy's gnarly hands grappled his tiny criminal neck and wrenched the life's breath out of him, just because Herbert West of 66 Angell Street, Providence, Rhode Island had finally perfected that reanimation formulae and breathed life into clay.

Herbert West, all of 13 years old, meek and feebly, had the privilege of taking an architectural walk with Edgar Allan Poe and Howard Phillips Lovecraft through the ruins of the graveyard. They ventured to sight some Georgian structures of which they were all so fond.

Who Are You, You and You?

Rick went to the biggest mall in Fort Worth, Texas, as he usually had went to do on holiday, this time to find a present for his Uncle Bill. Rick Taylor decided to park on this hazy day as close as possible to the Cortana Mall, he didn't feel like walking too much today. As usual, he did not pay particular attention to where he parked, the small signs which indicated where one's car could be found went unnoticed. But he knew he was somewhere near the cinema centroplex.

He strolled through the mall, keeping an eye out for the pretty young girls that had no worries in life, nothing to clutter their underdeveloped minds to any certain degree, as long as they had enough credit to wipe out Daddy's accounts at the various department stores that loomed like obelisks in this largest mall in Texas. He strolled into the B. Dalton Bookstore for the hell of it, and glanced at the classic fiction bookshelf. He was looking for Flannery O'Connor's collection of short stories, and they had a whole string of them. In fact, the book selections seemed to be lots of certain things, as

if the stratiation was gone, the multitudes of individual selections, and the law of duplication had taken over in this hovel of literature. Instead of the wide variety, there was clone after clone of different book, this seemed to be sort of a strange marketing strategy, to be sure. He bought a single selection out of the multitude of clones of the O'Connor book, but the book appeared, to his unique slant on things of the obscure, a not-true original. It had all the right words, and all the right illustrations, and the right cover, but for some overwhelming reason he seemed to think something was eroding his sensibilities to some degree.

He bought the book, and as he strolled by the video arcade the youths playing the different machines of pleasure seemed to all look similar, all dusky urchins with nothing better to do. As he walked and noticed the girls, the older men and women, the women strolling babies, there seemed to be a similar pattern to the blank faces on the expressionless folks. There seemed to him, he may have been wrong, that there was a string of folks who were all of the same type, but he had to go home and make himself a martini quick as a B. He strolled out near the cinema where he did not notice that in all 8 cinemas the same movie was playing. The scene which he saw then blew his mind. Out in the middle of the parking lot where he had parked his BMW, there stood in each neat cubicle, one for each, the whole lot was filled with thousands of BMWs, all alike, all identical to his. How could this be?

He tried to remember the small sign where his car was approximately at. He couldn't. What was happening, a nervous breakdown, a weird figment of his imagination? He walked by row after row of aquamarine BMW, year model 1977, and was bewildered. What was he going to do? He felt nervous and aquiver, his stomach was turning slowly. Could he go back to the mall, could he call a cab, what was going on, some sort of humongous sense of duplicity, a terrible cloning of everything, like what he began to notice in B. Dalton Bookstore?

He decided to go back into the mall. The McDonald's was over near the entrance, he hadn't noticed it when he walked in. All the Big Macs seemed identical in a way, but they should be of course. The next thing he knew, he was in the hospital, he had collapsed in the mall. The ordinary folks of similar genetic design were gone. He was safe now. He wasn't seeming multiples anymore. At least that was what he thought. They diagnosed his trauma as a nervous disorder, both Dr. Falk, Dr. Falk, and Dr. Falk. They got a second opinion from Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Adams, and Mrs. Adams, the social worker in the mental ward unit where he stayed. But he would be alright, he knew he would. After all, he had all these good people helping him, the multiples of people that he knew were imaginary, or something recognizably mentally wrong, that would be corrected soon. But he didn't get better after six months, the insurance had run out, so he was shipped over with fifty Mr. John Smiths, the other mental patients, to the state hospital, where he met Dr. Jones, Dr. Jones and Dr. Jones, and also, Dr. Jones. He was safe here, his duplicity was something he was getting used to. The interstellar comet finally finished passing through the earth's atmosphere.

Is It Live or Is It Lysergic Acid?

Jimmy Allen was the biggest videocassette collector in his neighborhood block. He had bootlegged tapes, beta, VHS, even had a few reels of The Mummy's Tomb on 16 mm. One night during his usual nightcap of a Bull Shot, which was vodka and beer, he put on a recent movie, The Natural. Jimmy had gotten tired of that rare and new feeling, specifically of seeing the same favorite movies over and over, to the point where he had the lines memorized. He almost wished he would have the guts to look at new tapes, hopefully to find new diamonds in the rough, but he simply, out of his 2000 tapes, only faithfully watched a mere hundred or so. Here in The Natural, Roy Hobbs just batted foul at the end of the big game, and his bat "wonderboy" was split in two. Jimmy knew what was to come next, but when Roy told the fat batboy to "pick me out a winner, Bobby," Bobby turned to Roy and instead of saying nothing and picking out his own Savoy Special, and smiling all the while, he

turned to Hobbs and said, "Screw you, Roy." Jimmy choked on his drink, closely and barely averting a full ichorous vomiting, and played the video back. That same sequence, it did not happen again.

So, before he went to bed, he put on Urban Cowboy, and Bud is talking to his buddies, they are all at the refinery, everyone wearing safety glasses but Bud (John Travolta). Suddenly, instead of talking about the fight last night at Gilley's, Marshall turns to Bud and says, "Hey Bud, how come you don't have to wear safety glasses?"

Jimmy began immediately thinking he was going mad. These tapes weren't coming out the way they had for forty or fifty times. It was also impossible that any movie made a long time ago could suddenly be converted or tampered with, or released any different than the common knowledge versions they were famous for. So, before he committed himself to the Biloxi Clinic and resigned that fact, he called directory assistance on a wild hunch.

"Is there a number for the video police?" The operator told him to hold. "I'm sorry, under video police I show no listings."

"Well, can you try 'video manipulators'?"

"Yes," she said, "that number is 273-3091 ... area code 213 in Los Angeles, Thousand Oaks, district of Los Angeles." Yes, he knew it, it was a radical conspiracy to do worse than the colorizers, the television editing hackers, these people through special effects and dubbing, and re-editing and mixing up tapes, it was horrendous, that was all he could think, as he dialed up the number.

"Yes, #2134. Go ahead please."

Jimmy spoke up. "Yes, I think I have a case for you. Two of my video tapes so far have been manipulated. You see, these are studio pictures where everyone knows how they come out. My Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid ended midway through the movie, when they jump off the cliff and get dashed like eggs on the rocks below, missing the water ... and..."

"-- Hold on, sir, give us your name and phone number. And address. We will take care of everything. We don't need to hear anymore. Someone will be coming by to visit with you."

The next day, Jimmy work up and answered the door. A man in a white outfit came to the door and cuffed Jimmy and put him in the white van. They brought him to a jet which flew him to Thousand Oaks, California, and a small man with pince-nez glasses and orange hair neatly parted, wearing a celluloid suit. "We are having you committed to an asylum. We will get your signature on an agreement by force if necessary, to be committed. First we will tour you around our studios to let you know you aren't crazy at all." They toured the mile long factory, the assembly lines of stolen tapes (right from people's homes, even in Hammond, LA), and the editors and remixers and redubbers, the masters of deceptions, which made the infamous colorizers as harmless as Nixon White House aides. Jimmy was kept in his straight jacket, and in a line of other video enthusiasts, and then sent to Holmby Pavillion and Mental Health Center, back in his own state.

When he was released, he went home and his video collection seemed to be untouched, except when he viewed a Star Trek episode. Captain Kirk and the entire crew of the Enterprise were killed off in the first ten minutes of "The City on the Edge of Forever." But Jimmy didn't know or notice, he just popped another Thorazine pill, and switched to Andy Griffith, where Barney Fife organized a Klan rally at Wally's Filling Station, and Aunt Bea was raped by a gang of thugs and her forearms hacked off. The credits rolled, and Herschel Gordon Lewis's name came up. He who controls the past, controls the future?

Going on a Submarine Ride

"Daddy's coming today! Whoopee!" Bubbie said excitedly. He looked around the hospital room. "He's going to take me to Disneyland!" Bubbie could barely contain himself. He wanted to be home like the people on T.V. He hated the hospital. The hospital was full of evil people. They wouldn't play with

him. They didn't like him very much at all. "I'll become a Power Ranger and Nintendo them down from the sky in a puff of smoke, fire all over," he thought. "I'll be Space Ghost and blast them out of the sky. Whooppee! Yay!"

He was in his favorite robe, which made him look just like the Velveteen Rabbit. That was his favorite story. It made him feel so cuddly and sweet, like when Mommy would read to him. First she would bathe him. Then she would tuck him in and read to him. But now all he could think of was Disneyland. He knew that Disneyland wasn't as good as Walt Disney World which was over in that other state, on his US map: Florida. That was it, wasn't it? But Disneyland was still good. He remembered if that Russian guy Khrushchev could go see Mickey Mouse, then it was good enough for little Bubbie. Yessirree Bubbie!

Bubbie had been in here a long time, and now he was actually getting out! He would be away from needles and doctors and experts telling him their wicked sorcerer things, their ways were full of meanness and spit. He hated them. Oh, they always said to him that they were Bubbie's special friend. They tried to tell him why he was here and everything, but Bubbie wouldn't listen, because after all, nobody listened to a sorcerer with his evil spells and potions. And now, Bubbie knew exactly where he was going first, when Daddy took him to Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom. The Nautilus submarine would be there, all metallic with bolts and rivets, and it goes underwater and everything. There was nothing better than that! No sir, Bubbie! He remembered that daddy took him there a long time ago, and that he hadn't seen his daddy in a long, long time. It seemed like almost forever ago. Bubbie would go up on the Matterhorn. The log ride. He would see the man in the space jetpack that flies up into the air. He would shake Goofy's hand.

Using his electric razor, Bubbie shaved his heavily bearded stubble off, for a good ten minutes. Daddy's coming! He was almost sure of it. The others told him that he was coming and that Bubbie and Bubbie's daddy were going to Disneyland, that fantasy world. Bubbie was almost kinda-like living in a fantasy world of his own because he hated the evil doctors a whole bunch. They would try to give him those evil Haloperidol shots. Oh, sometimes they were in liquid form, too. Sometimes mean Thorazine pills. Bubbie had done something very bad, they said a forever ago. And they told him everyday for the longest time but Bubbie wouldn't believe one word of it, no sirree. Then they didn't try to tell him how bad he was no more. And Bubbie would write his crazy stories about Box Monsters from Neptune, and a space wrestler who gets pinned down by a crab creature and guts go everywhere! Blood squirts out and the head lops off, and veins are sticking out like a piece of fried chicken, that has that vein in it sometimes. Bubbie wouldn't eat for a long time and then those sorcerers and their big burly guards force-fed him in this evil castle and all.

Bubbie rubbed his pudgy, clean-shaven face. He was always having to shave cause he didn't want a beard like the evil sorcerer doctors. Bubbie was putting his big brown suit on today, getting ready to leave, yessirree Bubbie! Oh, here comes a wicked witch nurse ... she's coming in my chamber. My dungeon where they have me chained up, in this wicked, wicked castle.

I am being punished for something that they said that I did. They say that Johnny Carson wanted to kill me, Bubbie. That I came to his studio and pulled a gun. But he had been talking to me telepathically since Phoenix ... no. Even before that. Around Texas somewhere. That's a really big state. See on my map? And I came to the show because the cosmic interface had everybody in show business knowing that I would be a great comedy genius and have MY own show. King of the Scuttlefish. King of Hollywood.

And it was kind of hard to remember anything after that. Bubbie hates guilty feelings. Bubbie has learned to stop hating himself. The evil ones say it isn't Bubbie's fault. I came to this place, from another evil place. They took my gun away! And now I am going to see daddy and go on the Nautilus submarine. Go under swampy, murky leagues of ocean. And daddy will hold my hand.

Bubbie sat on his smelly bed all crooked-like. Here comes the wicked witch.

"Hello, Bubbie. How are we today?" the witch asked, smiling. Witches don't wear white pants suits, Bubbie knew.

"Fine, Miss Cruella. I want my medicine."

She produced it from the small medicine cart. It was liquid Haloperidol today.

"You shaved, huh?"

"Yes."

He took the medicine.

"That's it ... Getting dressed?" Cruella asked him.

"Yes. My suit. Know where I'm going today?" Bubbie asked her excitedly.

"Where are you going? The Johnny Carson show?" she asked.

He hated her.

"No. Disneyland! Walt Disney asked me to go." He shrieked out a brash cackle with unbridled joy.

"Oh ... That submarine is there. I see the pictures on your wall."

"That's right."

"Well, Bubbie. You're a regular Captain Nemo, aren't you?" She laughed warmly.

"Yes. My daddy is picking me up soon. This afternoon."

She sighed softly. Poor bastard, she thought. He killed his father.

She left the room. Bubbie was tricked out in his velveteen suit.

I'm the Velveteen Bunny, Bubbie mused. I wish my mommy would tuck me in. Where's daddy?

Flashes of Bubbie cutting his father's throat in his study tried to force themselves into Bubbie's consciousness, but something was blocking the thoughts out.

Daddy is coming! I love my daddy. The submarine is waiting for us...

He waited all the rest of the morning. Then lunch came and Miss Cruella DeVille came and fed him some pepper steak. Yum, Yum! Bubbie thought. He liked pepper steak. Johnny Carson probably does, too. He doesn't have his show anymore. I took him off the air. He retired, he said. But I influenced the whole thing. I advised him on the cosmic Interface. Mmmmmmm, this pepper steak is like the food on the Nautilus submarine.

He looked at his faded, yellow drawings of a crude submarine on his white rubber wall.

He waited the rest of the afternoon, until night fell in the evil dungeon.

Where's daddy? He never shows up. Shucks...

Laboring in the Valley of Ashes

Between college semesters I worked construction jobs that my father had arranged for me. One summer I found myself laboring in some unknown section of the Exxon refinery. The tank farms that I used to think were huge swimming pools when I was small loomed on the horizon above a polluted framework of pipes and men running around cutting and welding them. I would refer to the ghastly place as the "valley of ashes" in The Great Gatsby.

There was a strata of factions involved, one was the legion of high school boys who might not have yet dropped out of LSU, specifically the Broadmoor High athletes who smoked pot high atop a metal spire at lunch everyday. One of them, Frank, described the tower as a hundred feet in the atmosphere, so high the wind swayed the small wooden platform that they were perched on while on uncontrolled substances. The blacks, old and young, had their own society. They seemed to take umbrage against the suburban boys as a threat to their own jobs. But things were booming for Louisiana oil then and even I got on as a laborer for National Maintenance, you could tell by the two stripes on my hardhat. My foreman was a slightly interesting black man, easy to work for, we laborers mostly sat firewatching. That meant holding a firehose and a chance to sit atop a fire extinguisher while welders welded

pipes full of gas, and if a small fire started we were to turn our hoses on to keep it down and out.

There was an ex Scotlandville High linebacker, a huge black behemoth who had played against some now-LSU football players but that was all forgotten or myth. Daily he would drop a marijuana joint down my shirt pocket, saying "Just a present from the mailman" with a dazed smile. I remembered my mother had told me, "They just want to get you hooked first." Once when Frank and I were walking after lunch through the sooty yard he told me in stride, "When you get fucked up, this place is BULLSHIT..." He said it emphatically as his steel-toed boots sparked against the pavement. I had been too protected in the manicured suburbs.

I heard around the lunch shack amongst the buzzing flies. "You going to see the Doors?" "Yeah." The black men were excited about the Commodores concert. An old black man with a green hardhat with "Cornbread" written across always smiled but had no teeth except for one each on each side. I didn't know if he was wise or in what way, for all I knew he could have been the Second Coming. I asked big John about Cornbread. "They don't give toothbrushes to you in Angola..."

Among the welders in blue jeans and denim shirts with hats turned around backwards, one ate his lunch quietly under a huge cooling tower and read the Bible and then took a nap. A crane operator there was born again also. They kept to themselves, trying to make the day perfect in their mind, which meant constant interpretation of the events at this site woven in with Bible parables.

Frank and his jock friends continued to get high atop the slim tower. They had all gotten on from one of the guys dad's contracting company as insulation men. One evening Frank and I played basketball in the LSU fieldhouse. "Yeah, pot cuts your wind he would say to me," after he had scored twenty points to my two. Once even big John and his friends snuck in there and played ball with me also. I had my ID of course.

Alex was a friendly guy from Port Vincent who was perpetually told about how to be a good Christian by that born-again crane picker operator. In some remote part of the huge rundown mess in a small dirty cell he told me he used to run with some crazy guys and they all mainlined speedballs and heroin. But now he was born again. Once Alex and I were sent to the Exxon docks where the oil tankers lay. All they needed was a hole blasted out on the dock with a jackhammer. It took us all of twenty minutes. "I'm going to find a cool place to lay down. They won't be looking for us all day. Find you a cool place."

Sure enough near the waterline of the underbelly of a huge ship underneath the cool docks with the muddy Mississippi river washing under us we took a nap and I felt good. I started realizing that I liked pot for some reason and that the plant was bullshit like Frank had said. I began running away whenever I could, my biggest task was to avoid being seen by any foreman. When it rained we could go home early. There were north Baton Rouge grown men who roughhoused with each other like they were high school sophomores. The woman who ran the tool shack was hardskinned, rumor had it that she had a thing for one of the young mustached carpenters and had even shown him her breasts during working hours. One of the biggest apocryphal tales was coaxing women engineers to go to the tank farms and make love during the middle of the sultry sun, no matter what plant I had worked at.

It had become obvious to me that I was lost in 'Semiconductors' and 'Circuits I and II' in electrical engineering. I had picked that major because my father was an engineer. I began to see the plant in an aesthetic way somehow, even though it was extremely unpleasant, the rust and smells of noxious fumes, the pits of ashes and old pipes taped together. The electricians in hard boots became a circus act as they miraculously walked pipes forty feet in the air (they said they didn't do it when it rained). I liked the soulful laughter and jostling of the black men who claimed their particular turf of firewatching with a determined squat upon a fire extinguisher and a fire hose. John gave me a joint and he and the foreman were

standing deliberately by the porta potty waiting and laughing to see the dumbfounded stoned expression upon my face as I stepped from the thing. I was speechless at the foreman's lack of disapproval. They just laughed.

Life went on, sometimes it rained and sometime it didn't. We carried respirators and though the sun burned down we had to wear long sleeved shirts due to the caustic chemicals. I found myself an expert at sweeping, digging small ditches, picking up rubbish when the black foreman said, "Police the area" ... This turned out to be my wondrous way to just think about Plato's Gorgias, Themes in Science Fiction, Robert Goddard, Ragtime, Kurt Vonnegut and various light theatrics. I was fascinated and bored at the same time. The wages weren't bad either. Alex sometimes told me he was going to read some scripture at lunch with his friend, the cherry picker operator, so I lay underneath the huge cooling tower a small distance away from the reverent welder who read the Bible and then took a nap, which I would do now. I had a bronzed face now and felt like a soldier felt, or better yet, Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse Five, bundled up in long jeans and long shirt with respirator, hardhat, and shovel and just as much ambiguity coursing through me.

One rainy day I couldn't seem to find out from anyone whether they were staying or leaving and summarily getting docked. I saw the bus leave with the men. I stayed and ran amuck through the misty towers and old rubbish and pipes bent to go everywhere, and just found myself atop this huge metal contraption, a building or tank or something, and looked down in the rain. From high above the valley of ashes I began to lose all sensation of time, I was the only one in the whole block, and felt good, the rain dripped on and around me. I was nothing but a college boy who wondered what the hell I was going to do with myself next semester, or the rest of my life.

Frankie had had it out one day with an old black man about a certain firewatching spot that they both wanted. He told me bluntly exactly what he had told the man. "Look nigger, you don't tell me what to do," he said as he had poked the old man in the chest ... "This ain't your spot, it's mine." He maintained that the old man was shocked at this and I knew he must have been. I felt bad about the whole situation and things weren't quite right after that.

I finished the construction job, having "drug up" as the various craftsmen put it when the toolbox is turned in, which laborers didn't even have. I had to go back to college. Other college boys worked their summer in shoe stores, or sold suits at Goudchaux's. I spent mine with a disparate community of potheaded drunk jocks, black men, rednecks from north BR, Denham Springs and Walker, all of us choking on the vile fumes that pervaded this valley of ashes and condemned metal. I didn't learn anything much except about how life was outside the suburbs. One day I was sitting by my girlfriend's parents' pool with the radio on, trying to get a tan, and the radio blared, "Alex Painter robbed a bank in Port Vincent. My born again friend had gotten in bad with his old gang of drug criminals."

The suburban city boy life started just the way it ended, back at the sprawling campus. Anonymously I went to Chemistry and Physics and Calculus walking through crowds, wondering what the hell I was doing there, and where could I go?

I didn't work too many construction jobs after that and never saw any of those people again. I had heard that Frankie had lost his fine looking girlfriend to a college football player, but that was about it. But at one time I was standing in the rain high above Gatsby's Valley of Ashes, far away from anything familiar and for a moment I had severed myself from the bare thread of suburbia and country clubs and Catholic private prep schools and it felt good.

Aliens and Minibikes

Chapter One

There is nothing quite like a neighborhood than a suburbia that isn't all built up yet. A neighborhood embryonic and emblazoned with vacant lots and half-built houses, always stuck with some idealistic name that becomes your universe. If you tell a kid he lives in Sherwood Forest subdivision, what's to keep him from believing he isn't in dark arbors, glens of goldenrod, with medieval castles amidst verdant lush vistas? He has to find out for himself.

A subdivision becomes a wondrous canvas of sidewalks that disappear, wild animals strutting on concrete, and plenty of half built houses on brown mud with woodpiles to steal treehouse boards. If you grow up without building your own treehouse, or as some call them, treeforts, you are doomed to hell. If your father builds it for you it becomes a double hell. Whose father would think of something so wicked to do to his boy? My father didn't and I thank him eternally. I knew of a kid whose father actually did it, and maybe his son sits up at night and thinks about this injustice.

My subdivision was four corners of curved street and bounded the four pillars of heavenly elysian fields. I had found this out for myself. Sherwood Forest was not some real estater's lucrative goldmine, but my own. I ran to the ends of the earth within it. My mind bled dreams at night that smoked into fluted realms all through it. The sun sat on it. The moon bathed it. Creatures were within it. People were in this microcosm watching televisions. People sat in comfortable chairs in their air conditioning while we ran in green-bladed front lawns catching inflated leather. We defined our summers for the rest of the world by showing them a baseball bat and ball and made second base out of a shrub and third base out of a pine tree. Of course if we hadn't done this the United States would have ground to a halt and the seasons would have ceased to pass.

But sports were flip pastimes. Why bother when you could go down blazing trails in vacant lots to back roads and drainage ditches where you could see lost worlds? Girls with tank tops adorned this cultivated paddock. These matrices of bricked houses were neatly enough in rows and flower gardens were meant not to be trod upon, but to me it was earth and heavens unbridled in an azure uncommon. I was in a bosom of paralyzing sweetness. How was I to know this subdivision would disappear into my very mind when I grew up? How was I to know my youth would fester into drudgery? I didn't. I will go back now. I will seek an older world, pluck it out of myself and display it to the world. It's all here. Creepy crawlers and incredible edibles and Captain Crunch with Crunchberries and the origin of the Big Mac. Estes Rockets and mowing old spinsters' lawns for a fraction of what it was worth, all of that. Wilson Spaulding basketballs and bullies and sissies and summer camps. Ringing doorbells and egging houses and fireworks and smoking the stale cigar that your friend's father gave to him to light the bottle rockets. Bathing irregularly and goofy grape Kool-Aid. All here. Telescopes with equatorial mounts. Streetlights that loomed like brick moons in the heavens. The general cosmic unconsciousness of a sporadic ripple of neighbors that became forever entombed in my psyche. People all gone really, all of them, for they are not the same to me.

They were phosphor phantoms of my youth. I was a blond-tressed boy with innocence and naivete unparalleled in my paper airplanes and World Book Encyclopedia intellect. I was about as astounding as the family pet. Putting a towel about my thin neck to become some immortal superhero with bronzed skin invulnerable to all was my fondest wish. Reading comic books and EE Doc Smith's Skylark and Lensman series and Tarzan books and Huckleberry Finn, one could only expect this.

The lawns spread in green like cultivated meadows. The sun glinted on me with less brutality then, for I was headstrong in its glare. I mowed Mrs. Ward's lawn with a push mower. My father would have none of this self-propelled mess, no sir. I mowed his lawn and then I ran down to the Hobby Hut to spend the voluminous crock of gold, a whole five dollars, on a centaur rocket, or perhaps that replica of a V-2, because that is what lit up the skies over Europe and Werner von Braun invented them.

And we had him now working for NASA. I had books from the library from Willy Ley, and Von Braun, and rocketry books, and how to build moonbases. I had to return the books soon. I remember this so much that I am dissolving into this past now. I am being transferred into this realm of memory. I am there now...

Chapter Two

The grass itched as the mower cut its swath as the old lady watched me mow. No glass of water for me, just a clean five dollar bill and we all knew how rich she was. But hard work was for me, none of this allowance stuff. Karl Marx would have been proud. Socialism is, like Marxism, right from the stomach. And my stomach was aching for even a mustard and ketchup sandwich fold-over. So I turned the mower off and sped across the brownish green sod two yards hither, into my father's yard which was also my yard, and ran inside to gulp down a gallon of milk and a luncheon meat sandwich that tasted like the finest stipends of royalty. For that is what I was. In this dominion of suburbia, this Sherwood Forest, I was the prince, just as Danny Gregor, and Johnny Haroldson. And the sweat dripped and dewed off my forehead as my sweat-soaked shirt invited the cool blast of rocket summer as my mother lay on the couch moaning and watching soap operas as the maid Rotelia watched also, having put the vacuum cleaner away for the nonce, to see if Julia was having the baby with Neal. Soap operas made me sick to my stomach, the organ music steam-piping out dread and depression. Let me go out into the clean air, instead of this cloister. Let me breathe the pine needles and magnolias and stench of summer. Sweet it was out there in the brilliance. White hot scalding but my friends were all looming out there, hidden in hedges and bushes, with lizards to tame and bottle rockets to hide.

The lawns were rectangles of money to be reaped by our push mowers. Muscular Dystrophy carnivals were to be embezzled by Buckskin Bob's television show. Girls were to be plied with kisses and then chased. Tank tops were to be peeked at with awe and wonder. The street was melting its grey suburbia tilt of rocks and gravel in its paved knowledge. Cars passed without us throwing dirt clods at them. So we had to be good, right? We weren't bullies. We weren't athletes. We were common everymen. We were our comix and Classics Illustrated. We knew the tenets of science fiction and horror movies. We knew that if a mummy movie were to ever come on channel nine or two that the earth would swallow us up. The New Orleans station didn't fire their signals all the way to us in Baton Rouge. For christsakes, we couldn't even get the Addams Family!

The eldritch woman, purveyor of lengthy lawns, was waiting for me at the edge of the lawn as I escaped the un-sylvan strains of mawkish soap-opera drama with a shut of the back door and dashed off through the carport into beams of intense white heat. There was her haggard face, the lines of it full of money. I was this close to a freshly inked five dollar bill with a few more swipes of the grim reaper machine. There she was at the edge of infinity, whereupon I started the machine that would end life as I knew it. And began with tremendous inertia of Sisyphus pushing a dungball up a crater, I tortured my ligaments and gristle and began the end of a task. She went back inside her shunted house after scanning the horizon for pirates and scoundrels, and I summarily finished and then killed the mower and looked out at a million acres of spinach cleanly processed for the school cafeteria.

I pulled the mower across lawn boundaries to its home. My brow was creased with the flop sweat of the gawds, which lay outside the subdivision somewhere. I went inside and lay on my bed in my very own bedroom and my heart thumped against the spread. Soon it would be time to go play army, but then I thought, I forgot to get my five dollars! I ran like a swift elk back across time lines to another hemisphere and knocked on the gargoyle's door. Expecting to see a hunchback or Lurch from the Addams Family, it was only her pitiful face peering out and the door opened wider. Out came a gnarled hand from nowhere and the five dollars was placed in my thin pink brown hand. I thanked

her as was customary and walked back, scanning the horizon for yelps and footballs flying through the thin blue stratosphere as if perhaps a game of some sort had been started without me in the thick of it. But there was no sod flying, no one tackled me on the sidewalk out-of-bounds so I knew my destination. Back from whence I came, like the giant Tabunga, the walking tree monster, or perhaps Matango, the fungus of terror. I was soon back on the green plaid vast sprawl of my king-sized bed that had fostered many a friend to come sack out with me upon the divan. I reached over for Tarzan and the City of Gold that I had purchased at the used book store. I immersed myself in verdant forests, and the deepest darkest jungles of the lost continent. Before I knew it I had fallen asleep after being mesmerized by all the description of gold.

I had awoke with drool on my mouth like a jungle beast. Suppertime and I hadn't done any skullduggery with my cadre of friends. My mother pontificated at me about something or other as I swallowed whole forkfuls of mashed potatoes, enough for a famine-stricken country.

I gulped entire tankards of lemonade with plenty of sweet-sour pulp whistled on my teeth. The new-found sour scent of the freshly squeezed elixir came from the gold coast. But all I saw was my odious father glowering at me for smacking and eating too fast. The television was blaring this hot but cooling summer evening at seven o'clock prime time shank The Monkees because that is what showed every Monday night.

There was knocking on the door, and I ran faster than a beam of light and pulled it open. There were the boys. Danny Gregor, Johnny Haroldson and Donald, his little brother.

"Ngrok 'nGrik," Danny Gregor said.

"Yeah. Ognibeany weinie," Donald said.

"Look, I'll be out in a minute, okay? Wait for me," I said, practically demanding it.

"OK," they said in unison, but Danny had to say something or other stupid or nonsensical like, "I know I will, but what are you?"

I went back inside as the guys just hung around the landscaped walkway until they finally sat in the chairs and began clowning.

Half an eternity later, I emerged unscathed from the house.

"What took you so long?"

"Yeah, we thought you snuck out the front to go see Linda Landiston."

"Hyuk, hyuk," I said.

"Har har de har har," Danny said.

Donald tried to grunt like a pig. But of course he couldn't do it. I had taught all of them, it was a process born out of me, one of the many things my father despised. And to the day he dies I knew that Donald Haroldson would never get it, much less his brother Johnny, much less Danny.

"Oh, look, it's a meatsweller!" Danny emphatically cried out.

Johnny chimed in. "What's a meatsweller?"

Danny shot back, "It's a steamroller spelled backwards." He made the sound that we all knew were special effects of a steamroller rolling and a scream slighted and a splat. Then a pitiful ambulance siren coming to the rescue.

Then Johnny said the inevitable: "What happened to this guy?"

"I don't know. I think he got run over by a meatsweller."

"Gee, what's a meatsweller...?" and so on ad infinitum. This went on for a while before Donald said, "God, Danny, why don't you run it into the ground?" and made pig grunt with his mouth to indicate he was mockingly joking.

We finally decided to walk a few years of lawns down, slowly down the sidewalk, lapsing into inanity as we were wont to do, until we wrapped around the half-block into sublime happiness. We goofed around like blithering idiots until the moon came up and Linda Landiston came out in her tank top. Linda was an early bloomer. She was blue-eyed, blond-haired, and growing out in wonderful places.

For some reason, which we never noticed, she was always doing athletic things like springing around, bounding, doing jumping jacks, and letting us surreptitiously peer down her tank top because she had cleavage.

"Hey Linda," Johnny said. I had had a crush on her since the beginning of time. But her house, the Landistons', was right next door to Johnny and Donald Haroldson. But she just thought of them as brother/sister, and they went to school together. Danny Gregor, spoilt since he was born because his father was an optometrist, went to affluent Episcopal school. I went to St. Thomas More run by priests and nuns. I had once been a dutiful altar boy, good compared to other altar boys at the time that used to chug the white wine out of Monsignor's chalice when he wasn't looking.

But our eyes diverted to Linda and her shapely youthful sexy body that she wielded like an atomic weapon. She did some jumping jacks. She did some hand springs and cartwheels in the evening moist cool grass, freshly mowed like every lawn in the neighborhood. The streetlights were on and all was well here in Sherwood Forest.

As we drank in her voluptuous curves in her short shorts and tank top, pirouetting on her front lawn, it was getting late. The wattage of the streetlights blazed against the constellations a bit further up. Donald Haroldson had gone home to listen to Janis Joplin records. Danny had gone home because his mother forbade him out too late. Johnny wasn't interested too much in Linda's wondrous body, at least not as much as I was. The grass swelled up in the loins of the manicured lawn about our feet. Dogs and cats lay about the perimeters of this bounded heaven.

"Did you and Danny Gregor really do all those things he said y'all did when y'all were growing up?" Linda asked me. I was taken aback by this sudden intrusion into my scalding looks at her legs all tanned and hips and flat stomach midriff. I did not feel like going into an explanation of my heroic childhood up to this point in the Pre-Cambrian period here in Sherwood Forest. She, my little crush, was speaking of the dawn of civilization.

When only Danny and I roamed and trod upon this earth, this stomping of the terra. When the neighborhood was not that at all, but ferns and prehistoric beasts and new eras unknown.

I managed sheepishly a "Yes."

Linda laughed. "Like what?" she asked me. I didn't want this. I wanted her to make my body twinge by doing another cartwheel. I wanted to graze her face with my mouth. Johnny was goofing around like a terror of comedic rites. "Running around with towels like they were Superman or somethin'," he said. "They had a treehouse right where the Sproats' house is now."

"Really?" Linda yawned wide. "What happened to it?"

I had to clear up the facts. "No, it was a series of trails going from a central chamber to outer regions." It sounded so sinister the way I was describing it, making it sound better than it was.

"Oh," she said.

"We had Kern's Korner and Gregor Square," I said, indelibly these remembrances were with me.

"This was way before Johnny or I moved here?" she asked.

"Yeah. Mostly these were all vacant lots."

It was impossible to describe the way things were as seen through my eyes back then. All we were interested in these days was playing golf at Fairwood Country Club and going to the movies. We didn't care anymore about the feel and smell of plywood. We were growing up. The taste of a ten penny nail in my mouth and driving in that nail without bending it out of commission.

Chapter Three

I don't remember the exact moment in the time line of the universe when the Kern family moved into Sherwood Forest. Most other boys a lot swifter and agile than I judged themselves by when they learned how to throw a football or started Little League baseball. I created a wall of DC and Marvel comic books

around me and my friends. EE Doc Smith Space Opera and X-men were our Bibles. Doc Savage's headquarters was a haven in my mind that I could create out of my bedroom.

I remember first meeting Danny. He came over with his mother to meet me and my mother. He was wearing full regalia of football gear as if a miniature cossack. How on earth could he slide down the slide with shoulder pads on, I had wondered. But slowly we wove mysteries and went stalking with Casper the Friendly Ghost and compared Saturday morning lineups. We both knew inside our very sturdy souls that this fall season lineup Hanna Barbera was dominating the entire lineup. The Super Six, Dick Dastardly and Chumley, Frankenstein, Jr., and Top Cat were being fobbed off on us. The horror story of this became even worse when the Halls of the Justice League became a haven for the "Super Friends." They had betrayed us all. Belittled us with these unauthentic caricatures, a far cry below the standards of the "Aquaman/Superman Hour." At least there was Johnny Quest and Space Ghost wasn't too bad either. Tom Slick and George of the Jungle came on right before Soul Train and though it was almost noon by then and football games were coming into the fray, it extended that paradise of television diet that we subsisted on.

The microcosm of a child-man Tarzan's extrapolated universe was that of teething on television and yearning for minibikes. I mean, we actually tried to build a rocket ship that really worked. Never mind the journals of Robert Goddard or the Gemini program, or mapping the moon's surface; we could build a working model with plywood and paraphernalia.

Danny came up with the idea of the liquid fuel tanks: blow up party balloons, the long slim ones, and coat them with paper mache. When the paper mache dried, voila! I cut out a piece of plywood to be the instrument panel. I think we had drawn our "blueprints" and partially did other pieces like the triangular wings. But after that, the rocket plans just fizzled. But later, we made a much smaller version of a rocket which we called the X-1, which had as its means of propulsion a few clusters of bottle rockets. Needless to say, we launched it from the top of a motorcycle ramp in Davey Smithson's back yard, which is not where Jules Verne predicted a rocket port site would be at all. It fizzled too.

"Well, back to the drawing board," was something we mentioned that fateful day.

It was Danny who came up with our actual super hero identities. "You'll be Mercury, and I'll be Jupiter."

"Wasn't Mercury the swifter one?" That's when he came up with the cardboard wings glued to our tennis shoes. Winged Mercury, like the FTD Florist commercial. He glued them on, and although we didn't wear capes anymore, we had utility belts made of those cereal variety packs attached to a regular belt. Inside were weapons, such as folded paper airplanes as crude origami, with messages written on the paper of each plane like, "Hey, do you want a knuckle sandwich?"

Thus the paper airplanes could be tossed at the villains and be extremely useful in crimefighting. Danny and I would walk into the air conditioned K&B drugstore to buy comics and our winged feet would elicit remarks of some kind. Doubtless the citizens felt safer among our presence.

Unfortunately, Danny's father meant well, but he ruined Danny forever by buying a metal-framed treehouse kit. To make matters worse, he put it together while Danny sat idly by. Where is justice? Who is the loser by this tragedy? I built a crooked, unplumbed mess on a dying elm tree in the middle of the back yard. It truly was a thing of beauty. A few beams of two-by-fours going this way and that, with a slapped on piece of plywood here and there to sit upon to survey the domain. My luncheon meat sandwiches were devoured in that very place. A perch for vigilant wholesome kids. Take Davey Smithson's treefort, for example. Endless packs of cigarettes and nudie books were stashed in his insidious den of iniquity. We would have none of that surliness. No sirree. We were fighting for truth, justice and the American way, just like Superman the way he was drawn by DC Comics before he became

invulnerable to Kryptonite. Mercury and Jupiter had no particular vices per se, with the exception of watching too much Saturday morning television and being really partial to Gigantor. We were on the cusp of the tail end of the sixties. It was a good time to be a kid. Of course, almost anytime is a good time to be a kid if you're as lucky as we were.

The phosphor images of test patterns were followed by such illuminating programs on early Saturday (or Sunday) morning as Across the Fence and The Louisiana Agriculture and Farm Report before the likes of Looney Tunes or the rugged pouty face of Popeye would show up in the remake of Arabian Nights and WWII propaganda cartoons with caricatured jap-teethed soldiers getting clobbered when Popeye got his junkie strength fix of raw canned spinach.

Hundreds, thousands of kids all across America were subsisting on a proper diet of cartoons in black-and-white and color both. Our minds reeled with action figures and GI Joe submarine and frogman equipment. I had two GI Joe equipment army chests filled with every sort of stiletto, army rifle, pistol. How many times did I roam Sears and Wilson's department store, looking for every accessory for our fighting man? My two sisters had Barbie and Ken and Mystery Date games. My forte was more of a Stratego, Risk arrangement. Monopoly was for everyone and crossed all lines. How could one resist not popping the dice scrambler bubble one more time just for that extra "pop"? Geographies of dollhouses and little trolls and tie-died t-shirts and swinger cameras enfolded our quarters.

Our biggest superheroic adventure besides the ones we lived through vicariously through Marvel and DC comic books, was attacking a villain named Johnny Love. Johnny Love was about twenty years old and at least two hundred pounds. He was just the friendly son of a next door neighbor who tripped through his heritage of Lovin' Spoonful and Strawberry Alarm Clock. We came into his villainous past right at the skewed corner of Danny's father's house. He was caught unawares and we grappled with this demonic righteous nemesis until we couldn't take it anymore, or when he got a pit peeved and we ran away.

Collections of comic books are treasure troves. I had everything from Little Lulu to Baby Huey to serious literature like Classics Illustrated and X-men. The folded and rumpled remained for quite some time. Dogeared Doc Savage and torn Conan the Barbarian paperbacks were in the realm. Danny and Johnny Haroldson and I all subsisted on a diet of these, along with Doc Smith's Lensman series. As hearty and brilliant as we were rocket scientists, we were also men of letters. We tried to submit a story to Analog. The story went as follows: a brilliant race of aliens were hunting a lesser known species across galaxies for sheer pleasure. I don't remember how it came out, but we never sent it out. Needless to say, Ben Bova, the editor of Analog, didn't seem to miss it any.

Daredevil, Hulk, Silver Surfer were all our myths and truths. We enacted our baser instincts of noble savagery on campouts and tentouts. Many a doorbell was rung on the basis of sheer deviltry. Lightpoles were clanged with obtrusive sticks until porch lights came on suddenly. And we went our merry way into the long eternal night. We read reams of Mad Magazines by flashlight. Renditions of prank phone calls erupted along invisible lines through the ether. Cracked Magazines were not my style, really, but give me Don Martin's cartoons and Mort Drucker and the world was a bit better.

Girls were a preponderance of our mighty thinking in those times. Aroused by cuteness I formed the most intense crushes upon the most cherubic fawns of femalia that one could imagine. The inked sirens, nymphs, and maidens were also ones to be partial to. Bodacious, voluptuous, smooth-thighed amazon creatures oozing sweetness across a bordered ink-dotted page or two were the acumen of sexuality for a wholesome group of boys.

Costumed beauties graced comic covers with buxom essence. That was literally our universe. Boyhood was good in those early years. Kids still wanted BB guns, go carts, but add to that now, Beatles albums for the rebellious. Lawn darts and Frisbees for the gamers. Lego blocks for the

plodders. Erector sets for the engineers. Footballs for the jocks. Comic books for the dreamers. Summer days of languid heat with the hurlings of basketballs and playground weeds sprouting all over second base in brutal twin suns of Krypton. Pet dogs that we could imagine were, in lieu of chasing cars, could slightly resemble Superdog, only if we could attach that cape.

Chapter Four

But everything changed when we found the alien dog/horse in the drainage ditch. Jones Creek where we hunted for golf balls. It was a large sized dog-shaped creature. Well, not that big, actually, about the size of a poodle. It was weird and all scaly like a goldfish. And really slimy. But it was injured, bleeding bluish green fluid. It was not whimpering strangely enough. It stood proudly, almost, in the rushes of weeds and dragonflies and bugs. The creek sluggish and milky green with stench. Us in our shorts and by the Sherwood Forest Country Club first hole which was a real haven for golf balls, one had to carry something in a five or six, perhaps seven iron for beating down the brazen high weeds. One had to have a keen eye for spotting the white sliced-up beauties. One could often find Top Flite, Titleist, Wilson, and every one imaginable, even Exxon and other personalized golfballs. Even ones that were swiped by the old codgers from the driving range somewhere.

Donald, Johnny, Danny and I were all in the weeds, carrying all the golfballs we could to sell for five cents apiece or ten or fifteen to some guy down the street. To be hawked to the old gentlemen by some enterprising boy who was more than us.

We were in the woods minding our own business before we saw the animal that changed our lives. On our minds were Incredible Edibles, getting to first and second base. And of course, Space Ghost, Outer Limits, the Herculoids and stripping the net in basketball games.

Danny was saying his meatsweller routine. Donald was rhapsodizing about Ish Kabibble or some other vaudeville figure, or was it his Mae West routine? And Johnny was mourning the loss of LSU football games to Alabama, Georgia, and whomever trod through this state. I was thinking about something beyond the stars. About vistas of unplumbed galactic space and star drives and ion generators and interstellar leaps into voids.

All of a sudden I spotted something that had the lustre of a large -- check that -- huge goldfish. Except it was crouched like a sitting lamb on folded legs. One appeared wounded by something. I was unable to speak. Literally transfixed by the cosmic forces that I saw in the gleaming red aspect of its two doglike eyes. Its mouth was almost that of a rictus, a grimace. Like when dogs pant, but then make a terrible smile as in my own double-take unbelief to myself, and then after my jaw dropped with unfamiliarity to this oddity, I saw to my left that the others suddenly came right behind me. The obelisked sun was shanked out up to one side of the sky. They decried to the thing in the rushes, each and every one of them. They gasped. Donald hooted with a curious afterword. Danny gave a "naaaa..." Johnny gave an expletive -- "\$&%@*." I swallowed and came closer to examine the creature, so unfortunate its state. It wasn't dying, I observed.

It took an infinity before anyone of us managed to come to a state where we could collectively converse and discuss. We weren't anything but in awe mixed with stunnedness.

The golden sparkling of the scaled body gave root further down to sort of cloven hooves like it was some sort of resemblance to one of those miniature horses.

"What is that thing?" was remarked by someone, I don't remember who exactly. We discussed it for a good while as it sat there with its legs folded under itself.

"What are we gonna do?"

"I dunnoh."

"What will our fathers say?"

"Who gives a shit?"

"Can we take it somewhere?"

"I dunnoh."

"Will you take it and keep it?"

"No, you!"

"I can't take it."

"Leave it here?"

"I dunnoh."

"Whatdoyathink?"

"I dunnoh."

This went on and we just couldn't believe it. We didn't think anything like that existed on this earth. Maybe...

"There is no such thing as a mammal like this with goldfish scales."

"Yeah. Goldfish scales are reptiles."

"We don't have anything to put it in."

"Who says we are gonna take it anyway?"

"Someone else will see it."

"So?" Danny spoke up.

"Maybe it's got diseases or somethin'."

"Maybe."

"Put it in a cage or somethin'."

"Yeah. It's not mean lookin' or anything."

"Rabies?"

"It's definitely injured."

Then it hit me. What if it were from beyond? What if it were from the heavens? From the stars? What if it wasn't just some freak of nature?

"Look for a spaceship," I found myself saying, almost frantically.

They laughed. "What the hell are you saying?"

"Look for a what?" they said to me.

"He might be right." We confided in each other's guarded trust about where it might hail from. This solar system. Andromeda. Orion. Pleiades Cluster. Jupiter. Venus. Mars. Farther away. Horseheads.

"Well, I'm getting sick of looking at it," Johnny said. His brother Donald, no matter how effeminate, hit him on the shoulder.

"Shut up," he said, "Can't you see the poor thing's in pain?"

Danny tried to come on like Bones, McCoy, chief medical officer. He started examining it, but without touching it. He couldn't fool us. He wanted to be a doctor like his father. But he certainly couldn't be chief medical officer aboard the starship Enterprise or anything quite close.

He muddled about it curiously, appraising it, perhaps trying to see how it functioned.

He said, "Respiratory system air breathing. No gills. Ears like a dog. Horse head in a way, like a dwarf or midget horse. Tail short and rubbery. Injury to lower left front limb. Reproductive system..."

"Hey! Don't go into that!"

That's how it started. We talked Davey Smithsons into keeping it in a squirrel cage. The plywood cage with metal screens needed a few nails to untatter it and make it feasible to hold the creature. Danny told his father about it and his father scoffed. "That's just some albino dog with the mange. That's all. It's not from outer space. What? Arcturan warrior's pet? That's crazy. You've been watching too much of that Star Trek."

"Oh, dad..."

And Davey Smithsons had his own ideas about what to do with it.

"We can sell it. Maybe somebody will want to eat it or sumptin'."

Davey's household, ruled by his frogsquashing beerbellied farting old man who smoked a pipe, was a cemetery for husks of motorcycles. They lived right next door to our family. They were nice people, it was just that roar of mufflerless engines whining and grinding and whirring and the oldest Smithsons boy was smoking dope while Davey and his middle brother Steve just vroomed motorcycles around creation and back and read Cracked and Muscle Car and

drag racing magazines.

"We oughta kill it and stuff it. Ya know, have it stuffed. Like taxiwhatchacallit. Kill it."

"No Davey," I said, the voice of reason. "We are trying to heal it. You just lent us the cage. That's all. We're keepin' it."

"You shitass," was emitted by the little badass.

We didn't say anything.

He left. So there we were. Johnny had found some antibiotics for dogs that they recently used on Rocky his pet German Shepherd/collie. We put salve on the leg. The creature seemed to like us. It was rather friendly and was quite tame.

We had made a pact that came about after a while. No one was to tell about the star creature. Or whatever it was. He had plenty of room in the cage and was eating lettuce and some dog food scraps. We had tried everything to feed it. But the main idea was that we had the pact. I mean, it wasn't a blood oath or anything, but nonetheless it was a pact.

We were all blabbermouths, we knew. But we got off on the right start, we hoped. We looked at the cage standing chest high. We had put a towel in there and it seemed to like that. The scales, we determined, didn't really need water at all. It was just something we found when we tried to put water on the creature. It didn't take to it very much, much as a dog but not quite as bad as a cat. That didn't seem to make sense too much to us, but there you go.

Danny's father was the only one that knew about it out of all of our parents, before the pact was made. He didn't care too much about it, either. Danny's father could hardly be bothered about anything. He was an optometrist, but he collected Playboys in his study the way badass kids' older brothers stacked their nudie books in the closet. But I guess if a doctor did it, it was a different thing.

When Danny's father did something, he would do it meticulously and perfectly. He bought that huge Estes rocket version of the Saturn 5 rocket with capsule and all that stood about five feet high. I remember the day the whole damn neighborhood came out to watch it launch.

They made a mistake of putting in a single "C" engine instead of a cluster or a couple of the mammoth "D" engines. When that thing went up, the chute didn't pop out and down came this five foot replica of a craft that sent three astronauts at a time to the lunar surface or somewhere thereabouts. And it was coming straight down, nose first. My older brother extended his hands as if to catch this hurtling piece of balsa, cardboard tube and glue and paint. He saw it wasn't too keen of an idea and withdrew, as Dr. Gregor watched his prized possession, this rocket, which he had built with exquisite care, crumple in on itself, stage after stage of cardboard tube, like a four dimensional tesseract. Dr. Gregor walked home with a much smaller, crashed and burnt replica of a Saturn 5 rocket and wasn't pleased at all about the matter. He was surely not to care about our ravings about Arcturian warriors goldfish dog/horse pets that we may or may not have found in Jones Creek. For one thing, those upper-class Gregors, they never let their son Danny run around barefooted and certainly couldn't have been much pleased with the idea of their precious son going into the subterranean depths of a sewage ditch.

Our misfortunate parents -- how could they possibly let us catch footballs on cool green lovely grass in any clime, in our bare feet? Didn't they know you could step on a nail or a shard of glass? But did they know of succulent mud squishing between our toes in a mud puddle? Did they know of the wonders of going barefoot and without a shirt as if we were Lord Greystoke of the fronts of rapturous jungles?

And there we were: we possessed what we thought was one of the most treasured possessions in the galaxy. And it was our secret. We had, it seemed an eternity, pass since we would have had a club name with monikers or such; we were much too grown-up for sissified activity like that. We were the gladiators and warriors of these manicured suburbs. We knew the vast acreage

of Sherwood Forest was all staved in with nice upper middle class homes filled with burgeoning modern families. We stomped on the bevelled tracts of freshly mown terra. And now we had in our arsenal built of treeforts designated as pillboxes, dirt clods and firecrackers as artillery, and bikes as steeds, a secret weapon that would get us international fame, the Arcturian warrior's pet, accidentally left from an interstellar romp through the spaceways. Danny's apple crate stingray was far better and far cooler than my old-fashioned Schwinn, but all of us in fast company were agile belting around curbs, cutting through driveways and sidewalks and sidestepping all manner of car with these iron stallions.

Our enemies were obnoxious bullies like the notorious Buzzy Miller and his ilk and everything they stood for. He and his gang of thugs thought they ruled the cosmos with their cigarettes filched from 7-11's and with their experiments with all manner of dope (at least that's what we heard). The likes of Buzzy Miller and all the other badasses in the neighborhood terrified me to no end. They might as well have been the antichrist and diablo incarnate! Beelzebub in bell bottoms. Dante's Inferno was the local junior high filled with all manner of young rebellious maniacs. We were just kids in comparison, still being weaned on Flintstones and Gilligan's Island, sheltered from reality through animated celluloid and comic book ink.

Chapter Five

So the penultimate dispensation secret was with us until our dying last moment. Or something like that.

I came home to a hearty repast of my poor mother's cooking. It wasn't too bad. Not something you could get botulism from. I looked over Doc Savage books by Kenneth Robeson. I read the Incredible Hulk comic book where he gets shrunk down to atomic size. I read the new X-man. I watched Wonderful World of Disney. I slept with a copy of The Martian Chronicles under my chin, much dogeared.

Soon Johnny and Danny came over. Donald was listening to Janis Joplin albums and trying to worship and imitate Mae West.

"Let's go over to Danny's and hang out." I agreed. We walked across the pavement to the rich kid's house. Where every toy ever invented by Hasbro, Kenner, Mattell, and Parker Brothers was bought and sold to the highest bidder, Dr. Gregor, for his beloved son. When would I ever stop thinking about such matters, I thought.

"NGrok'ngrik," Danny started into nonsense again.

"Why do y'all have to be so dumb?" I said.

"What's eatin' you, Kern?" they asked. Johnny seemed up for NGROK NGRIK language easy enough. But then Johnny was up for anything.

"What are we gonna do with this alien creature?" I asked.

"Whatdayamean?" they asked. Gawd, I thought. It didn't even bother them. Why did it bother me?

"Are we withholding top secret information from the Pentagon by not coming forward?" I asked.

"Man, you're crazy," Danny said. "Ngrik/ngrik," he added.

"No really," I said. "How do we know that all the UFO people and all the extraterrestrial studiers are not after this prize winning information?" I asked.

"Extra-what?" Johnny said. Johnny went to public schools and wasn't as well versed in science fiction as Danny and I, especially Danny with his whole closet full of Analogs.

"Extraterrestrial. It basically means something that is not of this earth," Danny told Johnny casually. Danny was always so logical. He thought he was Spock or something. I hated that crap.

No, he was smug. But then I realized that Spock was on the smug side too.

"Ngrok'ngrik," Johnny said.

"Come on, y'all, I'm serious."

"Kern, you're such a wimpo," was all they could muster.

"Well, what if there is going to be an invasion from outer space and a craft had landed, and that was a scout or a pet of a warrior that was just staying in hiding, and he took off, but now we found evidence that he was here? And then," I continued, "we could save the Earth because we could present this as a real proof that aliens are invading..." They looked at me and awshucked to the side with "Gahhhh."

"You never know," I added. We walked to the back yard where Danny's father had patio chairs and there was a little fountain of a boy's stone head dribbling out water from the wall. A little cherub or something.

"Just lay low on the alien. You've got an active imagination, for sure," Danny said. Danny was just trying to be too cool about the whole thing. What if Danny himself was an agent of this thing, or that he wanted, yes, WANTED, the Earth to be destroyed by the Arcturians? My mind reeled as we sat there in the summer night air with the cicadas hanging to the trees all around creation, whining and buzzing and indicating a cooling down and that special time of day that cicadas always know about.

Before nightfall.

"Speakin' of UFOs, didn't y'all pull a hoax once? A UFO hoax?" All of a sudden Johnny had recalled our, that is, Danny and my hoax. Danny laughed.

"Yeah. It was mostly all my idea," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"What did y'all do?" Johnny said. Now he pretended to be an announcer, some sort of emcee, with a fake microphone that he stuck in Danny's face.

"Cut it out, you slime."

Johnny cut it out. Danny talked with fond remembrance.

"Was it Halloween? It was either Halloween, or close to it, or we said we ought to do it on Halloween."

Nobody said anything. He continued.

"Glow-in-the-dark Frisbee. Looks like a flying saucer. But I had some of that glow-in-the-dark paint. My idea was to paint little windows or portholes on the side of this Frisbee. Then we got your sister's Swinger camera, Polaroid, and took some snapshots as we tossed the Frisbee in the air. Whatever happened to those?" he wondered.

I said, "I don't know."

Johnny rocked in his chair. The cicadas were deafening. They were undoubtedly trying to drown us out.

"Weren't we supposed to send those to the newspaper?" I added.

"I showed them around," Danny said.

He added, "And we made some tripod holes down at Sherwood Junior High, lifesize..."

"Yeah!" I said. We continued to rock in our chairs.

The evening was fading. I was thinking about Linda Landiston in her tank top, low cut, with marvelous cleavage, and short pants, with fine brown legs. I looked over at my friends. We were talking about UFO hoaxes, but our hormones were crying out against all that we knew, all that was not smooth, glistening young girl...

Danny was asking me something. I sat up in my chair.

"Huh?" "Oh." "Umm."

"Kern's got his mind on Linda again." That was a stupendous guess, I knew that Johnny had made, but I would deny it emphatically.

The correct response was, "Shuddup."

"You shuddup."

"Ognibeanie weanie."

"Me say you shuddup." Could we dive into immature realms of things such as talking in the Bizarro universe, out of Superman? I wondered.

"Danny, honey! Danny!" a voice came out the back door.

"Uhuh?" Danny shouted out to his mom.

"It's getting late. Come on inside and tell your little friends you've gotta go."

"Crap," Johnny said.

"Crap," I said.

"Okay!" Danny shouted to his mother. "Coming," said the dutiful Danny.

"NOW!" she yelled. Any other response now from Danny would be big, big trouble. We left and Danny retired to his luxurious home.

I walked down Sheraton Drive, the street where I lived, with Johnny Haroldson. With Johnny you could talk of LSU football and the Sugar Bowl and the like, but you couldn't wax lyrical about intangibles and imponderables. He tailed off for home and I was alone. Just me and the black curtains of heaven open wide to receive me. I recalled yet another memory dredged up from my towhead. Danny, once again, had led me into astronomy, stargazing. I got a telescope, for Christmas. Danny had received a better one, with an equatorial mount, no less. Much bigger refracting lens, much sturdier with a genuine wooden tripod.

I was satisfied completely with mine though; anything bigger and my telescope would crack the mirror of the universe itself. It would send me straight into the Horsehead nebula, too close for comfort. I didn't want to be propelled, thrust right into the asteroid belt itself, or sink into the red spot of Jupiter and in turn discover its very secrets unknown to any terrestrial.

We turned ourselves into miniature Galileos. I had uprighted after overturning a tackle box, and began storing astronomy pamphlets, notes, and lenses and charts within. Danny had a real chest filled to the brim with equipment and higher power lenses than I had.

We found where Mars and Jupiter sat for a season or two. We looked at the moon like we knew more than Tycho Brahe, and dreamed of sailing to the mares of its lustrous surface. We knew that the handle of the big dipper pointed to Polaris, granted. And we acted like we had charted the entire galaxy. I knew better of course. And there was the night we saw a satellite zoom by, going east to west. It followed the line parallel to Sheraton Drive, as if it were Sputnik radio-controlled by some mad scientist foaming and frothing. Pining away for Antares and Betelgeuse didn't help my crush on Linda.

I went inside, went to my bedroom and watched television on a tiny Sony that was a marvel, my private window to cableless television, and where I could peer at the very broad world.

Chapter Six

Just what did we have? Was it a mangy dog as Dr. Gregor explained? Was it not of this earth? Like Dr. Quatermass of Five Million Years to Earth would say in his goodly way? I lay in bed and looked on my shelves. Damon Knight, Lester del Rey, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury. What would they say about the thing in the rabbit cage? I remembered Davey Smithsonian's face with the killer instinct written upon the sloven countenance. I thought, for a second fleeting, when was the last time we fed it? I got up, put my shorts on, and snuck out the back door leading to the sylvan back yards without restraining fences. I made my way to the dilapidated but restructured cage. I heard no whining, not a sound from the cage itself. Hopefully that was good. I looked about in the soft bladed wet grass, into spotlights bathing porches and dogs retired long since and retreated indoors. Mosquitoes attacked me in squadrons. The night oozed around my thin study body. Moths danced in waltz time around lumened bulbs. A thin fine noise of this night saturated my ears, very familiar from tenting out in infinite sultry humid nights with my comrades. I pulled the old green blanket up to reveal what was inside. We hadn't named it, I thought. Perhaps we shouldn't. I looked at it and it looked at me. Its mouth was slack, its eyes were moist and beady, looking at me. Its pupils were pink. It was healing up. I looked at that leg. I put some of our food concoction within the cage and it made no attempt to move or take flight. It was taking a liking to me. It almost seemed wise to me.

I took my chances and stroked and petted it. It seemed to like it. Its

body wasn't reptilian exactly, nor was it furry. I couldn't begin to describe how it felt. It seemed to like what I was doing. I sat with it and it chewed the leaves of lettuce and nipped at the dog food. Cold Alpo seemed to do the trick, alright.

I smiled and closed the blanket over it, and cooed at it like a pet, fond, one, and left it to sleep, which it was doing before I had interrupted it back there. I crept back inside and washed my hands. I surprised myself by thinking to do that very act. I went into my room and looked at my star charts. The various constellations and the panorama of the Milky Way seemed to give way to my imagination. I tried to guess, what with a quite stubborn belief that it was 'not of this earth' but not really extraordinarily intelligent, as in talking, gesturing, or of some sublime sort of gift of intellect, but rather just on a par with our dog, Snoopy, the grandest noblest and most humorous stalking creature that ever ferreted out squirrels and birds and yelped whenever it stepped on a gumball. What sort of fame and notoriety had we come across with this find?

I managed to fall asleep into a slumber that had of its last waking moment, that large black velvet chart of stars winking and beckoning to me to build a star drive and hurtle across vast unplumbed galactic space, to swim in the thick line of the Milky Way that shot across the heavens like a beam of light. I dreamt that I met my special little specimen on its own turf in some psiognomical disturbance of unfathomable unbelief. The dream tangented into more bewildering realms of fascination, till I could no longer sustain the wispy state of cogency. I floated through baubles of vacuum on my own power.

* * * *

In an endless series of summer heating days, we slowly managed to keep our secret. We were trudging the flank side of Jones Creek drainage ditch, looking for some sort of spaceship that might be evidence of the star creature's crash landing. Or perhaps some tripod sores in the muddy heath girthing the tepid green brackish water. Remains of some silver craft, many miniature, just housing our captive pet from beyond.

"What if Buzzy Miller finds out about it?" Johnny said. He knew he was being very perceptive, because the tendrils of evil that permeated from the subdivision thugs extended from a central hub that was the ilk of Buzzy Miller and others laboring to find a space in hell.

"How could he?" I asked and before anyone could answer, I realized exactly how. Besides the general buzz in the neighborhood that bordered on gossip and tedious teatime society, an especial Achilles' Heel in our cryptic secrecy was Davey Smithsons, the hideous motorcycle embryonic hoodlum that initially wanted to stuff it. But then again, he didn't believe in its authenticity as an otherworldly creature, he just didn't give a good goddamn either way. He seemed to agree with Dr. Gregor, Danny's father, that it was some hideous dog with a terrible scabrous mange. Which couldn't be the case, we knew by now, for the creature was and seemed to be in altogether good spirits. Its stub of a tail wagged slowly when we approached it to play with it. We even let it out once in a while to taste the meadows of our backyards. We surprised even ourselves with our tendency towards tightlippedness.

"Davey Smithsons," that terrible invocation of an appellation that brought terror into our hearts, vilest of creatures, Danny had said it aloud at first. Then Johnny cursed about the matter and we all joined in, a rising thunder in our chests as we trudged through dirtclods of lost worlds that were the perimeters of the sheer cliffs of this ditch.

Golf balls lay like gold nuggets in the grass. We were all clutching and swinging our five irons like we knew how to handle them.

Could a little homunculus like Davey Smithsons, scion of Harley Davidson and Yamaha, be stupid enough and be in proximity to Buzzy Miller to cross us? It was very possible, we concluded. We looked all afternoon for that space craft or any remnants or wreckage thereof. We found nothing. Johnny came across some metal wreckage, but it was just a rusted skeleton of a jungle gym that someone had thrown out. Certainly not the frame of an interstellar craft.

We had between us three, a serious amount of golfballs of all brands, and that was some comfort to us. We tired of the smell, the mud, the sun beating on our necks. We headed to Johnny's and talked his mother into taking us to McDonald's and when we got back with the food we soaked it in sweet red ketchup and devoured it with gallons of iced tea and the persistent wail of Johnny's mother complaining about us leaving our burger wrappers and trash out by the patio. Through our rest and meal of Big Macs and fries and Quarter Pounders, we satiated ourselves to where we momentarily forgot about our little dilemma that we had concocted. We weren't even sure if there was anything to worry about, I thought later.

Chapter Seven

Buzzy Miller was busy cramming a Penthouse magazine down his pants at the K&B Drugstore. He and Steve Smithsons had managed to stuff themselves with sports magazines, drag racing posters and comic books the entire summer. Bags of candy stuffed within their shirts and snickers as they sauntered past the cashiers out into the twilights and sun-gold parking lots. Vices abounded; treehouses and girls stayed indoors when they stomped through Sherwood Forest. Dogs cowered and cats bewared the primitive teenagers lest their tails be severed or they become immolated with lighter fluid. Black light posters were absconded, Penthouse magazines were molested, and kids were terrorized as long as there was time enough in a day of summer to do foul and wicked deeds.

Steve Smithsons was Davey's older brother. In his lineage was how to ride on sissy bars and how to get your girlfriend to put out and wear bikinis at the drag races. Davey was riding his minienduro around his backyard as if to pollute the neighborhood with noise reeking from baffled motorcycle mufflers. Davey had been as quiet as could be expected for a young thug who was following in his older brother's footsteps. Getting high on sniffing airplane glue was just around the corner for him. Davey had tried to tell Steve about the animal but they didn't seem to care very much. He whooped and hollered even and Steve was busy sipping for beers and tie-dying t-shirts and feeling girls up down at the junior high in the bushes. Buzzy Miller at this particular moment in time had no real knowledge of the alien creature. Davey even lost interest by this time, resigning himself to ringing doorbells and egging houses. Houses were landscaped by magwheels and toilet paper traversed front lawn trees. While little boys ate Incredible Edible insects and played Snake in the Grass, these boys dreamed of running away and doing motocross, running away and going to a shrimp boat in Texas, running away and doing heavy drugs.

Buzzy got into a GTO with some even worse badasses and they sped off with their treasure of shoplifting. Little Millers were opened that were also stolen from the nearby Pac-A-Sac. You could suck on a cold Little Miller and before you knew it, you had arrived in heaven. Buzzy looked at the naked women in the Penthouse and showed it to the pimple-faced dirty hippie boys in the vehicle. Buzzy could soon go to juvvy for the crimes he was committing. Buzzy didn't know anything but the James Gang heavy metal that was resounding from the 8-track in the speeding GTO.

Buzzy lit up a Marlboro. He coughed with a rasp from his young unused-to lungs. He polished off his Little Miller Pony and the pony pak was dug into once again. The GTO with him and the greasy longhairs raced down Airline Highway towards the outskirts, near Denham Springs, where they terrorized through offensive driving, every poor housewife in their station wagons. After the beer ran out and the buzz came off, Buzzy got tired of smoking cigarettes and a greaser handed him a black molly. Speed of choice for badasses, he swallowed it down with a whisper of yellow beer strife left in a tiny little bottle. In his mind he was nothing but pleasure and wicked thoughts. They entered Sherwood Forest with a Baton Rouge pigcar fuzz following behind, but surprisingly when they turned into Charington Drive the fuzz kept going like the good local bacon that they were. Safe once again, and drunk in time for supper.

"Buzzy dear, your father wants to talk to you!" Mrs. Miller said to her unrepentant son.

"Screw you, old lady, and tell him to go to hell!" was the reply from the phantom figure flashing through the hallway with dusk on his face wan and pallor of Satan, as the shout resounded from wood paneling with unknown hatred. Mrs. Miller was truly a saintly woman for begetting this demon child.

"Buzzy, dear, please don't talk to us like that," she begged with a trembling kind voice.

"You heard me! Screw!" echoed as the bedroom door to hell shut loudly. Mrs. Miller touched her face with worryment and she could smell cheap beer as trace elements of a boyhood gone wrong from what was once a nice boy.

Buzzy sat in his room. He looked at the wall at Peter Fonda riding a hawg cycle in Easy Rider. Black Sabbath glared at him, saying yes! yes! you rebel young man! James Gang, Guess Who, the Beatles all smiled at him. He was cool. He was gleaming handsomely with speed that made him feel special sudsing through him and mixing with the beer in his little but growing belly. He was a badass with long hair that had long grown out of innocence of tree houses and chasing cute girls with blushing shyness. Crushes gave way to probing sweaters. Dizzy teen talk and nice attire gave way to ragged jeans and Marlboros dangling from his badass lips. Surprisingly he managed to fall asleep even with amphetamines coursing through him and the stereo blaring forth Abbey Road full tilt cockney. He had shut out his mother and his father no longer cared. He wanted to get kicked out of the house so he could hitchhike to Mexico or work on that Texas shrimp boat. Steve and him were having a real good time anyway, and his parents were too nice to him in this nice neighborhood to throw him out.

He flipped through the Penthouse that he had waved in front of his poor mother. "I shoplifted this, momma!" he had wanted to say. Why the hell didn't he? He would have to sleep a while even though little vibes of pleasure and awareness were stealing through his lightning young growing body, corpus of heavy metal and black light waves. This Penthouse pet was lying there showing all kinds of neat stuff to him. He got excited and stared hard at the wanton nakedness of pure brown tanned woman that he would get someday. A lot older than him. He didn't know that one day it would boomerang back on him like a time warp or the grim reaper. He looked at all the ticket stubs on the wall: Blue Oyster Cult, The New York Dolls, Kiss, The Who, the Stones, Badfinger. Albums stood stacked like cordwood near his bed, next to badass stock car magazines and Playboys, Swank, Gent Stag and Cavalier. Men's magazines that he proudly waved in front of his mother. She was forbidden from his room. He didn't realize that she cared about him and would always do so. He did, but not quite feeling something about that fact.

He stretched out as "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window" blared out decibels of sweet riot. The bed was a plaid brown that once indicated sweetness in this room. The sheets were still changed often, but she didn't mess with "his stuff." He was waiting for "She's So Heavy," which was his favorite. He remembered drinking a six pack and taking codeine pills to that and driving around town with pimple faced badasses that were the coolest, mean. Man, far out. He touched his face with his hand. Those hands had beaten up many smaller than he. That face had held meanness and glared out territorial rights, and given hell to those innocent kids who were so uncool. He knew he was a bully.

He vaguely remembered in his mind something that Davey Smithsons told his brother, Steve, Buzzy's boozin' and carousing buddy. It was garbled in the lilt of idiocy founting from his little punk face, something like, "A dude's got a thing ... a dude's got somtim' weird. It ain't a dog. It ain't nuthing like I know..." but he was stoned at the time and all Buzzy and Steve did was try and get the little peckerface offa their case and leave em to badass things on their own. Davey Smithsons, little motocross jerk, was tryin ta horn in on all kinda badass stuff they liked to do. Didn't wanna hang around his own age a punks. It wadn't cool with that little punk hangin' round.

But still he didn't know why he was thinking about what that little atavistic punk was tryin' ta tell him. Something was to that. But now he was gonna do some boss relaxin as Don Garlitz's funny cars swerved off, belching rubber on his wall.

Chapter Eight

A group of kids were hanging around my father's tool shed. I hurried outside hoping my little SPOCK was there. We had named the creature who was now my pet -- well, it was Johnny Haroldson's and Danny's too. We had all agreed its new name was SPOCK. It didn't necessarily seem to have logical cogent reasoning like the first officer of the Federation Starship Enterprise, but Spock was always a weird enough sounding name, and we truly believed we had something like no other on this globe. We had something that the very Pentagon and Smithsonian would sell their own mothers down the river for. Not that the Pentagon had mothers, but those cigar smoking bigshots there and at Langley and Geneva and Interpol would certainly want to have a crack at our being, "not of this earth." We were our own Dr. Quatermasses. Not just running around with non-bronzed skin trying to be Doc Savage, or the Green Hornet, but acquiring something so incredible that it boggled our minds. Just how did we manage to keep our mouths shut? We knew that if some four star general would get ahold of the creature we had named SPOCK, that they would strap the poor thing to a gurney, a metal table with runnels for draining away the blood. They would get their tensors and scalpels and forceps and pry it apart and dissect it and tissue sample the damned thing. Here we were healing it. We fed it its daily stipend of cat food, Alpo and greens, whatever mom was cooking. We were essentially spoiling it with table scraps if one must know. It was actually getting a bit chubby, I thought.

I went out there and the kids were just admiring it. Danny and Donald wanted to charge admission and put it in a Muscular Dystrophy carnival as a freak show exhibit and reap lots of cadged coin over its uniqueness and otherworldly beauty. Its scales of rough golden yellow were getting shinier, I thought. I looked at the cage after clearing away the kids, all wowing and awing and scared of it practically like it would bite them or something -- hah! Something as gentle as Spock the dog. Arcturian warrior! Hah! Little did they know that it had been tamed by aliens.

I ate supper at the table while the TV rattled out Walter Cronkite. My dad sat in his Lazyboy and my mother lay on the couch like a Christ child. My father was mumbling to himself about the occupied toolshed.

"It's just a snake, daddy," I said to him to appease him. Thank Prince Namor, Submariner and Hercules that he had not bothered to go out there and check; he just knew something was out there. He did not know it was not of this earth. I felt myself a sinister mad scientist. Me, Danny, Donald, Johnny all purveyors of science over the common good of the innocent townfolk. Just like War of the Worlds before the Martians invade. Let science investigate. I imagined, my father, Danny's father, and Johnny's father all holding Bibles and an American flag, and a white flag for surrender to our pet SPOCK dog. And here I was when I could be roving and playing army and kiss-n-chase under the bathing white strobe lights of stars and moon.

"I want it out of here. Let one of your friend's father put up the things you catch in that drainage ditch," he bellowed. Fortunately, Walter Cronkite switched over to Dean Martin's Golddiggers and the raptour women all dolled up next to Dean Martin persuaded him not to rag me on about my keeping an extraterrestrial. He let me daydream in match classes, read The Martian Chronicles till the book disintegrated, and collect comic books till the collectible X-men covers fell into tiny pieces of degraded art. But he had drawn the line of resistance as my mother watched the news. No more scaly reptilian monstrosities that would clamor out of the depths to devour the living. No more leviathans all spindly and writhing and slimy and toothy hideous mouths.

I ran out into the night air which hit me like exiting the airlock of

the Jupiter II out on some mining planet. It would be a good night for discovering the planet Vulcan between Venus and Earth. It would be a good night to have a populated meteor that only came into our solar system every million years, named after myself. But my friends were nowhere to be found. They were all home. We had finally agreed to have the muscular dystrophy carnival after all. We had built games, rope pulling devices connected to bean bags, and dish coin tosses. It was all set up in Johnny Haroldson's back yard. Just when the cornerstone of the carnival was about to be tossed back into the ditch by my parents (oh if they only knew what it really looked like), the centerpiece of the carnival's side show, the carnival would be going great guns on this radical Saturday morning coming up when the earth was perihelion and the sun raked over our suburban lawns. When girls in nightgowns took baths and changed clothes and watched their dolls stand still, the boys and I would be there in the back yard with our moneymaking extravaganza. Donald even promised to be part of the side show exhibit, snake boy or gorilla man, he hadn't decided yet. But certainly we would be the only muscular dystrophy carnival in creation east of Eden that had a genuine outer space visitor, a tamed dog made of goldfish scales.

I peeked over three yards past hedgerows and bushes to make sure no evil villains from another dimension were to topple our hastily built booths and go cart slide-ride. Everything was covered with old sheets, billowing in the wind. Besides, Johnny said he was keeping an eye on the whole thing and it was their families that had contributed brownies and hamburgers and hotdogs. And all the proceeds were going to muscular dystrophy. We couldn't even keep our cut. But I was provided the strangeness.

I went back into the house and dove into my undersea bed filled with sargasso mermaids and sunken rockets on the edges of dried space continents. I picked up a beaten copy of Analog magazine but threw it down for Startling Stories. I found a creepy crawler and thought it was an incredible edible and put it in my mouth to chew its purplish exoskeleton and instead of sugary gloop I got a mouth of industrial plastic. I spat it out and went to sleep. My Spock creature was sleeping soundly, picking up radio waves through its built-in antennae, named from the middle star in Orion's belt. I could only guess this, though, as I nodded off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

The chocked wood, the bent nails all beamed bright and smelt good on the foggy dew of the freshly mowed grass of what was not the muscular dystrophy carnival. Johnny's father made him mow it; what the hell kind of carnival can you have son, if you don't mow the grass? Johnny and Danny wanted to leave trails and paths like Disneyland or something, of mowed grass, to different exhibits. I brought over the prize of the carnival, Spock, who now perked up bits of ears when you called him by name. Donald was pilfering the pimento cheese and ham sandwiches as Mr. Haroldson stoked the Sears barbecue pit for the hotdogs and hamburgers to be sold to the charitable public. Danny's mother, being rich and all, sent Danny over with fancy candies, brownies and petitfours from the bakery. Mrs. Gregor certainly wouldn't go near a kitchen, least of all for the rogues that hung out with her beloved future doctor.

"Do you think the badasses will show up?" They all knew what I was talking about. It was part of our oath, our promise. Keep Steve Smithsons and Buzzy Miller, and even that little stinker the minienduro motocross devilchild, Davey Smithsons, from attending this most devout fun and adventure.

"If he comes, you know the plan," Danny said. We nodded. We were just too nervous, but who wouldn't be, holding something not of this earth in this ere neighborhood around these civilians. We would someday be honored by the highest authorities for our wondrous find in those rushes of Jones Creek drainage ditch. Our plan was not to accost, or confront those badass brutes. It was simply to close down the side show, or at least Spock the alien dog's

exhibit. Hide him inside or in Mr. Haroldson's toolshed. Spock seemed to be amiable enough anywhere we put him as long as he wasn't too hot and we took care of him.

Johnny, I and the others went over our routines in trying to reap and cadge coin for Buckskin Bob's television show and the muscular dystrophy association. Get them to plunk their pennies and dimes and quarters. We hadn't built much rides and wild fantastic whizzing exhibits. But we were going to do just fine because of the good food that was going to be cooking. There was Mr. Haroldson with his chef's hat and firing up the barbecue pit and there was Mrs. Haroldson asking with her head out the door to see whether to bring the hamburger patties and hotdogs out on a plate.

"The fire isn't even started yet," Mr. Haroldson growled in his bearish way. My parents didn't contribute anything. They meant well, but it was probably for the best that they weren't there, at least to see Spock.

If they found out what was being housed in the extraterrestrial protection unit they would ride my hide like Space Ghost doing a boogie dance on Element Man of the parallel universe. But here I was with all my friends as the sun began to melt the fresh soggiess off the crisp grass in Johnny Haroldson's backyard, as Mr. Haroldson's barbecue began sizzling its sweetmeats of hotdogs and burgers into the fray of the semblanced crowd here. Fathers with their small children were looking at our booths and prizes. We had raided the five and dime for cheezy prizes which I must admit looked tantalizing there, swinging from nails and string.

If only Mrs. Haroldson would go inside and tend to things instead of creating an armed incursion here. Just when the crowd was beginning to pull out their wallets with coins shining and glinting above the turf and plinking into our laps and aprons. I stood there and realized I was due at the dish penny toss next to bean bag targets. I trotted over there as the kids oohed and ahned and began tossing their coin. No chance the trajectory of coins, namely pennies, would slow down but skip right off the shallow pans. Mrs. Gregor had donated some cheap china that she was trying to get rid of one way or another. But chink! There was a dinner glass that was a true ringer. I handed him a plastic toy whistle and the glass and the child gleefully trumped out shrieks to his older sister.

Donald was in the freak show, dressed up as a hideous creature from the black lagoon or something, and was taking care of Mr. Spock, the prized UFO creature from the curtains of heavens above. I glanced over there, having here and there to pick up very bad tosses of good coinage. My gawd, these pathetic dishes are going to shatter and chip with this barrage of weaponry of hot metal. Johnny was over with his father, handing out burnt hotdogs that were juicy and delicious. Danny was running the little cart slide we had haphazardly rigged up. Old Buckskin Bob would certainly be giving a good cowboy yell as soon as we appeared on the show with our crocks of gold we had so dutifully earned from this fabulous muscular dystrophy carnival here now baking in the sun. No breeze in sight, and I was worried about Mr. Spock. I walked over there just to make sure he was drinking his water. I was tapped on the shoulder by Dr. Gregor.

"Son? That's no mangy dog. Where did you find this creature?" His jaw had dropped wide open. He was craning to get a good look at it.

"We found it in Jones Creek ditch, in the weeds."

Behind him was my father. He wasn't saying anything.

Dr. Gregor strained to get a good look at the creature. "Open the cage." He motioned to me. I opened it. He took a careful hold onto the now healthy creature. Its scales of leathery glossiness of yellow brown gleamed in the sun. The crowd that had now gathered around, that a moment ago were laughing at the antics of Donald Haroldson doing his impression of Mae West in a creature outfit from the novelty costume company on Goodwood Boulevard, was now enraptured by this tremendous find. They oohed and ahned in disbelief. Dr. Gregor began to examine the creature. He examined its tiny hoof claws that were rudimentary paws also.

My father stood next to him. Thank God he doesn't look mad or anything. Dr. Gregor's physician hands carefully held the tame animal as it looked at him with its sweet eyes.

"I don't know what to think about this..."

I looked at Dr. Gregor. The way he handled the animal with his caring, thoughtful caresses. He picked up a paw or leg. He looked at it closely. He smelled the leg. He looked at the ears, the eyes, the nose. He looked at a portion of its stomach. My father looked on. I didn't see my mother; there must have been something good on television. I guess now the secret was out. Mr. Haroldson didn't seem to think anything of it, he went back to the barbecue pit. A little child petted it, being rather bold. The father pulled her away. But then he saw the stars in its eyes of sweetness, the wonderment in the child. The creature licked her hand. She smiled and hugged it as it sat in Dr. Gregor's lap. It did not struggle, and surely, I thought, we had done a good job of taming the creature. My Mr. Spock, whose telepathic thoughts are stopping wars throughout the globe on its mission of peace. Like Klatu's boss, from the stars, trying to give a star-to-star navigator device in The Day the Earth Stood Still, he was trying to save us from ourselves. And here we were, making a million dollars, which we could convert to Martian money and set up a colony there in the FDR mountain range, and raise Mr. Spock's scions, if only we could find him a suitable mate near the canals of Mars.

My father went over to the barbecue pit to talk to Mr. Haroldson. I looked at the expression on his greyhaired flanked face. Ruggedly, he didn't seem to be upset, just smiling away as Mr. Haroldson offered him a cheeseburger, which he began dressing up with condiments of mustard, mayonnaise, and ketchup.

I strutted back over to my post at the dish throw penny toss, and Danny sideswiped me. I looked at him and faked hit him and he flinched.

"Two for flinching, gumdrop face!" I said. He looked astonished and faked surprise. "Ognibeanieweanie," he muttered. I shook my head. When would those clowns grow up? They couldn't invent their own language like George Orwell's 1984. When would he learn? Especially grokngriking in front of his father, who staunchly forbade such idiotic chatter. But unfortunately Danny had so gotten into the habit, just as I had taught all of our gang how to make a grunting pig sound with the base of the throat, he invariably couldn't stop himself, even at home at the dinnertable.

Such was life in Sherwood Forest. Hey, if an alien can land...

Dr. Gregor put him back in the cage, and said, "Well, I don't know..."

"What do you think it is, Dr. Gregor?" I asked.

He looked at the creature one more time as it sat comfortably in the cage and began chewing and tugging on a crisp leaf of iceberg lettuce. We watched it chew. One little badass said, "Look! It's eatin'!" I wanted to slap the little delinquent. Of course it eats, you numbskull. I didn't seem to be worried about what my ageless father would think about what was crawling around inside his precious toolshed amongst the pipe wrenches and circular saw. I was learning things all the time, I thought. Another kid landed a nickel precisely in the middle of a soup bowl. Incredible, I thought. It was that Star Trek freak kid, the one that lived and breathed Star Trek. How did I know this? Because he was in full Starfleet regalia uniform. That's why. Weirdos, I thought.

He turned to me as I handed him the soup dish and a rather lean beanbag of bright plaid. I had that look of uncertainty about this refugee from a derelict starship. His elfin face beamed and I heard an "Alright!" issue forth from his mouth. Then came a right-handed Vulcan salute and a peace sign.

"Live Long and Prosper," he said.

"You too," I said and feigned doing the same.

He walked away, a little lightness to his being, and met his friend. His friend was dangling a slinky from his left hand that he just won. Damn, I thought. I hope we don't give our best prizes away too soon.

I surveyed the carnival. Wow, I thought. This is a crowd bigger than a

pack of ghouls outside the Broadmoor Theatre for Dr. Terror's House of Horrors. Johnny Haroldson and I got dropped off by his big brother and when we got to the ticket booth, the old lady wouldn't let us in.

"Little boys shouldn't see that horrible stuff," she said. Mark Haroldson, Johnny's big brother, argued with her incessantly after we called him to come pick us up because we weren't allowed access. She relented, and we got to see a great Hammer film with scariness in the pitched theatre. In that blackness we saw vampires and monsters come to life and reach out and grapple with us to nudge a nightmare into our fertile minds. I remembered all this as I swooned in the broil. A swirl of kids pinwheeled around trees and booths in a smashed color of summer. Games were played in this charity event all in the name of that host of Channel 7's Buckskin Bob show. Kids all over the Baton Rouge area watched with eyes fixed upon his stratum of Flash Gordon serials and "Our Gang Little Rascals." Senior Puppet Puppet and "Hully Gully" and the "Hokey Pokey."

And soon we would be beaming our smiles -- all of us -- Donald and Johnny, Danny and me, all over Louisiana on The Buckskin Bob Show, wedged between the Happy Birthdays and the first Bugs Bunny cartoon. That sure beat the heck out of hanging around Tommy Coerver's house, drawing jet-fuel dragsters and Corvettes. Or getting tackled on the driveway of concrete in someone's father's front yard by some goon who played too tough. Sweating out solar flares and buckets of lemon lime kool-aid after scoring ten touchdowns in a row. The gleaming, beaming, shining lights of the famous studios of Channel 7, one the set of the Storyland Cabin! The Buckskin Bob Show, where one of us would hand over the profits, no, proceeds of the most famous carnival of the Western Hemisphere, to Buckskin Bob himself, and then we would go to the side and get free cookies. I ran it over and over in my mind. I awoke from my trance in this sweet, dulcet afternoon by the tinkling of crystal and glass bombarded with pitching pennies, dimes and quarters.

Over there was a familiar face: that of Buzzy Miller. Next to him, always at his side, was his gang of thugs. I had to think fast -- the oath we took. And don't ever let a thug like him or his evil friends near Mr. Spock, our special pet. I was about to react when I saw Donald in his human fish-reptile outfit grab the cage and take it inside. Everyone else for the moment seemed to take all this unnoticed. Steve Smithsons, Davey and Buzzy, and some real longhaired greasy hippie badass friend in wide flared bluejeans and sandals were walking the midway. Correction, our midway. And there was Danny, sucking up to them.

Why don't you just give them the money out of your apron, you Ngrok-n-grik jerk!, I thought.

Now that Donald as a reptile had put up Mr. Spock, I wondered if that was what they had come for. To see it. I prayed to Superman that that was not the case here. They pushed Danny aside and came towards me. I pretended not to see this. They came closer. The place was now devoid of parents; "Let the kids play" came out of some mother's mouth. No one to protect us. Buzzy pushed a kid that happened to be in his way that was no longer that. Right before he came up to me one of his cronies shouted, "Food!" I lurched with nervousness and realized just how scared I really was. I thanked Wonder Woman's magic lasso that poor silly Donald, lover of Ish Kabibble and Janis Joplin had thought in that strange comedic mind of his to act as fast as he did. There was Buzzy Miller over there, stealing food from a kid we hired to sell our main stuff. There came Johnny the Haroldson. Doubtlessly, he would use his considerable wiseacre charm to coerce them not to eat everything in sight. Just as I was coming over, about to pee in my pants, out stormed Mr. Haroldson, steaming right at 'em. Hooray, I cheered between my ears. I stopped and watched this bald scruffy man in t-shirt take on Satan's disciples and the hideous dwarves.

Just what in the hell do you think you're doing?" Mr. Haroldson demanded. It sounded like a foghorn with soul down deep. He meant business. Steve Smithsons said, "Eating a hotdog sire."

They all had jammed their mouths with hotdogs and hamburgers each. The dope hippie fiend was smoking a Marlboro and had a softpack rolled up in his t-shirt sleeve. He didn't blink, but he never looked at anybody. Just looked away, puffin'. You're all dead meat, I cheered in my head. Buzzy Miller looked straight at me.

"Did you pay the fifty cents for the hotdog, son?" Mr. Haroldson asked.

"Yes sir," they said. The proprietor of the hamburgers and hotdogs shook his head no and shouted, "No they didn't! They all started grabbin' stuff off the plates, sir. They didn't pay anything!" Did that poor kid know who he was striking out against? I wondered. They would have him killed, I thought. Brave little guy. That's why we volunteered the little Mad Magazine reader.

"Alright, you four guys ... get the hell outta here. And don't come back either. I mean it. You're Buzzy Miller, aren't you? I've heard about you guys. Steve Smithsons?" He just shook his head. I could picture it now: if Mr. Haroldson went inside, they would destroy every single booth and prize and display and funhouse we had built. Steal our food and kill us all and bury us three feet in swamp mud. I could see the end of time itself coming. The end of the world as I knew it, or at least the end of the carnival.

Miraculously they walked away. Mr. Haroldson reentered his house and the four of them started walking away, with the drugged hippie, with his lit Marlboro in his mouth dangling, flipped Mr. Haroldson the bird. But he was back watching the Ohio State game. Before they left they did tip over a small booth that we hadn't used yet and weren't going to use anyway, because Danny forgot to get enough prizes. Johnny, oh stupid one just pretended to be badass Buzzy's oh pal, oh friend. "See ya Buzzy," he said, sucking up to the hellraiser.

Chapter Ten

"Where was the thing?" Buzzy asked. The three boys sat around the light pole smoking Marlboros. Davey looked at him with that look of benevolent but prime evil. He sucked on his Marlboro without gagging.

"They took it inside. See! They thought we didn't see it, but I saw it. Goddamn sure did. I'll kill the damn thing! Right before their fuggin eyes, sure will!" Buzzy laughed, but with the modified authority of one who was much older and much more experienced being a badass.

"Is it really a creature from another planet?" Buzzy asked Steve Smithsons, who began a cough. Steve kicked an ant hill. The ants flew into the now late afternoon air. The neighborhood was still stirring with afterthoughts of wild carnival times in the back yard not far away from this smoking pen. The sky was falling. Venus was shining but these three didn't know or care what that was. Their cigarettes glowed in the pallor of iridescent twilight. Their feet kicked grass and ground in nervous patter. Steve popped a pill. He swallowed the illegal black molly, as his younger brother Steve clawed at him for one.

"Give me one, too!" he begged with what sounded like a child rather than a badass, as if the kid went straight from toddler to conman jailbird. Tricycle to mini-enduro motocross. The road to McDonald's was paved with motorcycle tracks like good intentions in mud caked flats and splits on flank sides of drainage ditches like Jones Creek itself. As these children's mothers well knew from their mothers, when the wind blows strong and fierce, the horses get wild and so do the children. Here were three wild such boys. As the carnival for a good cause like Muscular Dystrophy and Mr. Jerry Lewis and Buckskin Bob, was going on and simmering down now, as rides ceased and did not resume, as coins exchanged hands less and less, these three Satanic infidels of youth plotted to steal something. Something mutated. Something not of this earth, which they could barely grasp. They just knew though that they had to get back at the punk wimps, not by dirt clod war, not by fireworks war, but by stealing the most prized possession on the face of the planet. They lit up again and coughed in unison, and plotted some more just how to do such a

thing. Night tendered itself into darker pitch black. Stars pierced the air above this swell atmospheric realm of Sherwood Forest. The carnival was nothing more than tumped over wooden carts with wagon wheels. Nothing more than crates, fruit crates that were once booths, now crates again by reverse magic.

The carnival had had its day. It bore the scrutiny of all of Buckskin Bob's carnivals. Jerry Lewis himself back in Hollywood would be proud of all the money reaped and sown by the good children in the neighborhood. All was safe it seemed to them. All the houses glowed with electric blazoned shadows of televisions purveying news and Gilligan's Island and Star Trek. Land of the Giants showed while kids baked easy bake oven cakes for their mothers, who wouldn't eat them but secretly threw them away. Milton Bradley games were taken down from shelves to be scored and popped and dice thrown here and there, off the boards themselves. Laughter heard all around these festivities.

Families clustered by their dens engorged with happiness.

Chapter Eleven

That night I had dreams. I dreamt of far-off realms, not just any neither. No sir. I was smack dab in the middle of the Arcturian sector just as sure as weird people wrote science fiction galactic visions. Just as sure as the science fiction books in the K&B drugstore were replete with rockets harbored in constellations of swirling feral white lights, incandescent empires in unheralded realms of unplumbed galactic space. That's when I realized they were coming back. They were coming back to visit. Just as sure as Analog magazine had stated in full color ads in the town paper. I dreamt the ships were unloosening their bowlines for the fleet to patrol near the earth as soon as they came out of hyperspace. Why were they coming, you ask, as I smiled the great smile of mine in bold sleep of nocturnal gold braided knots of Morpheus? Because they were to come back and claim Mr. Spock. Why, I did not know. But they were sending me telepathic signals like a warning beacon from a monolith on the moon's surface, radio signals from the stars right to Sheraton Drive to my very bed near the clusters of science fiction and Edgar Allan Poe, inside my very skull with blond hair atop it. They were coming, yessirree! I yipped and howled in my sleep. I then directed my wonderful science galactic space patrol dream about unplumbed space and vectorless vortices and all that, to the tool shed out back. THAT'S where my precious, rather, our precious Mr. Spock was. Soon we would show it to humanity, with all the television network's world premieres of the greatest find since the unearthing of the great pyramid's graverobbing days. All the big television networks: CBS, ABC, and NBC would whisper our names as we beamed our bright and shiny patinaed faces on Buckskin Bob's Storyland Cabin, unearthing the most prized and special secret property of the entire globe of man. I dreamed again and drove myself through endless fluffy chasms of space back to where a ship would split off from the others and head our way, once calculating trajectory from galactic compasses and telemetry from our television and radio stations. That's when I would be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It would be like that Outer Limits episode where they turned Robert Culp into an alien, using scientific apparatus like chemicals and drugs and barometric sealed chambers, to make the world stop warring and fight the common enemy. From above, just like our Mr. Spock was, from above. Well, Johnny and Donald and Danny and I would all share our Nobel Peace Prize, and we would be able to roller coaster our way across every soda fountain shop and Baskin Robbins for free ice cream and peace movements for all. Scientists would have slumber parties with us, world politicians would eat our incredible edibles and like it too.

I began sweating from all the heady excitement of my galactic world-colliding, planet-smashing dream. That's all I just about knew for sure, though. Let Dr. Gregor be doubtful about just what we had, that sat in the closet. Let the world gasp in awe at our profound mystery unlocked from the eternal world of time itself. We had the gift of the ages. Alchemists and

sorcerers were we!

Chapter Twelve

Danny was on the phone. It was the next day, a day like any other, except today was the day before a new beginning for mankind. Today was not only the day after the Muscular Dystrophy carnival, where the group earned \$54.63, but the day that they were calling Buckskin Bob's Channel 7 studios to see if they could do a Show and Tell right there in Storyland Cabin, in front of God and Bugs Bunny and everybody.

"I told you," Donald cried to Danny, who was trying to dial information to get Channel 7's number. "I told you we shouldn't do it just yet." Johnny fake punched him and got him in a headlock. Donald pinched to get back at him and to get him to release his shaggy thick bush of black unkempt hair. He started brushing himself, his face pink and engorged with blushing. Danny got the number from the operator and hailed a "Shutup you moron!"

"Excuse me son?" the operator said, a woman of distinction who wouldn't take this crud off some suburban punk kid.

"Hang up!" Johnny said, without a tarry. Danny hung up. He scribbled down the number as the wan and ancient astronaut would scribble down his flight path to Nazca landing strips in ancient times.

"Call Buckskin!" we all had told him. He called Channel 7 studios. A lady answered.

"Channel 7 studios, may I help you?"

"Yes ma'am. My name is Danny Gregor."

"Yes."

"Uh ... don't kids who throw Muscular Dystrophy carnivals get to show up on TV?"

"You mean our Buckskin Bob show?" she queried.

"Right."

"Yes. Did y'all have a Muscular Dystrophy carnival?" She was being extraordinarily nice. Donald was walking around Dr. Gregor's study like Mae West, bowing and flitting his eyes and sashaying.

"Shimmy for us, Donald," his brother said to him. Danny began cracking up but managed to hold it in. There was a large intricate model of the human eye on his desk. I felt like it was like Fantastic Voyage in the room, like we were all miniaturized down by cobalt rays.

"Hello? Hello?" came through the receiver. Danny restrained himself from doubling over as Donald was shimmying like Sister Kate in Dr. Gregor's study.

"Yes ma'am." He almost said, "ngrokngrik." His father was right. If you keep grunting like a pig or saying ngrok-n-grik or ognibeany-weanie, then you would get in the habit of saying it and you would say it for the rest of your life.

"Yes ma'am, we made fifty-something dollars."

"That's good. Did you use our Muscular Dystrophy carnival kit that we sent you?" she asked. Donald put his shirt down. Johnny stopped laughing finally.

"Yes ma'am. We used it."

"Okay. Now would you like to show up and present your earnings to the Muscular Dystrophy Society to Buckskin?" Johnny passed gas and giggled. Danny giggled.

"Yes ma'am," Danny said, obviously getting in a frenzy of excitement over all of us getting on television and all.

"Okay, when would you and your other carnival friends like to appear?" She coughed. "On the show," she finished.

"When would we like to appear on the show?" Danny asked me.

"On the show?" I asked. Instead of a good smart reply, I urged something else. "Ask her if we can show Mr. Spock on the show."

"I will! Shut up! When do we want to be on the show?" he begged us.

"Next week!" I managed to say while Johnny let yet another one fly in

this most sanctified study.

"How about two weeks from now?" she said. Danny echoed her response.

"She said how about two weeks?"

"Tell her okay, numbskull," Johnny said. He still stank.

"Okay," he said refraining from saying "numbskull."

"Okay, just be at the studio next Friday before the show starts at eight o'clock. The show starts at nine." Danny wrote this down on his father's calendar. "Eight o'clock," he whispered. Now we were all quiet but excited. Handing over our hard earned money to Buckskin.

"Anything else I can help you with?" she asked. Danny looked at me. Me. I nodded enthusiastically, telepathically picking up that this was the moment to ask about...

"Can we bring a Show and Tell thing?" Thing was right, I thought.

"Show and Tell?" she asked.

"We have an unusual pet to bring to show Buckskin. There's nothing else like it. We think it is from some place rare and unknown."

Go ahead and tell her, I whispered to him. Outer space ... outer space...

"Okay, I'll check with him. It should be alright, as long as it doesn't bite."

"Okay, thanks lady." He hung up.

Chapter Thirteen

The shed was right there, easy pickins. Davey Smithsons was up to a heinous crime. He was going to steal the animal from Mars. It was dark and no moon out. He crossed the motocross paths in his father's back yard and headed through shrubs to the back yard. He had no conscience. He was bad and he knew it deep down. It felt good doing this. He hated those sissies. He tossed away his Marlboro from his hand.

Those sissies knew they couldn't keep their precious little animal away from everybody, especially him. Screw the oath! He hated Mike, Danny, Donald and Johnny. All of them. He wanted a gesture that would really get to them. He wasn't sure what Buzzy Miller and his older brother would do with the creature. But all he knew was, he had to bring it to them. He chopped his way through a mimosa and was standing by the shed. There was no one around. The crickets had stopped chirping, the cicadas also. There was rustling of pine needles way in the trees. The coolness of the wind was making him restless. His heart was pumping a mile a minute. He looked around really good to make sure no one was looking.

Sidelong glances told him not a soul was in sight. They were all locked up in their houses like the idiots. Like idiots he hated. Like Mike's family that owned this thing. Or kept it in their shed.

He opened the shed. It made a slight noise, but not enough, and he was bold enough to get the door ajar enough to where in one swift movement he could reach for the cage and haul ass. There was no little voice in the back of his head to tell him not to do this. He was just following their orders. Bring them the animal. Bring it to them. Get it, steal it. Take it and never come back. Don't come back to the scene of the crime. When they come askin', don't say nuthin'. Don't let on about nuthin'.

There was the cage. Inside was a tame looking creature, all weird and all. He looked at it and just for spite, cooed at it like he was its friend. What exactly was Buzzy Miller going to do with it anyway, he wondered. But there wasn't much on his mind but dragracin' magazines and Penthouses, and Miller beer and Marlboros and drugs, which his older brother was just now showin' him all about.

He grabbed the cage and it didn't seem all that heavy.

Buzzy said not to run fast and all. Those wimps, they would bawl all about this stuff. Their poor little animal from Mars, stolen and they don't know nuthin' about where it might be or nuthin'. And here he was walking away from Mike Kern's father's tool shed late at night and nobody knew nuthin', but

him. He had it. The great and wonderful creature that would make everybody famous.

He kept walking in the shadows of houses and to the sidewalk on Charington Drive, the back way through the subdivision. All the way to Buzzy Miller's back yard, way down the block. And the creature wadn't doin' nuthin'. Wadn't trying nuthin', like it was gonna bite him or anything.

Well, if it was to try anything, he would bash its brains out with a golf club or stick or sumthin. Just smash right through that cage and killin no creature from outerspace didn't matter no more than killin a rat or somethin. Dead things was way dead to him.

He was getting tired of carrying this cage. Keepin it turned right-side-up an all. The water spilled and the dog food and lettuce that they fed it was sprawled all over the cage. But that thing in there wadn't doing anything but rightin itself in the cage an all. Wadn't jumpin around or nuthin'. Maybe it wadn't so bad an all. It did seem kinda nice an all. He secretly hoped that Buzzy wouldn't kill it or nuthin, or do experiments on it, like torturin it an all.

He made it stealthily, the whole way, and now he put it down within the confines of Buzzy's house. There they were waitin' for him.

Buzzy stood around it and looked at it from all sides.

"You did good, punk. Here's a beer. Think you can handle it?" Buzzy told him. Steve Smithsons laughed. They were drunk probably.

"Don't hurt it or nuthin', now, Buzzy." Davey pleaded, almost like a sissy, they thought, and Davey thought. That immaturity again from toddler straight to juvvy hall.

"Now don't worry, we ain't gonna hurt it. We just want to keep it for a while." Surprisingly, none of them opened the cage and no one tried to grab it and pick it up or tease it or anything. They seemed soothed and mesmerized by it. Those sorrowful eyes, such a weird thing it truly was. It was almost sucking the punk spirit right out of these despoiled brats.

They put it in the patio, the one with the high brick wall around it, where Buzzy's mother always drank her martinis that she was getting a lot of these days what with Buzzy's misadventures and police troubles and stuff, like shoplifting.

"Tomorrow I'm gonna let it stay in the patio and take it outa the cage," Buzzy bragged. "Those asses had to keep the poor thing locked up and all. And we are going to have our press conference and tell NASA and the world, and then we'll be famous and all." Steve Smithsons chugged back his beer again and burped out a raunchy one.

Chapter Fourteen

There we were, standing next to the hermetically sealed inner sanctum of Wildfire out of The Andromeda Strain. And we had a full alert, Danny, Johnny and I. We were stunned like stunned with a ball-peen hammer stunned. Mr. Spock was gone, the seal was broken on toolshed central, and worst of all, we couldn't believe that Mr. Spock was gone.

"What the hell's going on?" one of us said.

"Who took him?"

"Do you think he got out by himself? Maybe somebody just wanted to let him go?" I said. I felt stupid, mightily so, for saying that on the crabgrass laced with lawngrass that made up our tarmac to Wildfire. The toolshed had been graverobbed. We had been robbed of our national treasure. Danny shook his head.

"My father wanted to look at him closely, he was gonna talk to people about it." He was being somber about it. Like he was totally giving up on it, finding it, anything like that. I looked through the toolshed carefully, under every jar of screws, under every gasoline rag, under every old parakeet cage and coil of electrical cord. Behind the lawnmower, maybe it was cowering under there. We all knew better.

"It was definitely taken. The cage is still there. Does that answer

your question about whether it got out on its own?" Johnny said. He was not being goofy just this once. He hadn't cared for it as much as Danny and I, but he was making sense in our suburban house of madness.

"We gotta find out where." Then we all began thinking of the same thing.

It was as if everyone said the same thing at the same time. Who were the biggest badasses in the LSD Mickey Mouse Club around Sherwood Forest? Who rolled toilet paper in trees, and egged cars and houses all the time? Who would suck the brains right out of our heads like the monsters they were? Who resembled Satan's hideous dwarves here in this young turf?

Danny said it a syllable faster than I did. And Johnny screamed it out the most as I was climbing out of the door of the toolshed, almost tripping over my dad's edger. I cursed and said, "Buzzy Miller" and was drowned out, essentially. Or brains were honing together like a symbiotic creature in Omega star cluster or something. Like the Fantastic Four or X-men. Like the Justice League. "Buzzy Miller" Danny said. And then Johnny's yelp of outrage, "Buzzy \$*%#@ Miller." He said it the best. And that was followed by his minions in his pervading pernicious evil: "Davey Smithsons, Steve Smithsons." Why, we could almost hear evil in a motorcycle muffler chopped and howling in the distance.

"That's probably them now."

Danny was shaking his head like all was lost. Like in Robinson Crusoe on Mars_ when he runs out of air. But he lived and survived. I only hoped in my steelplated ironman heart that the poor interstellar creature was alright. I only wished that he had been let out on his own, or if someone took him, that he managed to escape and fly into outer space on his own through some sort of built-in antigrav drive or teleportation instinct. I hoped that Buzzy Miller and Steve and Davey, the whole bunch, wouldn't torture him. That's why it was imperative that we get him back.

That's when Johnny piped up the wrong thing to say to us. "What about Buckskin Bob? What are we going to do about showing the Spock thing to the world?"

"Look at you pig grunting pathetic freak," Danny said. "Aren't you concerned about more than that, for Gawd's sake?"

Johnny shrugged, and thought about frigging him with an arm flincher whomp, and declined. "You're right," was what came out of his oblong black-haired face.

"We've got to get him back," I said. I must have been kidding myself. Fight Buzzy and his whole hippie gang of badasses? They were probably making him inhale glue, or smoke pot or take a hit of acid.

"Yeah, like the Green Berets special task forces."

"Danny, let's do it like Robin Cook's book, Green Berets_."

Then Danny chirped up with fervor. "What about Mercury and Jupiter?" Those two words struck gold in my heart. But that was just kid stuff. I was Mercury once. He was Jupiter. We were crime fighters when we were kids. At least we could do it in the spirit of Mercury and Jupiter with cardboard wings glued to the sides of their shoes.

That's when Johnny said, "Who's Mercury and Jupiter?" He knew, if we could jog his memory. Danny explained. I listened, my heart already growing stouter in this daring rescue mission from the stars themselves.

We planned. We had our uniforms like Wilhelm himself had designed them. Like JFK had done the green beret uniforms from the oval office chair. We had our weapons. We were to be a stealth force. Special unit of crack officers of touch football sometimes reverting to tackle. From the ranks of suburbia, to fill the boots of mighty GI Joes and tactical basketballers and softball agents of crimefighting.

We really got into this kick. I couldn't help but think all the while, just what was Mr. Spock doing? Was he safe? Was he intact, breathing, not starving? We tried to determine just exactly when he had been taken, and we began to go on the hunch that it was a night job. Some little punk like Davey

Smithsons was just enough of a little creep to do the job, get in, and get out like the Satanical infant that he was. No mini enduro noise on this one, no sir. Just the tennis shoes of a monster. Back to the headquarters of the very evil itself, Buzzy.

Johnny began getting hungry. It was dinnertime now. We all had to go home. As I walked home, I began wondering about that dream I had. It had been repeated last night also. Warriors from the stars had to come back to earth to rescue their steed, their common housepet of Orion's belt and the Tannhauser gates of the crab nebula. Starships parked in asteroid belts clawing for new pets to tame.

Maybe there was something to that, as I crammed and jammed mashed potatoes and gravy down my gullet, washed down with iced tea and chomped on a sirloin pattie with onions. Gee, Mom had really cooked up a good meal. Maybe it was my last meal, that Danny's and Johnny's mother had done the same also, cooked them the finest meal like the condemned men we all were. Because going into hippie buzz-high territory of punk central, Buzzy Miller's house was like asking to get skinned alive.

That night I dreamed of chasms of deep space, and once again, the aliens who were coming and operating starships through gulfs of vacuum, into our solar system within a fortnight, to take back the creature. I tossed in my sleep, as if tumbling through weightlessness. I gestured to the aliens, out by Jones Creek, where they were waiting for us, to beam all of us back to their planetoidal-sized ship. We got to go along, and in the dream I focused on whether this was really happening or was it just my dumb imagination, you know how sometimes you can be half in and out of a dream and then you've got to go to the bathroom, and the dream is so good that you try to hold it, and stay asleep but you can't stay asleep because your bladder won't let you stay asleep but only awake. Then you run and get up and go to the restroom, and down the hall are the aliens waiting for you, and you climb back into bed after doing your business, and the sheets and spread are awaiting your transition into deep uncharted space where they tug on your space line and reel you into the ship and you give them the international signal for peace. And the Spockster is there yelping and barking for you and giving you one of his cloven hooves to shake hands with you because you tamed him and he is smart and he licks your hand. And you simply love him even though Sherwood Forest is hundreds of billions of years away from that star cluster or Orion or Aldebaren or whatever branch of infinity he belongs to. And the point is, as I sat up and yawned, and was excited and my heart was beating two trillion miles a second, from transforming into a space pirate who wins galactic control of the counsel of the millennium, that Spock was gone, and we were going to go after him, and I almost started crying because I knew the evil that promulgated from every cell of that crowd of punks, and they would no sooner kill it than smoke a slim Marlboro from a crush proof box.

I got up and managed to eat a whole box of Cap'n Crunch with crunchberries nonetheless, and read the box with the special offer, and as I sunk crunchberries, I wondered, was that a real berry? Nothing was real anymore, but Mr. Spock. I bet if we still had him that he would have built a special invisible force field around us like the Martian invading attack ships in one of my favorite movies, War of the Worlds. I wanted to be like H.G.

Wells, and take science classes and grow a fiery mustache like his Victorian Edwardian face possessed, and write futuristic books, and what would Mr. H.G. Wells have thought about Mr. Spock? My mind had to start grasping reality, because I was shunting out our attack of the Buzzy Miller fortress of solitude which was nothing more than a suburban house whose adults were probably really nice people except for the fact that they had given birth and raised a cockroach for a son who should have been stepped on a long time ago.

We prepared our clothes and had the shoepolish from my dad's shoepolish kit that was in his bedroom closet, brown dark and stinking with brown stuff that we were going to rub on our faces like The Guns of Navarone. I only hoped that between Donald, Johnny, Danny and Me that there was no saboteur

like Fantastic Voyage or something, the guy that sabotaged the laser so they couldn't cut out the bad cells that were destroying and ... hell there wouldn't be any saboteur! It was just us, trying to get back the outer space alien. Us! Just a couple of average suburban punks.

Chapter Fifteen

It was nighttime. I had waited an eternity, it seemed, for that nightfall to occur. Twelve of my lives had hung in the balance, and I had been born thirty times and died forty-two. Here we were, huddling houses, outskirts of fences. Blending into wood. Clinging to burnt brick. Gliding atop blades of razor sharp grass. Slithering through canals to our destination, in the light of nothing but faint stars that didn't give a damn anyway. But I knew they did. We ran and stopped. Ran and stopped. We stood in doorways unnoticed. We crouched and stood and sat and waited. We waited until the Miller household would be full of sleepy people that drank too many martinis dry and more than that even. We waited until the Johnny Carson show would transfer through the ether and make everyone turn into a zombie and go to bed. We waited until Buzzy Miller himself was innocent by means of his brain being shut off by sleep, rendering him this innocence by unconsciousness. Slumber of evil. Evil was still evil because it would awaken again to begin more punk games of evil. Defiling graveyards, tearing up and keying car doors, shoplifting Penthouses and stuff. But here we were, almost there. It was eleven o'clock. Like I said, it was an eternity till suburban people turned off their lights and even then they didn't turn off their lights. They slept with their lights on as if hypnotized by yellow wattage.

I scoped out the back yard. I spied the cage and motioned to Danny. Donald wasn't with us, thank the ninth god of monsters, BC. He would trip and yell and scream and that would be the end. Johnny either. He declined. "I don't want no shoepolish on my face." And that was that. Just me and Danny. Mercury and Jupiter, without our utility belts made out of variety packs of Kellogg's cereals, and without our wings on our tennis shoes.

Without towels around our necks to fly through the air. But bad and meaning business. We were here to free the creature that was rightfully ours.

There is the cage, Danny mouthed to me. I nodded sarcastically, which he instantly read as that I knew this already. We were in the patio. He was nowhere to be seen. We looked for a good fifteen minutes. We kept looking under bushes. And then we spied him. He had jumped or flown over or teleported himself through the brick wall like the Flash or something. Moving molecules around, either way, he was safe and sound and we hauled arse out of that patio and the lights came on and Danny had grabbed the cage and I almost whooped. We caught our breaths and I scooped up a happy Mr. Spock who immediately recognized me, and his little horsetail started wagging and all, and we were off, me swift as the god of Mercury of the heavens, running over hedges, across driveways, across the street and Danny lugging that cage into the vacant lot. Danny knew the plan. He was to stay in the vacant lot with the cage while I came back for him as soon as I could put Mr. Spock the wonderful back in the toolshed. Doubtless he would not run away from his rightful star masters. I ran and ran forever. Finally I made it into my backyard and tried to catch my breath. I looked into Mr. Spock's eyes and he smiled at me like an alien could. Like you think your dog can sometimes. And I shut the shed and ran for Danny as if my little framed lungs could do the job and run all this force and speed of a herculoid or something like some super hero of television lore. Didn't Sheena of the jungle have to take a rest sometimes? Didn't Space Ghost have to take a vacation sometimes?

I ran and ran around the back way to the outskirts of the demilitarized zone of enemy territory. Went around through some people's yard and saw Danny crouching in the bushes. We got up and walked across the back street around Marlbrook Drive and just casually walked and walked down sidewalks that were government property and weren't doing anything bad or anything. We made it through Stephanie Laplante's backyard and through the Smithsons' motocross

field that they had made of their back yard and through that old vacant lot that wasn't a vacant lot anymore but the Sproats' back yard, and we were at the toolshed like the starship Enterprise itself had beamed us there, breathless. Panting, we gathered up Mr. Spock. I held him for a minute, barely about to catch my breath, with Danny sitting there, whooping and smiling and all that, and we let Mr. Spock climb into his very familiar cage that didn't seem any more worse for wear. It appeared that if Buzzy had tortured it or anything, we would have been able to figure that out quick. Not a mark on him, we saw, and Danny used that future medical knowledge of anatomy and bone structure and contusions and whatever that I didn't know much about and gave him a clean bill of health, unless he had some interstellar virus that would explode the earth into a billion jagged pieces and then it wouldn't matter anyway if Buzzy Miller came after us and beat our asses. He will beat our asses, I thought, for we restole what was rightfully ours like the green berets crack unit and all, and he surely would be mad.

"Why don't you keep him at your house for now?" I said. Danny nodded. "If the old man will let me."

"Well, you know if Buzzy steals him again, or gets Davey Smithsons to steal it, it won't be unharmed. They will burn it with gasoline and cut it up and throw it in the ditch. Just for what we did to get it back." Mr. Spock was eating some lettuce that I had put in there that was from a head of lettuce that was sitting for his arrival safe home, back to Wildfire. But now it was up to Danny. And would this fool him? Buzzy Miller was no idiot.

Danny carried him home and I went to sleep and darn it if I didn't dream about chasms of outer space and I sensed in my dreams that the starship invasion was imminent. I began to feel as if my nightmares were telepathic portents of what was to come. But then again, I really believed once in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, and Superman too, until someone spoke the truth.

Chapter Sixteen

The next brightness of day, we reported to Johnny and Donald Haroldson the success of our mission. We grew two sets of eyes on our knit shirted backs because we feared retaliation from Buzzy Miller and his Third Reich of dirt clod warriors. No, there were too many fireworks battles, too many dirt clod wars long since passed since we grew to the samurai that we were. We were outgrowing treehouses as outposts in war zones. The badasses were choosing their road down life, littered with beer cans and cigarettes, and we were still subsisting and nursing on our mothers for trips to the Broadmoor Theatre to see Thunderball.

"So where is it?" Johnny asked without grunting like a pig for once. Danny fake punched him because Danny was fond of Johnny in a different way than Danny was fond of me. Danny and I were Mercury and Jupiter last night, roving amongst land mines that were really fire hydrants, machinegun nests that were stickerbushes, and pillboxes that were just garbage cans. But in the undersea world of neptunish badasses like imperial warlord Buzzy Miller and his mighty army of suicidal soldiers, we were imperialist suburban dogs to have our throats cut or at least get punched out till we started crying and then maybe a few punches more.

"New Oath ... It's in my old man's back yard, near the fountain."

"Yeah," I chimed in, as we sat on the brisk landscaping in front of Danny's yard which he never had to mow because Dr. Gregor, his old man, hired black men to come over in their truck and do the whole thing for money that Danny would never taste. At least money with mowing sweat on it. "Yeah," I continued. "It wasn't safe anymore at my dad's shed..."

We felt like Russian agents. Spies and spy smashers. "You still have the muscular dystrophy money, right Danny?" I asked, worried. We were all thinking and wondering with reeling excitement about the Buckskin Bob show coming up this week. It wouldn't be long now. Live cameras pouring into the entire city's homes, across sprawling junkyards and railroad tracks, through boardrooms and brokerage offices, and all the homes that populated this

cauldron of happiness. Live cameras of us, and not us as Boy Scouts, or Cub Scouts or cute little girl Bluebirds that got the giggles and were reprimanded by Buckskin. No, honest hardworking capitalists for the Jerry Lewis organization.

But our secret weapon was Mr. Spock, the outer space wonder dog. We knew we were going to shock the world. We would be shaking hands with Walter Cronkite himself. We would be on Meet the Press against the senators and congressmen, stating our terms.

Danny was bombarded with Johnny's and Donald's and my inevitable questions, all the same and single coming forth like a torrent in one epiphanal moment as hot breezes wafted down Sheraton Drive just like that satellite UFO came bleeping across the sky following the guts of the road ... "Have you heard from the Buckskin Bob show? Have you heard from the television station? Channel 7 Studios?" The megalithic MGM of Baton Rouge, great capital city of this great southern state, where can be found strange creatures besides alligators and possums and armadillos, but space monsters and outer space scaly things.

Danny said, "You know, I've been having these weird dreams." I wondered what he meant as I looked across the street for snipers. Snipers with Marlboros and fuzzy trolls and big daddy don Garlits's t-shirts and little millers.

"Dreams?" I asked. He looked at me as I looked at him. Mercury and Jupiter meeting on this hallowed pantheon of brick and concrete in the heavens above or below.

Donald started acting like Mae West again and I don't even think he was aware of it until his brother grabbed him and made him stop.

"Yeah ... about Spock. About an invasion. About people coming to get him back to put in their ships."

I gasped. "Weird." All I could muster was that and another one, "weird!" Danny wondered why I was acting like a nut all of a sudden. I told him why.

"I've been having the same thing! The very same thing." We grokked. We were two spy smashers like Artemis Ward and Jim West. Johnny didn't seem to think it was that weird, but Donald surprisingly chirped up in his wont-to-be-goofy way that only Donald could do as clouds dotted above us to prepare for the onslaught of UFO's that would unfurl their heat rays upon us because we didn't heed the skies. Keep watching the skies those old movies said. Watch for Klaatu because he will be walking right around the corner, and if you're not a superhero, you'll be smashed and melted down into slag.

"There's a special term for that. When two people dream the same thing," Donald said. For once he seemed serious. "I've been reading books on dreams." Danny and I let him take the floor of this cavern of suburban asphalt melting into the air.

We compared the two dreams. I could remember mine better than Danny could, and it was a true fact that Danny had an uncanny sharper mind than I did. I seemed a dullard usually compared to him. He had memorized all the human bones and organs and respiratory system ever since he saw Fantastic Voyage, that Isaac Asimov thing. But I was matching his dream to some extent. "Where did they land?" I asked. That was the key question of the penultimate dispensation that the aliens were going to fall from the sky and splat us like a Bugs Bunny character caught with his head under a boulder. Like Wile E. Coyote.

"In Jones Creek Ditch," was the answer from Danny wonder doctor.

"Same place I dreamt!" I said. The ancient gates of time portal gates seemed to open on that one. Here we were, no less than a street across from each other, Danny's old man's house a two story which we never had, and our house was much more modest, since my father was just an engineer, and not a doctor. Here we were and we were transmitting or receiving the same dream from the stars, like the Sentinel Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey. We were depositing dreams from the stars into our own heads as we slept, we were being

conquered by the star people as we slept.

"Maybe, if this is what you think it is, that these invaders are going to be nice to us, because we have been taking good care of their pet." Johnny scoffed at us.

"Y'all have too much imagination." And he did an "Ngrokngrik" and a pig grunt to lighten things up. It was to no avail, because Danny and I, who both read voluminous old pulp tales and sci fi till we didn't believe in the solid earth anymore, were sold upon this transference of information from the stars.

"Maybe we could explain this to Buckskin Bob on his show after we bring our Mr. Spock the wonder pet from the future," I said. Danny nodded. We were almost too old to buy all this. And yet we did, as though we were wondrous children again, with malleable minds.

"Yes, we can!" I said. I could feel the blood pumping through Danny's body and mind and soul just as I could with mine own. We were Mercury and Jupiter again, and Donald and his brother Johnny were left out. "I'll tell him. About the invasion. Tell him we know they are coming and they have to be friendly and all." Johnny laughed. Johnny was a bit more pragmatic than us, the wonder twins. Donald loved the idea and was swirling around like an exotic dancer who was about to pull up his shirt and shimmy for us like he always did he was so overjoyed by this weird occlusion of ideas that promulgated forth on hot pavement uncooled by hot breezes formed in convections over hot brown lawns that needed a long rain. Near magnolias and azaleas that stunk they smelled so good as we stood there, hopping on hot bricks in our short pants and tennis shoes.

"We'll be more famous than the Beatles!" Donald said.

Danny, being a genius then said, "Then I guess we'll be more popular than Jesus, too." Very dry sense of humor, the boy had.

Chapter Seventeen

Buzzy was in the back of the GTO of some hippie freak.

Rolling Stones was buzzing through the car and seeping into his brain. Steve Smithsons was next to him in the back seat as it was raining on Airline Highway. They were drunk and making little sense.

"They stole it back..." Buzzy said. Steve nodded with his beer.

"Sure did, the bastards," he said.

"I like the thing. Don't know what it was, but I liked it."

"Can we get it back?" Steve said, asking permission to do bad things.

"We can try. Gotta figure out where it is. It is the weirdest looking thing. At first I wanted to kill it with a shovel or something..." he said, and Steve looked at him with a smile all buzzing with beer wet on his burping sipping lips. "But something about it, the way it looks at ya and all. It..." and he was unable to put it in words, but Steve almost understood that he was turning pussy about the whole thing.

"Shoulda kilt it," Steve said, but Buzzy knew he just didn't grok with it. "No man, you'll see, when we get it again..."

"Okay. You're the boss. Want another beer?" Steve asked him.

"No, I've gotta burp up this last one." They burped but both knew they only managed to avert vomiting and instead the burp crept up audibly and saved both of them and the GTO interior, and the saving face in front of the drug connection hippie smoking a joint in the front seat and fingering the stick shift and lookin' at women and yelling stuff.

The dirty hippie's face could not be seen at all behind his mop. He jammed it into overdrive and yelled at Buzzy in a mania frisson of sweating chemicals. "We gonna get your monster back! We gonna get your monster!" Buzzy looked at him and patted his back.

Steve yelled and it was a real party going on on Airline Highway doped out all over the road like that. The GTO spun out as he cocked it grooving with a full 4-barrel thrust. Buzzy and Steve whooped and sloshed in the back seat as the beer bottles clinked in the pony pack. The car vroomed until it

was just a dust mote speck down the highway 61, going nowhere fast.

* * * *

Our beloved goddess, Linda Landiston, replete in tank top and shorts barely covering a mosaic of delicious nubilia, was emphatic about meeting the spacedoggie.

"I want to see Mr. Spooock..." she whined in pseudo-baby garble. A princess of Mamie Van Doren stature standing in her blonde-tressed glory, she always got what she wanted.

"Come on Danny!" I said. How could you turn down such a vision of loveliness, such fast development of beauty, ripened Helen down?

"I don't feel like going to get him!" Danny whined.

"Oh, pleeeeaase, Daaanny!" she begged, leaning in on us with cleavage gaping at the front as she did a side straddle hop and bounced in places.

"I wasn't here when y'all had the show at the carnival ... with Donald as a big fish and Mr. Spooockk..." she begged.

Danny's young body bristled with love hormones oozing into place. Mine were too. I could not take my eyes off her even to do something as dastardly as blink. There she was doing a cartwheel. Look at the smooth thighs below her short pants, I said to the world. Look at her dainty waist. Look at her arms with wisps of blonde hair. Look at her balancing feet shaped from clay of temple pilasters. Listen to her siren song Danny, willing you back to the sea. Those cartwheels are sprinkled with magic dust to settle upon your heart forever, to break us both in two until we go to our maker. Danny shrugged with the weight of a continent upon his shoulders, arched sideways, cutting into the sky with a design and aspect of the rigging on a cutty sark. We were in oceans of landscaped earth, cultivated for us to grow out of like stalks of white wheat, towering into the sky to spread out in girth and sit thusly upon the face of this slanted world.

Danny eeked okay out of his sensitive lips; he had been won over by Isis, Helen, a mermaid beached wrapped in seaweed.

Danny trudged home with his tail between his legs, through the Sproats' yard, just aligning with the paths we had once traced from our very youth, from Kern's corner to Gregor square. Right about there, he was now, where we saw that huge kingsnake who slithered into our lives to shame us from our cowardly selves to become bronzed gods and superheroes beckoning to no one but the Greek myths of strength and vitality, speed between Sparta and Athens, we were couriers then and now we were just growing boys, who possessed the secret of the hallowed ages.

This left me with a superwoman. Linda flirted with me and I swooned with adoration.

"Oh, Mike! Is it scary?" she cooed. I gazed into reflets dans l'eau in the regarde of her face. I became glued to the earth itself. I smelled her aroma of sweet perfume that haloed around her in an orb.

I finally regained consciousness and shyly said, before I thought I would die of something, "Noooo. It's a sweet animal."

She giggled out rivulets of audible jewels, laughed swept by me.

She said, "It's tame?" and just at that point her eyes lit up incandescently and banjoed wide open, and I became suddenly pierced by this intensity bombarding my face. I died again and came back again.

I managed to say, stirring somewhere within me I did not understand, "Of course it's tame. I tamed it." There you go, taking all the credit, I thought. What about the treacherous trio and the shimmy girl, Donald? We were unconquerable, but cowards probably.

I sweated healthily in the dusky twilight that set on our empire. If I reached my thumb to the end of the street I could touch the orange pregnant sun and poke through, arresting it like a candied apple plucked from the source tree. Linda looked at me and if I wasn't mistaken, she was looking at my legs. I looked away and looked back again at this tank topped cutie baby. She was looking again. I thought I was going to die with honor!

I couldn't believe it, but I asked her something unbelievable.

"Linda! What are you looking at?" She laughed out a loud a crock of glistening bobulets from the caverns of her precious throat. I became rigid with terror.

"Silly! You know that you have the prettiest legs?" I chortled with embarrassment, and proceeded to choke myself, or if I didn't really choke myself, I wanted to, and to rest in peace.

I blushed with a pinkish hue belonging to Japanese plums. I coughed nervously, as her cut figure of beauty was blurry as I could not look at her and swooned again and died. I managed to say, "My sisters say the same thing. That I have girls legs."

"Your legs are prettier than mine," she said, and she roared and brushed her long latent flaxen hair back with her left hand. I laughed but begged her, "Don't tease me!" I thought, if she keeps this up, I won't make it back from my grave this time.

Danny came warbling up from the greenery of shrubs and bushes of holly behind her house, through a swath in the back of the yard he was traversing as he lugged the cage with him carefully, but it swayed.

We waited there, and I stole some more glances at every beautiful curve of her body, and gorgeous face with round healthy cheeks of brown and eyes of blue and lipstick stealing me soul, and she knew I was looking, too.

"Here it is!" Danny said, to her, not to me. He was almost mumbling it, like he too was in total shock from the neck down to the center of the core of the earth itself. Just like me. She suddenly became animated because she knew in her heart that she was murdering us with her vision of existence, and she knew that she was the perfect center of the entire cosmos, just as sure as the center of a Titleist golfball was the instrumentality of foul poison.

"Oh my gawd!" she yiped. "It's so cute!"

"Yes, it is," Danny said, like Goldfinger. I looked at him, my ally against the Buzzy Miller peril, and he was sneaking peeks at Linda's overall essence just like I was. So I resumed my vigilant body-staring also. Danny was stiffened with pride, like he was a mad scientist and I was his assistant, Lobo, or something, to do his bidding. And here was Linda, gaping at the outer space monster that our little Spock was. I looked away from the luscious Linda for a second to look at Spock. His teary sad eyes became joyful upon looking at me, just as if a dog just as domesticated would perk up his ears like radar with delight at this amount of slight attention. Danny pulled him out of the cage and cradled him.

"Do you want to hold Mr. Spock?" he asked her. I saw him lift it into Linda's maternal blossoming arms and bosom with it squirming a bit, but still the most gentle thing you ever saw. I found myself saying "Awwww" like a little idiot that I was. Danny didn't say anything but closed the door to the cage temporarily. Linda held Mr. Spock in her arms.

"He's the cutest little thing!" she cooed. "I know," was what both Danny and I said.

"So, you don't think he's too weird?" I asked. Danny laughed. Hey, pal, this is between you and me. I'll fight you to the death in a parallel universe to win the hand of the fair Linda, who once probably dated the silver surfer. I mean this was a galactic tag team match between Mercury and Jupiter, vying for her attention because she was so blond and everything else that comes with that, and full of life. And every now and then she looked at me. Me more than Danny, who was probably now my nemesis.

"He's licking my face!" she chortled. I looked at her cute butt and legs and firm waist and top and neck and shoulders and all of that. I was growing up, I guessed.

Linda patted the little fellow from Orion's belt, and we chucked our little buddy back in the safety and security of his cage, which he seemed to favor more than running around loose. I wondered how the little fellow scaled that wall. Did he have psionic powers that whisked him over, canceling and nulling out gravity? He didn't seem to be any different than our dachshund or Johnny and Donald's dog. That's why we thought he was a mangy dog at first,

but now, revelations of distorted dimensional planes of gravitational fields and all this, and what do we know?

He may have servos built into his system, implanted from the voyagers who were traversing the galaxy right as we sat here, eyeing Linda's legs and face and everything in between. These voyagers were launching an invasion which would doubtlessly lead to a worldwide incident. Galactic planet smashing proportions. I asked Danny now that Linda was cartwheeling again and laughing and jiggling and bouncing all over the place, arresting us with her liveliness, "Danny, do you still have those dreams about the invasion of Sherwood Forest by probes and ships landing in Jones Creek to take back Mr. Spock?"

He nodded yes. "Maybe that is what has been hypnotically implanted in us to alleviate such a misfortune?" I sounded really scientific, I thought. Danny would outdo me though.

I noticed Danny had laid off the ognibeanie-weanies and ngrok-n-griks for the nonce. Not in front of cooing Linda, jumping up and down on the divan of the green lawn.

"It's really from the moon?" she asked. Danny looked at me and smiled. I was about to answer, and Danny said, "It's from the moon alright. The moon, and Mars, and Aldebaren."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. I continued. "All we know is what the old British sci-fi movies say, 'It's not of this earth.'"

Linda whispered, "Not of this earth," in a mimicking fashion, but in awe and wonderment. It barked out a weird call that we affectionately labeled, "The Vulcan War Whoop."

"Wow!" Linda yelled and sat up from a side straddle hop. She had long since given the creature back to Danny, but it seemed to take to her. I brought up the subject again. "Danny," I said, "Have you really been dreaming the same thing I have?"

"You mean, about legions of ships, squadrons, zooming their way through hyperspace towards Jones Creek? They wouldn't be able to fit their ships in this whole neighborhood." I nodded. I thought about it some more and realized, he IS right. But, what if they landed on the outskirts, near the parish line, in the woods? I still believed they were coming, crossing seamless lines of unplumbed galactic space. Legions. Squadrons.

"Buzzy Miller stole Mr. Spock, but we got him back," Danny said. Linda looked at us both. "Not you two superheroes?" We both began blushing a shade of puce.

"Mercury and Jupiter," Danny managed to say.

"And we're putting him on Buckskin Bob. When we go on TV for our muscular dystrophy carnival." Linda laughed deeply, throaty, sexy.

"Far out..." she wheedled.

"It should be before the invasion," I said. Linda looked at me quizzically as she did a hand stand. "The what?"

"Well, I've gotta put him up..." Danny started towards the path through the bushes towards his two storied house, across the street.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," Linda said. "I've gotta go eat supper," she said. I didn't realize she ate. I said, "Me too."

She got up, turned and walked into her front door, under the porch of an orange-brown structure, and the last I saw of her in my bout with staring was her backside walking up the front walk and then she disappeared.

I walked home in the shady back yards that moved under my feet as I traversed properties of neighbors that we all knew. Supper was waiting for me and I must have drunk a gallon of milk before I ate a bite of food.

I read my pulps for a while and watched "Mr. Terrific" eat his pill within his ring. I lay in my plaid bed under the covers and fell asleep. Dreams bled out of me suggesting the invasion again, as the heavens ran over my head, wispy cloudy climes of unreality floated before my shunted eyes, as occlusions of strangeness afforded themselves to me.

I could see the metal hulls like locust shells of the gigantic tarrying for position, shining from Andromeda far off. I could see the bay windows with shadowy figures milling about but steadfast in their stances. I zoomed into the point of the wing attack closing in on our solar system. I whizzed by the huge hulls, cigar shaped monstrosities adequately borrowed from pulp fiction. I waved to the people in the enormous width of borrowed space and air within sealed hulls. I dogged myself in my sleep for not alerting our highest authorities about the upcoming invasion. Why would they have left our beloved dog from the dogstar behind in the first place? Did their probe ships have to shag out of Jones Creek landing zones because some ruffians like Buzzy Miller and Steve Smithsons and his little devilish brother, motocross legend Davey. That they had embarked upon an empire collapsing dynasty. They were subliminally controlling the alien creatures that were now zooming across hurtling gallops of space and time folded neatly like the underwear in my drawer.

I tossed and turned because I knew that these dreams were getting more intense, and with the additional fraying of my senses by the added elements however despicable, of the notorious bullies in the neighborhood that had actually laid hands on my little space creature, Spock, I was starting to feel these once soothing dreams as horrendous night gaunts.

* * * *

I woke up in the white shadow of the bedroom. I looked out the window from my bed, through the curtains at the luminescent luster pitching forth from the streetlight that we had knocked with sticks every time that we had tented out in my back yard or someone else's, and didn't feel safe. What with the Buckskin Bob show coming up, that didn't seem to have anything to do with it. We were just going to display our surprise to the modern and civilized world as the cameras captured the essence of Mr. Spock in front of thousands of youngsters, and perhaps some scientists at the university as well. Word would get out, and then we would be shuttled to faraway lands and do more television coverage. But did any of that matter if there was an invasion to come that was being ingrained and etched in my mind, and Danny's as well, at some undefinable time in the near future, to scoop up Mr. Spock, perhaps raid the television station and blow the entire area to smithereens with a scalding hot white death ray, just for good measure?

I managed to fall back asleep, and was calming down within my comfortable sheets. I managed to dream about Linda Landiston with a welling of lust for her unbridled body in my own youthful way.

I managed to hold back on invasions this time, until I woke up and rejoined the suburban experiment in this giant ant farm that we all really were.

Chapter Eighteen

That morning his own evil woke Buzzy Miller from his sleep, a man who still thought about what he had done. He wanted that thing back. He couldn't remember what it was called, but he was determined to get the piece of interstellar madness back in his back yard. With the help of his minions of punkness, perhaps he could do it. He was not as mean as he was earlier. He actually talked to his mother now, and didn't even threaten to kill her as she brought him breakfast in bed. He had prayed to his Easy Rider poster, and to his Bad Company albums. To get back that piece of solar system debris back. But something had definitely changed within himself. He vowed he would never harm it. And he would damned well make sure if Davey Smithsons stole it again, that he wouldn't do anything to it. It was, in a word or two, neat and cool.

That morning awoke Davey Smithsons from his sleep, a boy who still thought about killing spacedog. Kill the spacedog, ran through his mind numerous times, like a swirling of medulla-drugs. Kill the outer-space horse-puppy. Kill the ball of goldfish fur. Make him strangle on backyard mud. Make him bleed green if he don't already bleed orange. Make it cut into little pieces and carry the head around, stuff it full of pine needles and hang it on

the wall. He seemed a bit obsessed with it, and would do the bidding of his puppetmaster from the big boyos, Buzzy, the rock'n'roll pirate of heavy tunes and big beer drinking. His own brother would never be as bad as Buzzy. He loved that name, Buzzy. He wanted to be like Buzzy but he was wondering if Buzzy wadn't turnin pussy about everything. It didn't seem like he wanted to go out stealin and shopliftin Penthouses and Playboys anymore. Swiping charm bracelets for the fine girls. Swipin' money from his old lady. Stealing stuff from school lockers down at the Junior High. Fightin' the other hippies. Smoking Marlboros, much less smokin' pot. Drinking Southern comfort until you puked. That's what Davey liked. All those things. Tooling around in that dealer's GTO with the stereo flying out haze of nutz.

* * * *

A myriad of personalities were blurred into families with siblings and kids and dogs and cats and tropical fish and lawns and everything that subsisted in the soil of this neighborhood so easily named like all the other neighborhoods. Oaks of Kingsbridge, or Knights of England Estates. Lions Den Estates. Goodwood Estates. Why did they all have to have royal sounding names, wondered everyone. All the parents gave birth to their kids like the Greek gods birthed children from their heads, or from the eyebrow of Zeus. The parents plunked down their mortgage notes and trimmed their lawns and cultivated their own lives. They raised their pets and raised their kids and sank their knees into the pillars of their houses' foundations. Whole new lives began from the day they moved all that they owned into these new wooden and brick structures in this zoning ordinance of a subdivision. Kids began scurrying around the block and seeking out other little kids to ride big wheels and topple bikes with training wheels. Parents met the new kids' parents.

Relationships formed. Backyards were mowed incalculable times. And thus began the completed neighborhood, all but a spattering of empty lots where magic still existed.

What possible effect could an extraterrestrial mangy dog or goldfish miniature horse have on a sedate suburb in the middle of Louisiana? Whose lives could be affected? What kids could wonder about the uncertainty of the universe from what he scavenged in Jones Creek drainage ditch among the weeds and bullrushes? What skullduggery came afoot in this benign serfdom in lower America? Was it a treasure or was it a mutant? Or both?

I wondered all these things as I went about my day of the shank end of summertime, before the eternal strife of school would beam down from somewhere to force me to walk to another year of tutelage and education. I ate two million bologna sandwiches that summer, this time in my life. I watched Twilight Zone reruns and Gilligan's Island like my life depended on brain dullage and escaping the heat outside that was insufferable. I mowed two trillion lawns that summer as I looked at my collection of Estes rockets that had pierced space and given me nosebleeds, right next to my model of the USS Hornet Aircraft Carrier and a scale model of the lunar module and Apollo capsule that I got for a dime and my mother had to cancel the rest of the stuff that engorged our mailbox in the companies' desire to take every dime my parents had. How many funny tapes did we make on my dad's reel to reel tape recorder, with the help of haunted house records and sound effects of multiple cats and ghouls and ghosts trampling through rotted doors.

How many Halloweens had come and gone since I was a kid forced to dress up like a hound dog and get my tail trampled, vestigial that it was? How many Christmases came about where that go-cart or minibike that was supposed to be mine was still sitting at the dealer? How many candybars were devoured? How much chocolate milk was sank into my throat? Now, I didn't seem to think about these things. Everything seemed to weigh on the Buckskin Bob show on Channel 7. The studio was downtown and we were all going to pee in our pants in front of two trillion people. We were going to giggle like fruits. We were going to forget the money we made at our world famous muscular dystrophy carnival. We were going to die of fright in front of the big man himself, Buckskin. We were

going to forget how our mouths worked. We were going to do the most unforgivable thing ever: forget to bring Mr. Spock, the space pet from Mars. What if Mrs. Gregor wouldn't let us put him in the car? I knew how she was about things like her new cars. I would have to speak to Danny about that. We had to get together, because it seemed we hadn't been hanging around, and I even seemed to begin missing those ognibeaniweanies and meatsweller routines and ngrok-n-griks and all that silliness. Pig grunts at the dinner table, and the last night of the world when we would camp out and drift off into the vastness of space with Mr. Spock's interstellar telepathy and antigrav nodules built in to his hide aiding us. Yes, we had to gather together somewhere, around a landscaped corner of a front yard, in the shade of a brutal sun, and talk about what we would do when we became so famous that we were going to be more popular than the Beatles. Or Gilligan.

* * * *

The days counting down to our appearance on the show were passing fast. Danny fed Mr. Spock his Vulcan lettuce and Klingon cat food. With every day that passed I not only continued to have more intense invasion dreams, but could hardly wait to stand in front of those television cameras in Buckskin Bob's Storyland Cabin. For my image to spill out to 5 billion people if the television images got around the earth that much. But this was a local show, and didn't that mean just around this area? This forsaken paradise? Like just around the block, there I would be, Mr. Mike Kern. And over there, in the Gregors' den, there I would be also. And over there, on the other side of town, where people hadn't even heard of me. Same thing. And just how would Mr. Spock's image come across, spilling into neighborhood after neighborhood?

Danny came over. I stood with him on the bricks in my father's front yard, like the retarded man waving and holding his broom. He had just one thing to tell me.

"Mr. Spock is pregnant," he said.

I said, "What?"

"It's a SHE, not a he, from outer space."

"How do you know?" He smirked at me, as if I didn't know.

"My old man, the doctor, figured it out." He continued, "He couldn't believe that we didn't guess it or figure it out before. He said something about how he's, I mean ... she's, configured. Reproductive system." He added, "He's fascinated by her."

"Did you tell him that we were going to put her on TV?" I asked earnestly. The secret.

"No. That's our secret, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. Danny left without so much as a pig grunt or an ognibeaniweanie. Must be in a bad mood. But wonder of wonders, she's pregnant, I thought. Well, we can't change her name now. I wished I had discussed this predicament with Danny. I was determined to stick with the name we gave her/him. We couldn't call her Lieutenant Uhura, now, right? What would we do with outer space puppies?

Then it hit me. A whole new species on earth! We would march our Mr. Spocks across the seven continents on our famous journey to foreign zoos. Our monster from the stars would soon be nursing her babies from those weird arrangement of four nipples that we had seen on her. That was all we remembered from our famous "first inspection."

But what if she got pregnant after she was in our care? My dachshund Snoopy could have done it. Or Danny's poodle, or Johnny's famous dog, Rocky Raccoon! We would have the first instance of outerspace aliens breeding with earth stock. Just like I Married a Monster From Outer Space and a million other movies.

But then the lineage would be marred, not pedigreed Martian, or whatever.

Chapter Nineteen

I forgot to tell Danny that my father had banned the Space-dog from his

toolshed, or anywhere near the house. I didn't understand why. I mean, this was the same silverhaired man who let me get my own wood and build my own dilapidated treehouse. And I feared that the vast integrated network of Buzzy Miller and Steve Smithsons might have figured out again where Mr. Spock was.

Danny did mention to me earlier that he had changed the hiding place of the cage, just because Danny had a sharp crisp mentality that thought of espionage type stuff like that ahead of time. Outthink the punks, he told me. I concurred.

I stood out on the bricks, and that's when I first spotted the government van. It was unmarked, so I really had no way of knowing that it WAS a government van. But I wasn't dumber than Baby Huey. And there that van was. It was brown, hardly an outstanding or rude color. The windows were tinted darkly. It was just parked on the side of the corner down there, Braeburn Dr. and Sheraton. I looked for any telescopic sights, any radar. Didn't seem to be any antennae sticking out. I tried not to look too hard at it. Undoubtedly, if it was a government surveillance team, I didn't want to look suspicious.

I resigned myself to walk inside and wait for those last few excruciatingly slow hours to pass until our famous world premier of Buckskin Bob.

I got a call from Donald. "Hey, Mike," he said, "Tomorrow's the day. Can I dress up like Mae West?" I laughed.

"No, Donald, but do an impersonation of her in front of Buckskin Bob. He'll love that."

"Yeah." He was serious.

"Whose mother is driving us to the studio?" he asked.

"I guess Danny's mother. My mother certainly won't. My dad banned Mr. Spock from the house. So it's a good thing Danny took him when he did."

He said yea, had to go and hung up. That night I dreamt what was now a silver tinted clear realm of spaceships in formation. All jockeying for position around the outer rim of the solar system. I couldn't sleep too good, as I sat up in my maelstrom of sheets. The moon glared a phosphor cartoon image through my green plaid curtains. I wondered about my little space puppy. Was he knowing about the government men out to take him away? Did he know all the countries on earth were dying to get their hands on him, to tie his, rather, her paws to a gurney and dissect him to see how his esophagus works, to see how his bone structure is. I shuddered at that thought. I tried to look out the window to see if that van was still there. I managed to see what I thought was that corner of the street, down to the far left of our house. It wasn't there. I looked to the right. Was that van there the same one?

We met in front of Danny's house. Thank the ninth century god of Yule that Donald wasn't dressed up like Mae West. I was showing the plain brown unmarked van to Danny, and just down the street was a white one, same exact type, but different color.

"Come on boys," Mrs. Gregor said. Danny wielded the cage into the back seat of the Pontiac Bonneville. Johnny got in, acting goofy, like he always did in front of Mrs. Gregor. Donald and he fought each other over room.

"Danny, son, you're going to have to put your little friend in the back seat." Danny gave a Bronx cheer in disgust.

"Oh, you mean Donald?" Johnny said. Donald gave him a knucklebooger.

"Cut it out, Donald!" Johnny argued, whined. Mrs. Gregor was getting no patience with us. I sat in the back. Danny put the cage in the trunk.

"Don't worry dear, it'll be alright," she said. We backed out the driveway slope and into the street and we were on our way.

Mrs. Gregor was smoking her Virginia Slim and saying,

"Danny, we sure have been getting a lot of weird calls lately." I came to attention.

"Do you mean, calls and hangups? Our family has had the same thing."

I looked out the rearview window and both vans were behind us. I could see two men with mirrored sunglasses on right behind us in the white van.

"I think we're being followed, mother," Danny said. She laughed. "What

do you mean, dear? You've got to be joking."

"Those are government men. They've been outside our houses and down the street doing surveillance on us probably ever since they got the word we had an extraterrestrial with us." He was serious. I was serious.

"Oh darling, there are no government people after you for that poor thing in the trunk." She laughed again. She puffed away. She flicked the ash out the crack in the Bonneville's window. Johnny coughed in the secondary smoke. Donald nudged him.

"Cut it out Donald, we're being followed by government men."

"Oh. Okay," Johnny said, and with a hard nudge, bumped him again. Johnny let out another "ow."

"Cut it out you two back there. You're going on television. Danny, do you have the muscular dystrophy carnival money?"

"Yes ma'am." He checked his pockets. "Oh shit," he said. "I forgot it, worrying about these government vans that are on our tail." Mrs. Gregor's sweet face turned a mass of mean wrinkles.

"Well, I'll give you the money this time, but I'm going to talk to you when we get home, do you hear me mister?"

"Yes, ma'am," Danny said. Johnny and Donald giggled.

Chapter Twenty

"Come on, we gotta get down there!" Buzzy was saying to Davey Smithsons. Davey was choking on a butt of a Marlboro.

"Okay, I'm gittin' inna car." The drug dealer revved the Goat GTO. Steve was passed out in the back seat. They had been drinking two days in a row, skippin out on christian good times for the devil's business.

"Shag it, butthole!" Davey said and Buzzy almost backhanded the little creep. "You sure it was that kid that talked to Donald Haroldson that got this right?" Buzzy said to Davey. Davey nodded.

"Sure I'm sure!"

"And they are gonna be on Buckskin Bob's show today?"

"I said I'm sure!" Davey Smithsons said.

"Let's shag it, dude," Buzzy told the long haired hippie. He punched it and steered as they burnt rubber a hundred feet down Government Street.

"I hope my little friend will like his new home," Buzzy said. To no one in particular he had said that with a calmness even though all their hearts were pumping.

"I'll steal it right in front of TV an' all," Davey said.

Buzzy said, "That's my man!" They continued all the way down Government.

* * * *

Mrs. Gregor stopped the car at the light downtown on Government Street, turned into Channel 7 studios and parked where the visitors parking was.

"Okay, let's go y'all. Johnny, Donald, Danny, Mike. You want to look your best." Danny grimaced.

He asked his mother to pop the trunk. He got out the Space-doggie. I looked in the cage and there he, rather she, was, her tail wagging, her scales glistening yellow ochre all pretty.

"I swear that's the most wretched-looking creature I ever saw."

We walked into the studios and Mrs. Gregor smiled at the receptionist.

"May I help you?" I gasped in awe of the power of this place. There were inordinate plaques hanging on the wall, big pictures of the Chairman of the Board, general manager. Certificates, fancy furniture, water cooler.

"Yes, my sons are scheduled for the Buckskin Bob show today."

"Okay. What did they do?" the receptionist asked.

"What did they do?" Mrs. Gregor asked.

Danny nudged his mother. "Muscular Dystrophy Carnival."

"Right. They held one of those carnivals in the back yard. Sherwood Forest." She cleared her throat. Like royalty.

"Okay. What is that over there?" the receptionist said, pointing to Mr.

Spock's cage.

"Oh, that's just their pet they want to Show and Tell with Buckskin. Is that alright?"

"Sure! What kind of animal is it?" the pretty receptionist cooed to Danny. Danny was looking at her bosom.

"What happened to the government vans?" I asked Danny in our secrecy of superhero language.

"Wait a minute, I've got to tell her what it is."

"It's just their pet coyote or something," Mrs. Gregor said. "I think it's a stray dog, to tell you the truth." She laughed.

"It's from outer space," I said. Danny nodded no. "Shh. Don't tell her that, we'll never get on." The receptionist blushed.

Mrs. Gregor sheepishly said, "Oh, these kids are full of imagination." The receptionist couldn't see what was in it, because it was facing away. She smiled and said, "Go in there and wait."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

And Donald said, "Hey lady, thanks a lot," just like Mae West. Johnny backed up and punched him.

"Cut it out, big boy," Donald said.

"Come on, let's go," Danny said. We walked down the hallway.

Chapter Twenty-one

"Look at these assholes in those vans," Davey Smithsons said, as they converged on the parking lot.

"Hurry up, the show is starting!" Buzzy said. Buzzy was acting like he took some black mollies or something.

"I'm gettin there. Here, we're here." They looked around. All they saw in the parking lot were these plain weird vans. With men in em dressed up in suits and shit. Lookin paranoid. Lookin strange.

"Let's get out. Hey, I want out!" Davey said.

Buzzy turned around in the shotgun passenger side seat. He waved his Marlboro at the little brat. Davey's older brother was still passed out. "Look, you idiot! We've got to sit here for a minute and make sure everything is cool, you dig?"

"Yeah, I dig," the little punk said. They sat there waiting for minutes to tick by. Finally they walked out of the car, because cop cars were beginning to slowly form a line into the parking lot. Buzzy thank god had just put out his Marlboro, they thought all at once.

"Okay, I don't know what is going on, probably just a funeral or something." Three plainclothes cars unmarked came in front of the four cop cars and the three sheriff's deputies. Buzzy and Davey walked into the lobby.

* * * *

The Buckskin Bob show was going on now. We were all standing in the wings. I came to realize the whole set was even cheesier and more fake than I realized from TV. And to think, when I was a kid, I believed it was a real cabin. It was cartoon time, and then we would be on. There was a little girl crying over there with her mommy, holding a baton.

"Shut that kid up!" Buckskin shushed. The cameras were scary to me. I heard a commotion outside. Buckskin and the associate producer came over to us. They hadn't even asked us about Mr. Spock or anything. Danny had his hands on the cage, patting it. We felt soothing, even though I was so nervous I felt like I was going to pee in my pants. Just like when I was in cub scouts.

"And now kids, it's time to honor some children that held their own muscular dystrophy carnival like you can." The associate producer walked us out there. Danny carried the cage by its handle. That's when I saw Buzzy Miller. I must be dreaming. There he was, over by that equipment and ropes and stuff.

Donald was laughing uncontrollably.

We were there, just like we had imagined. Right in front of the cameras, with our secret weapon.

"Oh you kids have brought something for Show and Tell, I hear."

"Yes sir." Danny was the spokesman, because he was the most likely not to wet his pants or pick his nose, I imagined. I looked quickly to the wings, and there was Mrs. Gregor, seeing her child in show business. Then the government men and cops lined up the outskirts of the sound stage. As if they were waiting for us. Coming to get Mr. Spock, our beloved mascot.

"But first we would like to tell you that our carnival at 16486 Charington Drive made over \$55 at its location." Danny said it wonderfully, I thought, like Mercury or Jupiter, our superheroes. I wondered if Danny saw all the government men.

Buckskin burped, and hid it well. He didn't seem to notice the cop convention that I saw standing in the wings like the town church choir or something.

"Thank you, Danny. On behalf of Jerry Lewis and the Muscular Dystrophy organization, I would like to take this money and pledge it to the muscular dystrophy organization."

I saw Buckskin Bob pocket the money.

"And now it's time for Show and Tell."

The little girl started bawling again.

"Yes, Buckskin," Danny said, and he opened the cage and said some more, "This is a creature that we found wounded in Jones Creek Ditch. We think he's from outer space."

Danny held him up as Buzzy Miller rushed the stage. Davey Smithsons kicked an FBI man in the knee. Buckskin took one look at our Mr. Spock and said, "What the fuck is that?" I never saw a look weirder than that.

The cops caved in on us, grabbed Buzzy Miller, and grabbed us as poor Mrs. Gregor looked on and the cameras toppled, it happened so fast, that ... I didn't even have time to blink.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ever since then, we have been sad, but excited. We all made the news everywhere. I even met Walter Cronkite and Tom Brokaw. Mr. Cronkite is really a nice man. They took Mr. Spock and us up to Langley Field in Virginia or someplace like that for a couple of weeks. Then they let our parents come up and visit us after they did all these tests on us. Danny and me feel like real movie stars. Important and all. Donald even did his Mae West impression in front of a billion people.

My parents didn't know all this would happen. Mr. Spock had her puppies, and guess what, they looked just like Schroeder, my dog. He must have gotten ahold of Mr. Spock when we had let him out to roam around the back yard. Those government men said I can probably even keep one of them.

I am famous now, but Danny and Johnny and Donald and me don't know how long it will last. After all, Buzzy and them will probably beat us up because they wanted to be on TV or something stupid like that, too.

After it all died down, and our space creature was in safe hands all top secret and all, we started school, and we haven't hunted for golfballs since. I told them about my dreams about legions of silver ships flying through space, but they don't seem to believe me. I believe it. I know they are among us now. I just know it. And they will rescue Mr. Spock, whom they now call something else that I don't even understand and probably never will. Some weird set of names. The government men are real nice and we got to eat ice cream all the time. But now I am home and school sucks real bad. Buzzy hasn't bothered us at all either, I have finally realized. He must have changed. But still, you never know.

My dad never did let me have a minibike.

About the Author

M. F. Korn has sold six novels, and in the past two decades has

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