
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 19

Halloween

2007

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Editorial

Welcome to Halloween!

In theory, two of our issues a year should be specials of some kind, so that we can still justify calling the magazine a quarterly. This year, we've decided to have a Halloween special. Luckily, we had some suitably scary submissions! "Pumpkin Jack" is the most appropriate, for obvious reasons, and so that's where we begin the issue. It's a story by Laura Bickle, about the discoveries a pair of bored teenagers make in and around their grandma's isolated home. I'm not totally familiar with the way that pumpkins grow in real life, but there's definitely something strange about these ones!

Next, Wayne Summers asks us to climb into "The Walled Garden", if we dare. I don't want to spoil his surprises, so I won't say much more than that, other than to note how good it is to read that Henrick's is still a going concern after that terrible incident with the shop window dummies a few years ago.

Something we've done differently in this issue is to divide the stories up – very roughly (some may even have been bruised in the process) – into sections. In the past it wasn't really necessary, with most issues just being one long chunk of nonsense from me, but with more and more stories appearing in each issue, it started to seem like we'd be doing readers a favour if we made them a bit easier to navigate. So after the calendar-friendly fright section we segue into our series of fantasy stories!

I'll note up front that our first fantasy story, "Rural Legend", by Eric R Lowther, features horses and wolves, just like "Winter's Warm Blood" last issue. It's an unfortunate coincidence, but both stories were too good to reject on that account alone, and in any case I think we're on a run of something like nineteen issues in a row featuring robot stories – a mere two sets of wolves and horses seems half-hearted in comparison! This is a great story that takes its time to draw you in, and is as much of a gentle giant as its protagonist. It's a story that pats you on the back and says, "You ain't doing so bad. Just keep on trying your best, and keep on trying to make your best better."

"The Iron Mercenary" is a piece of heroic fantasy in the classic mould by Richard K Lyon and Andrew J Offutt. It is a continuation of their Tiana series, which saw publication as a series of three paperbacks in the late seventies and early eighties. I think this is this story's first publication, but it dates from that period, a time before fantasy became a sub-set of the airport novel and Tolkein's influence pushed Howard's into the toilets and gave it a solid thrashing.

Andrew J Offut of course has had a long career in writing, but when I hear his name it means one thing to me: *My Lord Barbarian*, the cover of which earned me much kudos at school by virtue of its buxom heroine, her own virtues bare save for some tasteful bits of tin over her nipples. (Sadly I can only find the US cover on the internet, which while nice enough in itself lacks that important nostalgia

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #19

Halloween 2007

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factor!) I can only imagine what I would have made of Andrew's *Spaceways* series at that age!

"When the Sun and the Moon Did Not Shine" is from Sam Leng. Saying anything more would give it all away, because it is only a slip of a thing! In the interests of driving readers to our competition, I should mention that Sam has a literary undertaking of her own (her webzine can be read at www.neonbeam.org).

Rounding out this impressive fantasy section is the second of the Tales of Yxning from Bruce Hesselbach. This one details "The Remarkable Life of Yren Higbe", a character who made a brief but intriguing appearance in the first story, "The Tragical History of Weebly Pumrod, Witch Hunter". The stories intersect, but stand alone, so if you have yet to acquire your copy of TQF#18, don't be put off!

Our inaugural science fiction section contains "The Broadest Divide", by David McGillveray. It's an interesting story, in that your view of it – as to whether it is depressing or uplifting – will probably depend on whose side you would take. David doesn't tell you who is right or who is wrong. The chances are even.

I noticed a David McGillveray among the credits in the film section of the *Radio Times*. Could it be the same man? His biography makes no mention of the fact, and being somewhat star-struck I dared not ask about it! Also, if I knew

one way or the other would I feel honour-bound to berate him each time I felt a reviewer had completely missed the point of the latest Adam Sandler/Happy Madison movie, as is so often the case (though to be fair the Sandler reviews in *RT* have been moving in the right direction in recent years)?

"Who Picked the Pope's Nose?" by Dan Kopicow doesn't strictly fit our remit – there is no fantasy element (so my embarrassed apologies to anyone whose stories I have rejected solely on that account), and it isn't all that adventuresome. But he was kind enough to let us publish one of his previous stories, "The Bearded Avenger", and this one too tickled my fancy, so I indulged myself. Not knowing which pigeonhole to shove it into, I remembered hearing about some new-fangled type of writing called Bizarro.

Wow, longest editorial ever! There's no room left to talk about the way this issue has a green cover, just like the previous one!

As usual, I'm going to end up giving unfairly short shrift to our returning features, "After All", by "Magnificent" Mike Thomas, and "Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown", by John "Jackanory" Greenwood, and that is unfair, because they're the rock upon which year four of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* has been built. They deserve all the gratitude I have to give, and they have it! – *SWT*

News

Birmingham Town Hall

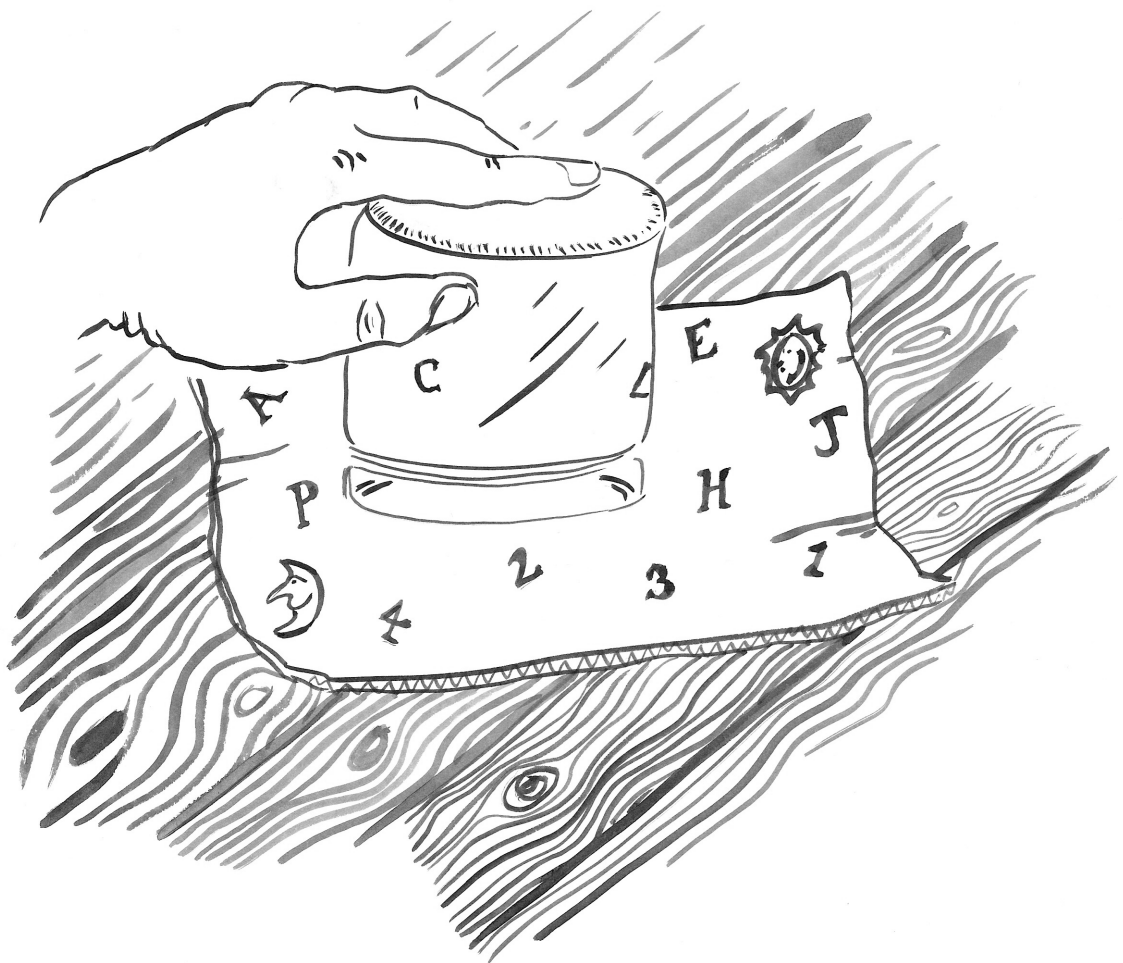
With all the news about the reopening of Birmingham's Town Hall, it seems strange that few people have mentioned the results of an archaeological dig on the site.

The team, led by an associate of the Tehran Museum of Antiquities, found evidence of a pre-human settlement of surprising technological

advancement. The team requested permission to investigate further but will have to wait until the Central Library is demolished to proceed. Finds included some ancient instruments, a cosmic communicator (of the usual kind), a mummified space cat and a set of space tools that were presumably left behind by the original builders. It is not known at present whether this discovery is linked to the mysterious church buried only metres away from that location.

Pumpkin Jack

Laura Bickle



Max always said that the spirits got Uncle Roger in the end. That explanation covered the hazards of alcoholism, as well as the creatures that Roger provoked at his illegal distillery. It was safer to say it that way, and no less than the absolute truth.

The summer that the spirits came for Roger might have been the most infuriatingly boring one Max remembered, up until the end of August. Max and his sister, Trudy, sat on Grandma Gert's back porch as the gibbous moon crawled over the trees. Gert had gone to bed, her snoring audible through the screen door.

Illuminated by a citronella candle, Trudy rested her black-polished fingertips on the base of an overturned empty jam jar. She pushed it back and forth over a piece of cardboard labelled with the alphabet, the numbers zero through nine, a few words, and a smiling sun and moon in black marker. It was her best recollection of the Ouija board Gert had found under her bed two weeks ago, now reduced to ashes at the bottom of the trash barrel.

"C'mon, Max." She jerked her head to the board, bobbing her burgundy ponytail. "Ask it a question."

Max rolled his eyes and put two fingers on the bottom of the jam jar planchette.

"Max. You said you would play."

"Okay, *Gertrude*." Trudy was named for Grandma Gert: overbearing, polyester-encased Grandma Gert snoring in the back of the house with a copy of the King James Bible under her pillow. He would never let Trudy forget it.

Trudy stuck out her pierced tongue. Max relented and parked his hands on the jar. It wasn't like there was anything else to do.

Their Grandma Gert's house was tucked away down a gravel road in the Appalachian foothills, about as far away from civilisation as Max could fathom. There was no internet. No other teens their age. No cable. Just three staticky local channels picked up on rabbit ears. No pizza delivery. The land curling around Gert's cedar-shingled farmhouse was lushly green, full of throaty bullfrogs, and dizzy fireflies.

It was a perfect hell for a teenager.

"Is Dad okay?" Trudy asked the improvised

oracle. Max pushed the meandering jar to the word "YES" and hovered there.

"Is he coming home soon?" she asked.

Max paused, then orbited the "YES" again. That seemed to soothe Trudy, who sat back on her heels. Their father had been deployed to the Middle East, and had sent them to stay with Gert until he got back.

Trudy closed her eyes and worked her mouth around a wish: "Spirits, please bring Dad home soon."

Her voice had an odd little echo to it that seemed to silence the bullfrogs and the cicadas. Max stifled a shiver, thoughts racing to break this strange, silent mood, to pierce the gravity of Trudy's wish that seemed at once simple and ominous.

The corner of Max's mouth quirked upward. "Spirits, is Trudy gonna grow up to be just like Grandma Gert?"

Trudy held her breath, her knuckles white on the bottom of the jar. Max blatantly shoved it to "YES".

"Ass-clown. You pushed it."

"I did not. The spirits spoke."

Trudy wrinkled her nose. "Spirits, is Max ever gonna get a girlfriend and get some action?"

"Hey," he protested weakly.

The jam jar was on the move. Underneath its lip, it spelled out a series of letters that Trudy dutifully scribbled down on a piece of notebook paper: "N-O-T-W-I-T-H-B-R-A-C-E-S."

"Heh. It says 'not with braces'."

Max aimed his flashlight under his chin and gave her an exaggerated sneer, exposing his orthodontics. He clacked his teeth together like a villain from a Bond movie. The orthodontist continued to lie to him about how long he'd have them. It was two years going on four. He'd kept his mouth closed for his yearbook photo.

"Hey, what's that?" Trudy gestured to the edge of the meadow, where a saffron light glinted in the thick darkness of the forest.

Max squinted. It was too big to be a firefly, and it was stationary.

"Maybe it's aliens," he half-joked. He *really* hoped it was an alien spacecraft. Perhaps he'd be lucky enough to get his ass abducted to some-

place with an internet connection. At this rate, an anal probing from an androgynous alien would be as close as he would get to a girlfriend.

Trudy hopped down from the porch and stuffed the cardboard oracle and the jam jar underneath the porch lattice. "C'mon. Let's find out."

Max cocked one ear back to the house. Gert was still sawing logs. He picked up his flashlight.

It wasn't like there was anything better to do.

Trudy's combat boots swished through the tall grass, illuminated by a startlingly-bright moon. The night buzzed full and clear around them. Max switched off the flashlight; there was more than enough light for crossing the field, and the flashlight seemed to draw bugs. He mashed a mosquito alighting on his arm. Deer, sketchily-drawn, grazing near the pond, paid them no mind. Ahead, in the darkness of forest, fireflies swam, and past them, that citron light they'd spied from the porch.

"Oof."

He tripped, landing in a tangle of gangly limbs on the ground. Max felt something stinging and wet and pulpy against his chest, something wound around his foot. He thrashed in panic, imagining snakes and thinking he might have been shot.

"Christ, Max," Trudy hissed. "Wake the dead, why don't you?"

"Aaaaah..." he began, scrambling for the flashlight, switched it on: "...oh," he finished. The beam illuminated a vine curled over his sneaker and orange goop on his T-shirt. Around him lay the remnants of a shattered pumpkin.

"Smooth move, Ex-Lax." Trudy wrinkled her nose. "What the hell is that smell?"

Max sniffed. Something dark and fruity and sharp. "I think it's me."

"Did you piss yourself?"

"No," he barked. "I think... I think it's booze."

Trudy cautiously bent down to sniff Max's shirt. The acrid smell of alcohol radiated from the pumpkin pulp. Max reached up and smeared some pulp on her jeans leg. Trudy squealed.

Max scanned the ground with the flashlight.

This corner of the field was covered in dark vines cradling orange orbs as big as his head. Jeez, it was a pumpkin patch. He clambered to his feet, brushing bits of orange skin from his T-shirt.

Trudy picked up a pumpkin and shook it. It made a sloshing sound. Max took it from her, scanned the surface with the flashlight. He fingered a tiny plug cut into the top, pulled it out, and sniffed. Inside, it smelled sweet, fermented. Max licked the inside of the plug. It tasted like rubbing alcohol mixed with pumpkin pie filling. Not entirely disagreeable, but disconcerting.

"Wanna taste?"

Trudy eyed the gourd dubiously, then stuck her finger in. It came out with a bit of stringy pulp and a seed stuck to it. Gingerly, she licked the thin liquid off, made a face.

"Ugh. It tastes like wood varnish."

Max scanned the vines around them. Each one sloshed a bit when he touched it with the toe of his sneaker. "I wonder who put these here."

Trudy glanced at the light in the woods and raised an eyebrow.

The yellow light, shining through the trees, radiated dark and light stripes throughout the woods. As they approached, Max could hear the buzz of the electricity behind the light, the hum of a small generator shaking the dew from the leaves. The light shone from a dilapidated shed, grey and mossy with age. It leaked out in fingers from the corrugated steel roof, shining around the rim of a window boarded shut and a door left slightly ajar. Something moved within the shack, interrupting the flow of light and casting flitting shadows.

"Someone's in there," Trudy hissed.

Max scanned the forest. Behind the shed, he could make out the dark outline of their uncle Roger's pickup truck.

"Look. It's Roger."

The opening of the door widened, and Roger came tripping out, carrying a cardboard box that clinked as he walked. Roger's balding head glistened with sweat, and he laboured to lift the box into the back of the pickup. From this distance, Max was surprised by how weak Roger seemed;

up-close, Max had always found him to be intimidating.

Roger lumbered over to the generator, fiddled with it, and the noise and light suddenly died. The absence of that bright light left blinding smears on Max's vision.

He nearly yelped when he heard the engine of the pickup turn over, and headlights flooded the trees. Max fought the urge to run, stayed motionless as the truck slowly began to back away. Max watched it bounce across the field, disappearing onto the gravel road that led into town.

By now, his sight had adjusted to the darkness. Beside him, Trudy was gnawing the black fingernail polish from her nails.

"He's gone. Wanna go look?"

Trudy followed him through the thick underbrush to the shed. Max smelled gasoline from the generator, and something more bitter. Carefully, he opened the creaky shed door and shone his light inside.

Glass bottles glistened on shelves made of bricks and boards. His light shined through some of the empty ones, and was absorbed by a ginger-coloured liquid in others. A spider's nest of electrical cords on the dirt floor connected to a

hot plate perched on a table made of plywood. Metal strainers nested around a collection of metal pots, one of which held an acrid mass of pumpkin seeds that made Trudy's nose wrinkle. Corks and bottle caps littered the table.

Max fingered the bottles. They were labelled with a date in black marker and the words "Pumpkin Jack".

Trudy began to giggle. "We found Roger's stash."

"No wonder he's drunk all the time. There must be hundreds of bottles here."

Trudy pulled one from the shelf, wrenched the cork from it. She sniffed the bottle.

"Here, I'll try it first." Max took the bottle from her, gazing dubiously into the green glass. He steeled himself, took a swig. It burnt his throat on the way down, leaving a warm tingling.

"Well?" Trudy asked, crossing her arms.

Max blinked back the watering of his eyes. "It's good," he rasped. "I think." He handed the bottle to her. "Wanna taste?"

Trudy tossed her head back and took a pretty manly slug that wound up spluttered all over the dirt floor.



"Jeezus, Trudy."

She held up a finger to catch her breath. "I'll try again. I need more practice."

★★★

Trudy got better at drinking, and so did Max. Either that, or they cared less about how ridiculous it looked. The pumpkin jack played tricks on him on the way back through the field to the house... Max imagined that the vines were a bit more persistently pulling at his feet than before. He remembered Trudy stomping them with her big combat boots, giggling.

He hushed her as they crept upon Gert's front porch. Roger's truck was nowhere to be seen, and Gert's snoring still bristled through the darkness. Max paid very careful attention to the porch steps, trying to avoid the creaky spots, when Trudy tugged at the sleeve of his T-shirt.

"Max..." she whispered, pointing to the porch floor. The homemade cardboard Ouija board was spread out on the floorboards, the jam jar perched over the "No".

Max rubbed his nose. "I thought we put that away."

Trudy scooped up her oracle and followed him into the house. "Last thing I want is to get caught by Gert."

★★★

Grandma Gert was royally peeved that no one came down to breakfast the next morning. She stood at the foot of the stairs and shouted up: "There are children starving in Africa who would love to join me for breakfast."

Sluggishly, Max crawled out of bed. He rinsed the sticky pumpkin pulp off in the shower and meticulously brushed his teeth, but his tongue still felt furry. He stared into the tin medicine cabinet for something to assuage his thundering headache. The only thing that he could find was his sister's Midol – the label said it had acetaminophen in it. Weighing the severity of his headache, he decided to take a chance on sprouting ovaries, and gulped down four of them.

He made it down the stairs without tripping over his socks. Trudy was sitting at the table, her wet hair seeming more purple than burgundy in

the morning light. Her hands were wrapped around a glass of milk, which she stared into bleakly.

Max tugged her pigtail by way of greeting, and Gert swatted him on the back of the head.

"Ow. What was that for?"

"Your sister has the flu. Be nice to her."

Max raised his eyebrows and smirked. "The flu? So that was you calling the dinosaurs last night?"

Behind Gert's back, Trudy stuck out her pierced tongue. "I hope that it's not contagious."

Max rubbed his stomach. "I dunno. I feel a little under the weather, myself."

Gert, cracking eggs into the iron skillet, hissed.

"Did you burn yourself?" Max asked, loping up to Gert's side.

Gert shook her head, staring down into the skillet. The egg she'd just cracked had oozed onto the hot iron, bubbling up... but it wasn't an egg yolk. It was a clotted mass of blood and stringy egg white.

Trudy gagged and fled from the room. Max heard the screen door slam.

Gert rinsed the defective egg down the garbage disposal, water hissing on the hot iron.

"What was that?" Max asked.

Gert shrugged. "Your great-grandmother would have said that's a sign of bad luck. But, it just means that the egg got fertilised before it was collected."

"Stealthy roosters?"

"Stealthy roosters." Gert smoothed down her turquoise floral-print housecoat and replaced the skillet on the stove. The gas crackled to life, and she rapped another egg into the skillet.

A black eye peered back at her in a mass of stringy red and white. Max swallowed.

"Those are some really stealthy roosters, Grandma Gert."

Gert's eyes narrowed. "Go find your sister and tell her that we're having toast and oatmeal."

Max headed out to the porch. Trudy was sitting on the porch step, her arms wrapped around her knees. In front of her was her homemade Ouija board.

"Trudy," he hissed. "What are you doing?"

Trudy looked up. "It was here when I came out. I thought that we put it away."

Max dredged his memory. He thought so, too. He bent down to scoop up the board and knocked over the jam jar. Too late, he realised that it was full of pumpkin seeds. The bone-white seeds spewed all over the porch with a rattle.

Trudy snatched up the jar before it broke, and stared into it. Max stuffed the cardboard under the porch.

"What're you kids up to?"

Max jerked upright, his thoughts spinning in space faster than the flywheel on a fishing rod. "Uh... looking for skunks." Mentally, he slapped his forehead after he said it, and Trudy rolled her eyes.

Uncle Roger ambled out across the porch boards. The wood squeaked in protest. He didn't look too good. His sun-crinkled, ruddy face seemed somewhat deflated and pale. He sat heavily in the porch swing, wrapping his red bathrobe more closely around himself. He curled his furry toes against some imagined cold.

"Skunks, huh?" There was a trace of wariness in his voice.

"Um, yeah." Max nonchalantly stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I think that I saw something moving under there. I think it's gone, now."

"Mmm." Roger squinted out over the meadow. "Seems there's been a lot of critters running out lately."

Max swallowed. *Busted.*

Trudy opened her mouth, and Max could see the confession boiling up in her throat. He stepped on her bare foot with his heel to silence her.

"See that?" Roger turned his hirsute leg toward them. "Something got me just the other night."

Max leaned forward. On the inside of Roger's left leg was an angry red weal. It seemed to feather out in branches, like frost, and spiralled up nearly to his knee.

"It looks... almost like a burn. Or a jellyfish sting." Max observed. Trudy looked away from the shiny lymph beginning to ooze from it.

Roger snorted. "No jellyfish out here, Max. Just skunks and frogs."

"What happened?"

Roger's bushy brows drew together. "I was just walking out in the field and felt something bite me." The worry mark above his eyes deepened, and in that moment, Max thought he looked a lot like his dad. Longing prickled Max's chest.

"You kids should be careful out here." Roger nodded sagely to himself. "Your dad had a couple of run-ins with critters here."

Trudy leaned forward. "Like what?" Like Max, she was hungry for any scrap of her father.

Roger grinned. "Well, your dad managed to put a skunk in Grandma Gert's mailbox. I think he was about your age, Max. The postman got to it before Gert did, had an allergic reaction, and spent the night in a bath of tomato juice. After that, the post office wouldn't deliver mail out here, and Gert made him walk into town to pick it up at the post office."

Trudy giggled, and Max smiled. He couldn't imagine his father at his age. His dad was always bigger, stronger, reassuring. He couldn't imagine his father having braces.

Roger looked down his thick nose at his niece and nephew, his tone serious. "You kids be careful. You don't know what's out there."

Max kicked a pumpkin seed along a seam in the porch boards, unwilling to meet those eyes that looked like so much like his father's. He finally succeeded in cracking the seed open with his shoe, and hissed when a black beetle came crawling out of the pale shell. It scuttled into the seam and vanished.

★★★

"I think that Roger's pranking us."

Max and Trudy huddled around a jar candle on the porch floor. Night had fallen, and the citronella candle cast moving shadows from the porch swing into the dark.

Trudy's overplucked eyebrows quirked upward. She'd gotten bored this afternoon and had found Gert's tweezers. She now looked permanently surprised. "I dunno, Max. Maybe."

She smoothed down the cardboard with the

lettering. Apprehensively, she rolled the empty jam jar between her hands. They had no fear of discovery tonight... Gert snored lustily in the back of the house, and Roger had dragged himself out of bed and disappeared two hours ago. But anxiety still seeped through her gestures.

"What happened to the seeds?" she asked.

Max bit his lip. "I put the jar back under the porch, and there was nothing there... just bugs."

"Do you think that they... they hatched from the seeds?"

Max shrugged helplessly. He didn't have an answer.

Trudy set the jar mouth-down on the cardboard and rested her fingers on the mottled bottom. A piece of pumpkin seed shell still clung to the interior – they hadn't imagined it. Without prompting, Max placed his fingertips on the jar opposite his sister's.

"Spirits," whispered Trudy, "are you here?"

The jar began to circle slowly, then arced its way to the word "YES" and orbited there.

"Spirits," murmured Max, feeling queasily ridiculous. "Spirits, did you leave the pumpkin seeds here for us?"

The jar circled "YES" more emphatically.

"Spirits, what do you want?"

The glass jerked beneath his fingers, and he sucked in his breath. Trudy furiously scratched the letters on her notepad, trying to keep up with the scrape of the rim on the cardboard despite the awkwardness of having the jar in one hand and her pen in the other. The jar lurched violently, circling in decisive, sharp patterns, until...

It suddenly fell still.

"Oh," said Trudy, staring at the paper.

"What did it say?" Max asked.

"Oh."

"Trudy, what did it say?"

He snatched the paper from her. In Trudy's looping script, it read:

G I V E U S B A C K T H E
P U M P K I N F L E S H
O R W E W I L L T A K E Y O U R S

Give us back the pumpkin flesh, or we will take yours. He mouthed the syllables in his head, but

all that came out of his mouth was a strangled little "Oh."

A small explosion and the tinkle of glass snuffed out the candle. Max could feel splinters peppering his arms. He grabbed Trudy and turned her face away from the sound.

He could hear his breathing, her soft whimper of startlement, and the glass rattling around the wood. In the background, Grandma Gert still snored. Something warm and sticky grated in the glass-dust around his knees.

"You okay?"

"I think so."

Max turned back to the glittering cardboard, his eyes adjusting to the low light. He could see that his knees were bloody.

"Must've been the heat that broke the candle," he reasoned, though it sounded hollow. *Must have been...*

With a soft *pop*, the jam jar planchette fractured and wobbled over onto its side. It rolled off the edge of the porch and disappeared in the weeds.

Trudy's fingers clenched in his T-shirt sleeve. She hauled him around to face the field. "Max, look."

The headlights of Roger's truck bobbed across the field toward the house like a pair of drunken fireflies. The truck swerved and bumped erratically, kicking up clay dust that shimmered colourlessly in the dim light.

"Something's wrong," Trudy hissed, shrinking back against the side of the house.

The truck crashed into Gert's clothesline pole, dousing a headlight and crumpling a fender. Max glimpsed a dark shape fluttering on the hood of the truck, flung away into the darkness by the impact.

"Max." Trudy pointed, her finger trembling.

Something flitted beside it. Something large. He could see red-orange veins stretched through skin as it stepped in front of the last headlight. It hissed.

Roger wrenched open the door, stumbled out. He charged up the porch steps to the house, past Trudy and Max, reeking of booze and sweat and fear. Roger stumbled, arms first, into the door.

The screen ripped open, and glass showered

down upon the porch floor. The storm door had been shut. Trudy squeaked, clapping her hands over her ears, and ducked behind the porch swing.

Glass trickled in a musical ringing from the ruined door frame into the frame. Horrified, Max stared down at Roger's prone body, half-within the dark maw of the house, chewed up by glass teeth, leaking blood onto the floorboards.

The porch light snapped on, and the light drowned the detail of the dark. Max could hear the beep of the pushbutton telephone and Gert's voice, high and tinny with fear as she summoned an ambulance.



Max stared out into the grey morning through the intact glass of the upstairs bedroom window. This time of night, the white not-yet light at the horizon washed everything in shades of grey. Broad black footprints and smears covered the porch in an exquisite graffiti, dusted with a shimmer of glass dust. He tried not to think of its true colour, tried not to think of what colours his father was seeing half a world away.

He missed his dad.

Gert had called from the hospital an hour ago to tell him that Roger would be fine; he just needed some stitches and some time to dry out. He and Trudy had begged to go with them, but there wasn't enough room in the ambulance for everyone.

But whatever had chased Roger was still out there.

Max had left the bedroom light on. Trudy was curled up in an afghan in the overstuffed chair. She'd refused to go to her own room. She slept with her arms crossed over her chest, ponytail limp over one eye, disturbed by her breath. At the side table, a picture of their father smiled back under his helmet, dressed in brown fatigues. His left hand was raised in a wave, his right resting lightly on his weapon.

Tears stung Max's eyes. Dad would know how to handle this. Dad would know how to handle everything.

Something moved below him. Max pressed his nose to the glass.

Something dark and sinuous slipped out from under the porch. Max registered a leathery wing, eyes that burned like a cat's. It crawled up over the stained surface of the deck. Max could make out the unevenness of something like foliage, twining over claws and trailing tail-like after the creature.

It lowered its head to the black stains on the porch floor. A tongue slithered out from its lips, scraped the painted wood.

Max's stomach lurched, and he must have made a noise, for the creature looked up at him with a face so translucently pale he could see sap running beneath it. Its claws flexed, and Max could hear the sound of them splitting the paint.

Max shuddered, imagining the hole in the door. There was nothing to keep it outside. His sweaty fingers moved over the barrel of Gert's shotgun, fished out from under her bed. He wasn't sure that he'd loaded it properly, but it was what his father would have done. Of that, he was certain.

Light washed over the porch, and Max heard the crunch of tyres on gravel. The creature scuttled across the porch and disappeared beneath it.

Trudy stirred, and her eyes widened at her brother holding the gun. Mascara had rubbed off under her eyes, making it look as if she had two shiners.

"Max? What's going on?"

Max swallowed. He'd tell Trudy, but not until morning. "It's Gert and Roger. They're back."



Gert white-knuckled the spatula, brutalising the hash browns with an unnecessary degree of violence.

Trudy and Max sat meekly at the table. Max stared into his glass of curdled milk, too fearful of Gert's wrath to tell her that it had spoiled. He stared at the date on the carton. It was supposed to be good for two more weeks.

"How's Roger?" Max asked quietly.

Gert snorted. "Just like his father. A miserable alcoholic."

"Uh... will he be okay?" Trudy leaned far away from the cast iron skillet as Gert scraped some hash browns into her plate. Gert had seen

her little cardboard creation last night and had smacked the back of her head for bringing filth into her house.

"They say that he'll live." Gert dropped the pan in the sink. "But not if I have anything to say about it."

Max flicked a glance through the ruined front door. He could smell the coppery blood baking into the paint, and he pushed his plate away.

"Can he talk?" Max asked, remembering Roger's wordless howling the night before. Perhaps sleep had made Roger more articulate.

"Sure. You can also ask him what he wants on his tombstone. Tell him that he needs to keep it short, because masons charge by the letter."

Max slid from the table, padded upstairs and slipped into Roger's attic room. It was littered with empty glasses and stereo equipment. Max thought he saw the corner of a skin mag under the bed. He thought about taking it.

Roger lay under a yellow chenille bedspread. His hands were covered in mitten-like bandages, and a strip of butterfly strips tracked across his balding forehead like artwork made by pissed-off Lilliputians.

Roger's blue eyes flickered open.

Max sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed.

"Hey, Roger. How's it going?"

Roger wrinkled his nose. "It itches."

"Yeah. I bet."

"I wasn't drunk... not that drunk." Roger reached for Max with his clumsy marshmallow hands, his bleary eyes watering. His breath reeked of alcohol. "There's something out there... the orange fairies with the sharp teeth..."

The door slammed open with a sound like a gunshot. Gert stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. "Enough of this nonsense, Roger. You want to die with a bottle in your hand, just like your father?"

Max shrank back.

"You drove him to it, you sanctimonious bitch..."

Max dove behind Gert and out into the hallway. Trudy stood at the bottom of the stairs, her eyes wide.

Max swallowed. "Uh. Let's go for a walk."

The shouting followed them all the way up the gravel drive to the mailbox. From this distance, Max could survey the sun-drenched yard, studiously avoiding the back porch. Everything looked right and good, blue sky and green grass. Max noticed that Trudy was shaking.

"Max, I'm scared."

Max awkwardly put his arm around his sister's shoulders. "I know."

"What are we going to do? Something's out there."

Max had thought about running away last night, about packing his things and Trudy's things and disappearing, but he was afraid of what would find them...both the spirits and Gert's wrath, should they ever be found.

"I think," he blurted, "I think we have to give the spirits what they want."

Trudy chewed her upper lip. "You want to give them Roger?"

"No. We have to give them back the pumpkin flesh."

★★★

Roger was talking in his sleep, delirious in his pain – mutterings about fairies and vines with teeth. Max guessed that Roger had taken one nip too many of a bottle of Pumpkin Jack he'd stashed under the bed. His breath stank of it.

Gert was furious. Like a crazed, bloated floral moth, she flitted from room to room, tearing apart bureaus and closets, depositing bottles in the sink and pouring them out.

"Not in my house," she snarled. "Not in my house."

Roger had stumbled to the top of the stairs. He was a fearsome sight in his bathrobe, bandaged hands beginning to seep.

"You don't know what's in your house," he slurred. "You don't know what's *under* it..."

Gert ordered Trudy and Max outside to clean the porch. Max shined the flashlight under the porch. To his relief, he saw nothing but a dead vole. He swept the glass particles up while Trudy ran the hose. Eventually, those terrible stains loosened and rinsed away into the earth. If it wasn't for the heavy plywood Max awkwardly

nailed to the doorframe, it would have looked almost normal.

Almost.

Exhausted by her rage-fuelled tirade, Gert fell asleep early. There was still daylight, and Max was thankful for that. He didn't relish going down to Roger's still at night.

But they had to give the spirits what they wanted. Of that, he was certain.

Max walked across the field with Gert's shotgun in his sweaty fist. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the tassels of the grasses. Trudy carried the flashlight and a firewood axe, sticking close to his elbow.

"You know, you look like Dad," Trudy said, then ducked her head. "Kind of."

Max beamed.

They paused at the pumpkin patch at the edge of the woods. In this light, the pumpkins were almost invisible, their orange skins blending with the grasses. In the heat and sun, Max could smell something rotting, the dark bitterness of fermentation. The pumpkins looked warped and twisted under the influence of Roger's experiment. The vines grew weak and limp, baking in the sunshine.

"We have to give the spirits back the pumpkin

flesh," he resolved. He kicked over a pumpkin. It sloshed, ejecting its rotting stopper, and spilled noisome pulp on the ground. The alcohol shimmered in the heat.

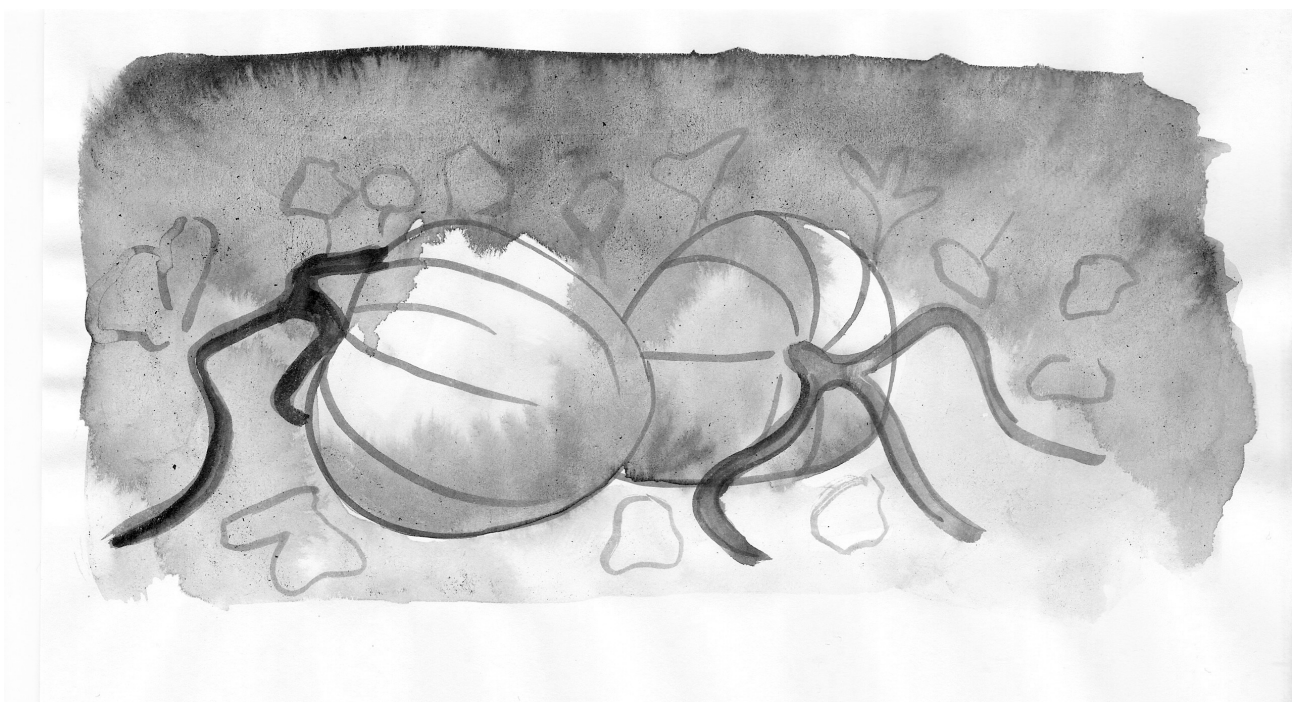
Trudy nodded. She lifted the axe and split open the flesh of the next pumpkin with a hollow thud.

★★★

They worked through the afternoon, until the light began to lower behind the trees. Each kick, each strike that rang emptily against the pitted pumpkin flesh evoked a thrill of exhilaration in Max. God, it felt good to let it out, to destroy something... Even spilling the artificial blood of these pumpkins was a release of frustration.

Max stumbled back to survey the pumpkin patch. His jeans were soaked to the knee in half-fermented pumpkin pulp, and his throat felt raw and scratchy. He must have been shouting. Adrenaline buzzed through his brain.

When he looked at Trudy, he saw that there were tears in her eyes. Her clothes were speckled with pumpkin seeds. She looked at him and grinned, lifting the axe to her shoulder. She looked like a little goth Viking princess on the battlefield.



"God, who knew pumpkin slaughter could feel so good."

Max glanced back to the forest. "We're not done yet."

There was still more pumpkin blood to spill.

They trekked into the forest, searching for Roger's still. It was harder to find without that beacon light, and Max and Trudy backtracked a few times. Funny how Max's memory of its exact location had grown fuzzy under the influence of Roger's pumpkin jack. When the last bit of light was draining from the forest, they found the shack.

It was even shabbier in this last little bit of daylight, grey plywood brittle and splitting. The generator huddled up beside it like some silent rusty beast seeking shelter. Max wondered how long it had been here.

Cautiously, Max opened the plywood door. His grip on the shotgun was slick, and it shook a bit. Trudy shone the light inside, glinting off Roger's bottles, strainers, and pots. That shimmer of false movement conjured by the light made him jump.

Trudy grabbed a bottle, uncorked it, and poured it out on the ground. Max set the shotgun down inside the door. The amber liquid splashed down over his shoes into the thirsty earth.

"Roger's gonna be pissed when he sees what we've done," Trudy remarked, giddy with rebellion.

Max had thought about that. "Maybe he'll just think that Gert did it."

The door exploded open. Max scrambled for the shotgun.

Standing in the dark doorway, blood leaking from his forehead, Roger glowered at them. He'd managed to put some jeans and shoes on, no mean feat with his cartoonishly-mittened hands.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Roger snarled, reaching for Max. Max had seen many of Roger's rages, but none like this: his uncle's eyes were dilated, as black as slugs, the sweat dripping from his chin. Wrath steamed off him.

Max raised the shotgun, his hands quivering. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with it,

exactly, but he wanted Roger to leave them alone.

Roger easily slapped the gun out of his hands and clutched it to his furry chest. He shoved Max to the soggy dirt floor. Somewhere, Trudy was shrieking.

Ka-chunk.

Roger pumped the shotgun. Max balled up his fists. Roger had finally lost it. Roger was going to kill him...

From his periphery, Trudy came howling at Roger with the axe, still stringy with pumpkin pulp. Roger swung the shotgun around to deflect the blow and flung Trudy, squeaking, to the ground. Bottles shattered. Max felt something wet underneath him, and thought he'd pissed himself until he smelled alcohol.

He launched himself at Roger, tried to tackle him, like he'd seen football players do on television. He wouldn't let him hurt his sister. Roger kicked him off like a bug.

Then he saw something foreign in Roger's eyes.

He saw fear.

In the doorway stood one of Roger's pumpkin fairies. He saw it fully now in the crazed light of the flashlight. It stood as tall as Trudy, limbs sinuous with viney muscle and dark foliage. Orange wings of leathery pumpkin skin stretched over veins and vessels illuminated in the light, sheer as a placenta. A weirdly luminous face buried in tattered leaves glared at Roger, snarling, exposing teeth as pale and narrow as dried pumpkin seeds.

Its ruddy lips worked around a hiss: "Flesh for flesh." It pointed at Roger with a half-rotted finger.

Vines whipped around Roger's feet, and the pumpkin spirit advanced on him. Roger howled something inarticulate. The vines yanked his feet out from under him, and the shotgun blasted into the wall.

The smell of gasoline burnt Max's throat, and flames charred a hole in the plywood. Roger had hit the generator. Yellow light reflected in the glass dust and in the eyes of that terrible creature bearing down on him.

Max grabbed Trudy and stumbled out the

front door. He paused for a moment, looking back at that tattered shadow standing over Roger, thinking that his father would go back for him. Roger was screaming, spittle glittering in that beautiful light, as the pumpkin spirit thrust its fingers through his ribs. Where its dark fingers touched, tiny green seedlings roiled and snapped their tiny seed-heads.

His father would do the heroic thing and save Roger, no matter how miserable a man he was...

"Max." Trudy's fists were wrapped in his sleeve, her face buried in his shirt. "We have to leave."

As he opened his mouth to protest, something exploded in the shed. The terrible light and heat drove him back, back to the perimeter of the forest. Smoke and flame washed up into the sky, smelling of gasoline and alcohol and burnt pumpkin.

"Max. Look."

He followed Trudy's shaking finger. Ringing the shed were more pumpkin spirits. They slid out of the dark, ripe orange and glossy green, tinged with the black speckles of rot, as graceful as if they were puppets drawn on strings. Firelight shone through their wings, showing dizzyingly intricate maps of sap and blood. Tendrils from their bodies lipped along the earth, like mosquitoes searching for blood, for what Roger had taken from them. One pale face looked back at them, at their flesh.

He and Trudy ran, ran until he thought his lungs would tear open into the humid summer air.



The sheriff called it "alcohol-related psychosis". There was no other explanation as to why Roger would have gone to a still in the woods, shot up the generator, and immolated himself. There had been precedent, after all; Max and Trudy's grandfather had blown the back of his head off in a similar fashion, many years ago. A genetic predisposition to alcoholism is a bitch.

Max and Trudy never spoke of what really happened. Gert slept through the whole thing, and neighbours eventually called the fire department to report the blaze. The Sheriff questioned

Max and Trudy, but his inquiries were half-hearted. Roger had been a thorn in his side for years, and the Sheriff was glad to be rid of him.

Gert sat on her flower-print couch for days after that, not uttering anything but the occasional "thank you" for flowers and dishes of food that well-meaning friends and neighbors dropped off. Nobody really missed Roger, but it seemed to be the thing to do, an excuse to sit in Gert's parlor and try to extract some gossip about Roger from her. These busybodies were always turned away disappointed.

Trudy still slept in Max's room, with the lights on. But there was never any further sign from the spirits, no hint of their existence. And she never made another Ouija board.

Three days after Roger's death, Max heard the crunching of gravel announcing a visitor. Anticipating another dish of food, Max looked out the window. He hoped that somebody would bring cookies. The flowers made Trudy sneeze.

But it wasn't cookies, or flowers. At the end of the driveway, a familiar figure waved, and Max's chest tightened.

"Trudy!" he bellowed.

The siblings raced out of the house down the gravel driveway. Max was barefoot, but he didn't feel the sharp stones. He hurled himself into the arms of his father. A heartbeat later, he was buffeted by Trudy's arms flung around them both.

Dad was home. He started to cry against his father's uniform. His father smelled foreign, like dust and gasoline, and his stubble was prickly against his forehead.

But he was real and he was back.

"What are you doing home?" Max croaked.

His father grinned at him, his face tan and crinkly. Trudy had locked her arms around his waist. "Hardship discharge, kiddo. Roger died, and I made the case that somebody's got to take care of you."

Max blinked. He now understood the architecture of Trudy's wish to the spirits for their father to come home. All the moving parts clicked into place. It was ridiculously simple: Roger's death, their father's homecoming.

It was flesh for flesh.

THE WALLED GARDEN

W a y n e S u m m e r s

James “Mac” McCormick had been waiting by the massive wrought iron gates for over an hour. He was beginning to wonder if he had got his dates wrong. He looked expectantly down the shadowy avenue of ancient oaks towards the main road and then again at his watch. He sighed heavily. Behind him, through the bars of the gate, was the imposing grey-stone mansion whose owner he’d been sent to interview.

It was a dark afternoon, overcast, and the lack of light made the impressive building seem gloomy and uninviting. Variegated ivy grew unchecked over the crenellated forebuilding, along the wall of the main building to left and over a good part of the wall behind which, it was alleged, was a magnificent garden. In fact, it was this legendary walled garden that he’d been sent to report on.

Mr O’Leary had lived in Birdwood Manor for as long as anyone could remember. However, very few people had actually seen the man since he rarely seemed to set foot beyond the black metal gates. He’d become a legend in the local

schoolyard, a figure the older children used to scare the younger children.

Once more Mac peered down the tunnel formed by the twisted and buckled branches of the oaks and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. He reached into his woollen overcoat, pulled out the crumpled packet of Silk Cut from his breast pocket and removed a slightly bent cigarette. Yet as luck would have it, no sooner had he put the cigarette in his mouth than he heard the sound of an engine approaching.

“Damn!” He let the cigarette drop from his lip onto the muddy ground below.

He craned his neck, squinting for a better view of the dirt road, and could just make out the shape of a small van moving rapidly towards him. It was the delivery van he’d been expecting, a Henrick’s van to be precise, delivering groceries and other supplies to Birdwood Manor.

Mac stepped out of the way and allowed the van to pull up at the intercom.

“Hello there,” he grinned. “How’s it going?”

The driver, a young lad with tousled, sandy blonde hair and a face dotted with pimples, replied guardedly. “All right.”

Mac looked towards Birdwood Manor and cleared his throat. "So what have you got today? In the back of your van? Food?"

The young driver kept his hand on the gearstick and regarded Mac suspiciously. "Yeah," he answered, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "What's it to yer."

Mac's smile widened. He admired the lad's ballsiness. "Well don't let me hold you up. Can't keep old man O'Leary waiting, especially since..." He left the sentence hanging, unfinished.

"Especially since what?" asked the young driver.

"He's in a pretty dark mood today," Mac replied dramatically.

"And how would yer know?" asked the driver, knowing that Mr O'Leary never received visitors.

"I've just been up there," said Mac.

The boy looked at him in disbelief and gunned the engine. "Up there?" he asked. "To the house?"

Mac nodded.

"You're bullshitting me. O'Leary doesn't let anyone up there. Only me."

"He let me in. Thing is, I've left something very important in the library and I need to get back in. So... what's your name?"

"Toby."

"So, Toby, I was wondering if I could hitch a lift up to the house with you to fetch it."

Toby wasn't born yesterday. He knew Mac hadn't been up to the house but also realised that for some reason he really wanted to. Not much he could do though. O'Leary would have him fired if he found out he'd let someone else in. He started winding the window up.

"Wait! Wait!" Mac shouted. "Listen, I tell you what. How about I make it worth your while?"

Toby paused. The window stopped half-way up.

Mac breathed a sigh of relief. All was not yet lost. At least he had the lad's attention. "How about I give you a hundred pounds to let me ride with you?"

"If yer know O'Leary so well, why don't yer

press the button on the Intercom yerself? If yer know him so well, he'll let yer in," said Toby.

Mac hadn't considered that option.

"Well, the old man is sleeping. Taking a morning nap. I don't want to disturb him. I just want to slip in and grab my, er, whatsit and get out again."

"Yer what?" Toby eyed Mac suspiciously.

"My briefcase," Mac replied without missing a beat. "And there's a hundred quid in it for you. Two hundred if you let me in now without asking any more questions."

Toby sat back in his seat, turned his head towards the manor and gently bit his bottom lip. Mac smiled to himself. He had the boy now.

"But what if he finds out I'm the one that let you in?" he asked, looking back at Mac. "I'd lose me job."

"Listen," Mac said, leaning on the roof of the van. "He isn't going to know it was you. How's he going to know I even left the grounds? I could have easily climbed the gate for all he knows."

They both looked at the eight-foot gate and its spear-like metal bars and knew how impossible that feat would be.

"Well, I could say I scaled one of the fences," Mac said, becoming exasperated. "Anything! I'll deal with that problem if and when I come to it. I swear I won't mention your name whatever happens. And I'll give you three hundred pounds!"

Toby began biting his bottom lip again. "All right!" he groaned. "Get in then."

Mac raced around to the other side of the van and let himself in while Toby buzzed the manor. Soon the electric gates were swinging open and the small van was driving up the driveway, the tyres crunching the gravel beneath.

They arrived at the servant's entrance and both men got out of the car. Mac helped Toby unload the boxes of groceries onto the steps that led up to the door and when they had finished Toby rang the bell. Within a minute or so a wizened little man pulled the door open and stared out at them.

"Morning, Mr O'Leary," Toby said politely. "I've just delivered your groceries. Let me know if there's anything I've missed."

Mac looked at the old man, who had a stoop, and a few wisps of long, white hair that seemed to float around his otherwise bald scalp. His long nose was bent in the middle and more hair grew out of his nostrils. His cheeks were rosy, but the rest of his skin was pale, almost transparent; Mac could see capillaries running like a road map across his face.

"Who is this?" Alfred O'Leary croaked in a tone which was anything but friendly.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't know," Toby said. "He was walking up the driveway as I pulled in. You didn't let him in?"

The old man was no fool. He could tell the moment the boy tensed up that he was lying.

"Who are you?" he demanded, facing Mac. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I know I shouldn't be here. The thing is," Mac explained, "I've been sent here to interview you."

The old man began to push the door shut, but Mac stopped the path of the door with his foot.

"Sir, please hear me out. I've come a long way."

The pressure on his foot eased and Mac took it as a sign the man had stopped pushing and was prepared to listen.

"You see, sir, while you are very well known, famous some might say, no one really knows anything about you. I understand this is probably through intention on your part, but there are people out there who have heard of you and your famous walled garden and would like to know more. I was wondering if you would do me the honour of allowing me to talk to you."

The old man peered around the door and surveyed Mac through the narrow gap and then began pushing the door shut again.

"Please, sir. I have money."

The old man chuckled.

"What need do I have for money?"

"We can pay you quite a sum of money," Mac explained. "If I could just spend an hour, half an hour, with you."

"No!" the old man replied tersely. "Now please leave. And as for you," he said, turning to face Toby, "I shall be speaking to your employer.

Now leave the boxes and get out of my sight. I'll fetch them in myself."

The door slammed shut.

"Thanks a lot!" snapped Toby as he marched around the front of his van and got in. "Thanks a bloody lot."

"Listen, mate. I'll call your employer. Don't worry about it!" Mac shouted after him.

But it was too late. Toby had started the engine.

Mac shrugged his shoulders and began to walk down the driveway as Toby sped past him. It hadn't been a good day. He had no interview and no story, nor was he likely to get one. He turned to take one last look at Birdwood Manor. He examined the forebuilding and its cross-shaped loopholes and was reminded of a medieval castle, although the rest of the building was reminiscent of an Elizabethan manor with curved gables and large windows comprised of small, diamond-shaped panes of glass separated by mullions. It was an impressive, slightly eccentric, building.

Then his eyes fell upon the great wall that surrounded the fabulous garden and an idea came to him. It was the garden people wanted to hear about, not Alfred O'Leary, and since it was only a couple of hundred metres away he knew he'd regret it if he didn't at least try to see what lay beyond the wall.

Without a second thought he began to jog towards the great ivy-covered wall and in no time at all he was standing, panting, in front of it. Taking a handful of ivy, he hoisted himself off the ground and found that in some places the ivy had become so thick and so securely stuck to the stone wall that he was easily able to get a foothold. Slowly he made his way up the wall, progressing carefully since one false move would mean a very rapid descent to the damp grass below. Finally he felt his hand grasp the top of the wall and with some effort managed to pull himself up onto it. What he saw on the other side astounded him. It wasn't the lush oasis filled with rare and exotic plants he had been expecting. Instead he found a blackened expanse of land covered with burnt and gnarled remnants of trees, burnt stubs of long dead plants and a

fine, grey ash covering everything. He couldn't believe that after all his efforts the renowned walled garden was nothing but a wasteland.

"You up there!" called a croaky voice from below. "Get down at once!"

It was Mr O'Leary.

Mac loosened his grip on the wall and began a slow descent. Several times the vine gave way beneath the pressure of his body weight and he found himself sliding roughly down the wall, tearing whole sections of ivy off as he came.

"Look what you're doing to my beautiful ivy!" Mr O'Leary shouted. "Just look!"

Mac apologised as best he could while trying not to slip. His fingers were stinging and bleeding, and the skin beneath his chin had sustained several cuts as bits of old vine whipped into him. It was a relief when his feet finally touched the soft, lawn-covered ground.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked the old man, glaring at the trespasser.

Mac straightened up and groaned. Every muscle in his body was aching and his lungs burned for oxygen.

"I'm sorry Mr O'Leary. I thought I could get a look at the garden while I was here, but I guess I've wasted my time."

Mr O'Leary looked at the puffing, red-faced man standing in front of him and burst out laughing.

"So you didn't get what you came for after all?" he chuckled.

Mac glared at the old man.

"Listen," the old man began. "Maybe I've been too hasty. Maybe it might be a good idea to show what you so desperately want to see."

"But I have seen it," Mac explained as he tried to gain control of his breathing. "And there is nothing there. It's all been burnt!"

"Don't be so sure," said the old man. "You can't always trust your eyes."

Mr O'Leary turned and shuffled slowly back towards the entrance of his vast home. Mac followed in silence, reaching into his coat for a cigarette.

"Haven't you damaged yourself enough for one day?" asked the old man.

Mac stared at the back of the old man's head, his hand resting on the packet of cigarettes.

"How..?" he began.

"Never mind," Mr O'Leary replied. "Just leave those things in your pocket."

The two men entered the manor and Mac was immediately taken by the sumptuous furnishings which filled each room. Great rugs covered bare stone floors and ancient tapestries depicting mythical scenes hung on velvet-covered walls. The interior of the house was warmer than he expected, though the giant fireplaces were unlit and cold. Great chandeliers hung overhead and old portraits of past tenants hung on the spaces between the tapestries. Richly upholstered, high-backed chairs were sprinkled around rooms filled with books. Elaborate sculptures stood like sentinels looking out across the room from dark corners.

Large vases of beautiful and exotic flowers stood atop antique tables and sideboards, and tall candlesticks with thick white candles flickered in the hallways. Snatches of music could be heard as though somewhere in the immense house there was an orchestra playing, and the air was scented with spring blossom.

"You've got one of the most beautiful homes I've ever seen," Mac heard himself say as his head swivelled this way and that to take in every magnificent detail.

"One of the most?" Mr O'Leary echoed, chuckling to himself. "You haven't seen anything yet."

There seemed to be a great sadness about Alfred O'Leary, despite the chuckles. His sunken eyes seemed weary, if not dead, and he walked, stooped, as though he were carrying a crushing burden. There was certainly an air of mystery about the man.

"We're nearly there," he announced as they entered a large kitchen where an overweight woman was kneading dough. "That's Clara, my cook."

Mac smiled at the woman, who acknowledged him with a nod before returning her attention to the dough. A strong aroma of herbs filled the air and something mouth-watering was cooking.

Only then did Mac realise how hungry he was. Maybe the old man would invite him to dinner.

On the far side of the kitchen there was a large wooden door with ornate metal hinges. Mr O'Leary turned the large key in the lock and opened it. What lay on the other side was truly breathtaking.

Mr O'Leary stepped aside and allowed Mac to walk into the walled garden.

"B-b-but I saw it," Mac stuttered. "It was burnt. Destroyed."

"An illusion," the old man replied. "A preventative measure."

"But how?" asked Mac as he wandered, wide-eyed like a child, further into the garden.

"Never mind," said Mr O'Leary, dismissing the query. "You wouldn't understand."

Mac feasted his eyes on the other-worldly beauty of the garden. Although the interior of Birdwood Manor had been opulent beyond the imagination of men, the garden was superior in both beauty and spectacle to anything he'd been fortunate enough to see on his many travels.

Some of the fruit trees blossomed in the pale sunlight, while others, already in fruit, displayed an assortment of large, colourful bounty from oranges and apples to guava and other exotic fruits. Bushes of berries grew in tangles around their thick trunks as if to protect them, but from what? How in this paradise could there be anything other than beauty?

Surrounding the small groves of fruit trees grew rhapsodies of roses and rhododendron; symphonies of sunflowers, snapdragons, stocks and sweet peas; lush carpets of carnations and chrysanthemums; and patches of pansies and petunias. Their sweet perfume filled the air and Mac took a deep breath. Everywhere he looked there were beautiful blossoms bursting forth from healthy, leafy plants. Brilliantly coloured butterflies fluttered from flower to flower, while bees heavy with pollen struggled to fly back to their hive.

In between the large gardens, long-bladed grass grew abundantly. It felt soft beneath the feet and was dotted with tiny, white clover flowers. Small grey and white rabbits hopped about between the garden beds, nibbling the grass here

and there and frolicking with one another. Overhead, doves sat in pairs on long-reaching branches, while robins and sparrows flew from tree to tree chasing food and each other in games of catch.

Mac wandered deeper and deeper into the garden, almost forgetting that Mr O'Leary was following closely behind him. He couldn't remember a time when he had felt so elated. Laughter welled up inside him. Then, as he turned a corner guarded by a huge hydrangea covered in giant blue pompoms, he saw something quite breathtaking. Over by the grassy banks of the river, in a space amongst the lilies of the valley, stood a pure white unicorn, drinking from the crystal clear water.

Mac turned to look at the old man.

Mr O'Leary nodded.

"Be careful. She's skittish."

Mac stared at the beautiful creature as it drank and then as it walked deeper into the water and began to wash itself. Oblivious to the fact it was being watched, the unicorn splashed around in the water, rubbing its side with its head to clean itself before rolling in the water to rinse off the dirt of the day.

Suddenly it stopped and looked about it as though it were searching for something. Then, with a whinny, it galloped up the far bank and into a thicket of elm and ash trees on the other side.

Mac looked at the old man, puzzled.

"As you may have guessed this is no ordinary garden," Mr O'Leary explained. "There is a dark power that maintains this beauty and hides it from the outside world. I cannot tell you more, other than that it's time we left."

Mac looked around him at the flowering bushes and then up into the trees. He noticed that the birds had stopped singing and that the rabbits had disappeared too. A strange feeling settled upon him, replacing the joy he'd been feeling only seconds before. He shivered and noticed that his skin had turned into a mass of goose pimples.

"What is it?" he asked the old man.

"Goblins," came the simple yet incredible reply.

“Gob... you’ve got to be kidding!” scowled Mac.

“And you would have said the same about the unicorn had you not seen it.”

The old man had him there.

“Now hurry,” Mr O’Leary said, turning and hurrying back the way they had come.

“But how is it that goblins live in a place so beautiful? I would have thought they’d live underground or in sewers or something.”

“Goblins can live anywhere, but less talk and more walk.”

Mac hurried along behind Mr O’Leary. It was pointless going any faster since by this time he was completely disorientated. He couldn’t have found the exit if his life depended on it, as apparently it now did. Every rustle in the undergrowth, every quiver of leaf, grabbed his attention.

“What do they look like?” he asked, just in case he should see one.

“Like that!” the old man replied, and Mac stopped dead in his tracks.

He followed the direction of the old man’s bony finger to a mound of dirt sitting in the middle of the grassy path and the hideous creature now scrambling over it. It was about a metre tall and as it stood upright it looked directly at them with cruel, yellow eyes.

Mac swallowed hard. The creature sniffed the air and began to drool; the thin, sticky slime dribbling out of its mouth stuck to the leathery, pock-marked skin of its chest and gathered there for a few moments before running down to its bony, scaly legs. As it sniffed the air a second time, Mac could see that its head was slightly elongated and that its hairy, pointed ears ran back along its dark green scalp. It looked at the men again and snarled, revealing a mouthful of tiny, conical teeth which grew higgledy-piggledy in its reeking mouth. It stuck its black tongue out at them and licked its lips.

“What’s it doing?” Mac whispered.

“Identifying us,” replied the old man.

The goblin took a step towards them and continued to snarl. It began to sniff the air in their direction, making small gurgling noises as it did so.

“Well let’s get it then,” Mac suggested. “There are two of us and only one of it.”

But at the very moment the last word left his lips, Mac became aware of a foul stench coming from behind him. Then, just as he was about to turn around to locate the source, he felt the sharp prick of a goblin fingernail in his shoulder.

Terrified, Mac turned his head just enough to look over his shoulder and saw, smiling back at him with evil glee, a second goblin. He felt a warm trickle of urine running down his leg as the creature behind him began to cackle, smelling his fear and enjoying it as much as Mac had been enjoying the perfumed air minutes before.

He heard the creature behind him begin sniffing. It let out a guttural bark. Both goblins began jumping up and down with excitement, giving small yelps of glee and smacking the ground with their over-sized hands.

“What did you..?” asked Mr O’Leary before noticing the dark stain on Mac’s trouser leg. “Oh! You shouldn’t have done that. Now there’ll be trouble.”

Mac didn’t know what the old man was on about, but soon they were surrounded by a group of seven goblins, each uglier than the other; the stench of their combined group was overpowering. For a while they did no more than lurch forward at the two men, chuckling and cackling as they made them jerk backwards in fear. One of them ran off through a small patch of hollyhocks and returned with a large stick which it used to poke and prod the men with.

“If that thing pokes me one more time!” Mac snarled, balling his hand into a fist.

“Relax,” said Mr O’Leary. “They’re playing with us while they wait.”

“For what?” Mac snapped back as he was again prodded with the stick.

“For the goblin king.”

The goblin poked Mac again and he launched himself at the pint-sized monster.

“Come here, you little bastard!” he yelled.

The other goblins stopped chuckling and began snarling. Two of them jumped at Mac, kicking him with their feet and knocking him backwards to the ground. A shorter and stockier

goblin leapt onto his chest, using it as a springboard to fly clear over Mr O'Leary.

"They're stronger than they look, aren't they?" the old man said.

Then the whole garden began to vibrate. The goblins began chattering incomprehensibly. They looked frightened. Their heads spun around looking for the source of the vibrations, baring their teeth at the slightest movement and biting at each other.

Suddenly a great mound of dirt appeared on one side of the path, pushing up the flowers and bushes that grew there and turning them over into the soil. Mac began to tremble. The goblins began smacking the ground again and continued to bare their rotting, yellowing teeth. A roar preceded the creature's arrival and then a great, grotesque head appeared out of the hole. It was greyish-green, elongated and pock-marked just as the others were, only much, much larger. As it pulled itself out of the ground using its deceptively scrawny arms, Mac dropped to his knees.

The goblin king stepped out of the hole and shook the dirt off itself. It stood at nearly six feet and towered over the other goblins. It sniffed the air then opened its mouth as if to yawn. The inside of its mouth was red and inflamed, and its teeth were like daggers. Bits of meat from whatever it had last eaten were stuck between them and its breath was a pungent combination of vomit and rotting flesh.

The other goblins huddled together on the lawn by a garden of tulips and daffodils. Mr O'Leary joined Mac on his knees, though this gesture was not one driven by fear.

"Sire," he said as he bowed his head.

Mac shot him a puzzled look.

"What did you say?" he asked the old man.

Alfred O'Leary ignored him and continued to bow.

"Sire, Morbiid, it is good to see you again," he said, keeping his eyes averted.

Mac stared at the old man in disbelief. It was hard to say what he found more unbelievable, the goblins or the old man's strange behaviour in their presence.

The goblin king leaned down and sniffed Mac's cowering body, spraying him with

mucous and snot as he snorted at a smell that had always repulsed him – humans. He then turned his attention to Mr O'Leary, sniffing him and then returning to an upright position.

"What is so important that you have summoned me from my rest?" boomed the goblin king.

"Sire, as you can plainly see, my body grows older. I am not able to perform my duties any longer, I fear. You once said that should I find a suitable replacement for the caretaker position that you would grant me my freedom."

Mac gasped and felt a sudden increase in his heartbeat. "What?!" he snapped, frowning.

"Silence!" Morbiid snarled, slapping Mac to the ground with the swipe of its hand. "That is true, O'Leary."

"Well, sire, this is the man. This is the trespasser who came willingly to the garden. He is younger and stronger."

Mac could not believe his ears. His anger was now giving way to terror. He had been betrayed and whatever his fate was to be, it did not sound pleasant.

"Sire, could I ask that you honour that promise?"

Morbiid leaned down and sniffed Mac once more. The creature looked at the old man staring up with eyes beseeching him to grant his freedom. It then leaned over and grabbed Mac's arm, feeling the strength in them, before doing the same thing to Mr O'Leary.

"I see you speak the truth," Morbiid agreed. "You shall have your freedom."

Alfred climbed to his feet and smiled. Finally, he could see whatever remained of his family, if he could find them. He would have people to talk to and places to visit. All the things he had long dreamed about were now within reach.

"Thank you, sire," he beamed. "Thank you for your gift of liberty."

"Unnecessary," smirked the goblin king, promptly piercing the old man's chest with a long, steel-like fingernail. "Enjoy your freedom."

Mr O'Leary's eyes shot open as he gasped for breath. The sharp, shooting pain in his chest washed over him like a wave of boiling water.

He dropped to the ground, his hands vainly trying to stem the flow of blood, but within the minute he was dead, leaving Mac alone with the goblins and their king.

“So, you are the replacement,” Morbiid said.

“In your dreams,” Mac barked back like a cornered dog, for that is how he felt. “I would rather die than serve such an abomination.”

Morbiid frowned. “Unfortunately, I need you. Otherwise I would be happy to grant your wish.”

Mac spat at the hideous monarch and was rewarded with a smack to the face. Morbiid then reached down to Mr O’Leary and tore open the old man’s shirt with a swipe of a fingernail. A thin band of gold sat around the man’s waist. Morbiid yanked the band free.

“Remove your coat and shirt,” Morbiid demanded.

Mac was learning quickly to keep his mouth shut, despite his desire for rebellion. His mind reeled with insults he could pepper the goblin king with but his face was still throbbing from the last reprimand. He glared at the king, wishing the creature dead, but the goblin king returned his look with one of growing impatience. Finally, Mac relented and removed his coat and shirt.

“That’s better,” Morbiid gurgled.

The gold band was then placed around Mac’s waist by two of the other goblins who were only too eager to do the king’s bidding. When the ends were introduced to each other they fused together, creating an escape-proof, tamper-proof seal. Mac nevertheless tugged at it and tried to pull it off.

“You’re wasting your time,” Morbiid stated triumphantly. “It has joined for ever more. Nothing in your world can break its bond.”

Mac continued to struggle with the band for a few more seconds but soon realised he’d been beaten.

“Your duty is to protect the garden,” Morbiid announced. “Allow no-one onto the property bar the delivery boy, and absolutely no-one into the garden. Only you may enjoy its beauty and tranquillity as reward for your service.”

And with that out of the way Morbiid stepped back into the hole which would return him to his

underworld kingdom. “I should tell you that the band around your waist will not allow you to travel beyond the boundaries of the estate. Of course, I fully realise you will need to test this for yourself since your ego rules your logic, but be warned, the consequence of you doing that will be painful.”

At that moment Mac felt a surge of electricity shoot through his body, making his hair stand on end and his teeth begin to ache. His skin felt as though a million needles were pricking him and he felt nauseous to the point where he actually vomited.

“That was just a taste,” Morbiid grinned. “The band has more intense punishments. You are welcome to try them at any time, though I promise you will only try them once.”

Mac watched Morbiid return into the earth. As the back of its head disappeared, the ground it had pushed up filled itself in and covered itself with a carpet of fresh flowers. There was no evidence at all that the goblin king had ever been there, only the band around his waist. When he turned around he saw that the other goblins had vanished too.

Slowly the sound of singing birds returned and the rabbits, sensing the danger had passed, crept nervously out from where they had been hiding. The buzzing of bees and the fluttering of butterflies returned. Within minutes the garden had returned to a perfect state of beauty and tranquillity, though to Mac it had taken on a different hue. It was now no more breathtaking than a dingy prison. Maybe he could grow to love this paradise again, only time would tell.

He turned and walked back to the house, which he seemed to find without any difficulty at all. He pulled the heavy wooden door shut after him and turned.

“What would you like for dinner, sir?” asked the cook, who he could now see was a goblin herself.

Mac ignored her. The thought of eating anything her hands had touched revolted him. Instead he wandered through the rooms of his new home, blind to its luxury and only able to think of the world from which he had come and to which he would never again be able to return. TOF

Rural Legend

Eric R Lowther

Mabel wiped her hands nervously and stood looking at her kitchen door. Everything was big in Montana. Big land, big sky, and the men tended to follow suit. But this one... Billy had gone to town earlier that morning to talk to the bank about the mortgage and her younger son Everett should be out in the barn. That left her and the man on her back porch. She had left the door open to let in the early-morning spring breeze, leaving only the thin screen door between her and the stranger. She wished not for the first time that her husband, Bill, had come back from the war. Bill knew how to deal with big men. But Germany had needed his blood more than the ranch, she'd oft been told. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and walked to the door.

She stared at the mass of flannel in the tiny grid pattern of the screen for a moment then tried to peer up past the door frame. The most she could see was a thickly-bearded chin. The man's chest had to be three feet wide if it was an inch, and his wide leather belt was nearly even with her breast. He held his massive hands folded in front of him and stood, patiently.

"Yes?" she asked quietly. The man's size was truly intimidating.



“Mornin’, ma’am!” an impossibly deep voice boomed from somewhere above the door. “Beautiful mornin’, isn’t it, ma’am?”

“I... yes... can I... help you?” she asked out of reflex. For some reason she hadn’t expected him to be so cordial.

“Actually, ma’am, I was hopin’ I could help you. Oh, where’s my manners got to?” he suddenly said and stepped back several paces from the door so that she could see his face. “Sorry, ma’am.”

She could see his whole body from this perspective. The man had to be more than seven feet tall. His shoulder-length black hair and close-trimmed beard were liberally sprinkled with bright silver. His smile was an easy, care-free gesture, as if it was the expression he was most used to wearing. He wore a plaid flannel shirt rolled up at the cuffs with both wide suspenders and belt to hold up his brown work trousers, the cuffs of which had been carelessly stuck into a pair of high and impossibly large leather work boots. The picture of a logger, albeit the biggest she had ever seen. “Name’s Paul, ma’am... and the puns don’t bother me a bit,” he said easily. Mabel smiled at the joke on his obvious stature and name and found she wasn’t nearly as afraid of the man as she had been only moments ago.

“Well... Paul... what brings you about?”

“Well, ma’am, I’m ‘fraid to say I’m a bit of a drifter right now. Just lookin’ for a bit o’ work to keep my belly from rumblin’ and my hands from becoming the devil’s, if you catch my meanin’. I saw this spread from the road, thought you might be in need of some help around the place. Good with my hands and never walked away from a day’s work.”

Mabel stared at the man for a long time. No one had come looking for work since before the war. It had been hard when Bill senior went away, harder still when most of the boys and men that worked the ranch answered the call. Hardest of all was none of them coming back. She had her sons, but Bill Jr was still cutting his teeth in the family trade and little Everett just didn’t have the size and experience to tackle the big jobs. It was all she could do to get enough

cattle to market to keep the place and themselves alive. But still, he was obviously a worker and if his size were any indication there weren’t too many labours he couldn’t handle.

“How about we start with some wood, then some breakfast. We can see about any other chores after that.”

The big man nodded and swept his knit cap from his head with a flourish. “Thank you, ma’am. Saw the pile ‘round back. Have that done up in a blink.” He turned and went off the porch, not bothering to use the steps. With his incredible size, the few feet from the porch to the ground made hardly a step itself. She waited until he was out of sight then went to the sitting room where she could see him from the side window. Paul wielded the axe in one hand – it cut through the big, rough logs like a hot knife through butter. The tool looked like a child’s plaything in his massive grip as he quickly, methodically went through nearly two cords’ worth of rough logs. At this rate, they’d have enough cut wood to last till Christmas. She remembered herself and Paul’s payment for his services and hurried into the kitchen.

She made a rough mental calculation of the man’s size relative to that of her late husband, and doubled what she would have made for him. By the time he had finished with the wood and had come back to the porch, she had a half dozen eggs, a half pound of bacon and some biscuits left over from yesterday’s baking waiting for him. Paul remained on the porch as she handed him the plate and a large tumbler of buttermilk.

“Whoo! Thank you, ma’am! I’m not sure I can eat all this, but I’ll surely try!” He sat down on the porch by the steps, his feet firmly planted on the ground. In less than two minutes, the plate was as clean as it had been before she had loaded it down, the last drop of sweet milk stuck in his thick moustache. He set the plate and glass down and let out a belch that shook the windows in their casings. He turned his head sheepishly and found her staring open-mouthed through the screen door. “Oh, sorry ma’am. Keep forgettin’ I’m not in the bunk house. But oh! That was the best breakfast I’ve had in a long time! Thanks again, ma’am.”

"You're welcome..." was all she could say as he got up and brought her his plate and glass.

"You know somethin', ma'am? That was so good I think I still owe you a chore. Noticed you got a loose step there. Let me fix that for ya?"

"Well... yes, I guess so... if you're inclined to..."

"It'd be my pleasure, ma'am..." The exchange was cut short by a shrill yell from the barn below the house.

"Everett!" Mabel cried out and came out the door. She joined Paul on the porch and looked down towards the barn. A straw-haired boy of no more than ten summers ran out of the barn, waving excitedly.

"It's time!" then, "Who's that?" he called out.

"Never you mind! You just get in there with her!"

"Problem, ma'am?" Paul asked as they came off the porch and towards the barn.

"Got a mare going into labour. Shouldn't happen for another two weeks yet," she replied breathlessly as she hurried to the barn. Paul tried to match his excessive gait to the small woman's steps and nearly tripped over his own boots. He resisted the temptation to carry her bodily to the barn and slowed his pace to stay even with her.

They ran inside, Paul having to duck to get through the doorway. The warm smell of livestock and old hay enveloped them in the cool darkness as they made their way to the end of the barn. They found the boy with a large mare lying on the floor of a stall. The mare's breath was laboured, her nostrils flared from the strain. Everett looked up at Paul for a moment, but the excitement turned his attentions back to the mare, Granny, and his mother.

"She just lay down and started breathin' like this, Ma," he said excitedly. "I thought you said she wasn't going to do this yet..."

"Sometimes the good Lord keeps his own watch, Everett," she answered as she kneeled on the hay and lifted the mare's tail. A tiny pair of hooves protruded from the labouring horse. "Everett, go fetch some water and rags from the tack." The boy nodded then stood and started running in the same motion, a feat that only young children seem capable of without injury.

"Anything I can do, ma'am?" Paul offered quietly from high above her.

"You can say a prayer or two, Paul. I'm sure Granny won't mind," came her breathless reply. She laid a hand on the mare's swollen belly and tried to speak soothingly to her. The mare pushed involuntarily; the foal was securely lodged. Granny bleated and looked back at Mabel with wide eyes. "It'll be okay, girl. You just hang in there."

Everett ran back into the stall, water sloshing from the wooden pail and down Paul's boot. "Is she gonna be okay, Ma?" he whispered.

"It's in God's hands." She dipped a rag in the pail and wiped off the small hooves. Grabbing one in each hand, she felt the feeble movement of the foal in response. At least it was still alive. She waited a moment, felt Granny push and tried to pull on the foal at the same time. It was no use. The foal was wedged far too tightly.

Paul stepped past mother and son and kneeled down at the animal's head. "With your pardons, ma'am..." he said to Mabel. He stroked Granny's mane with his powerful hand and started whispering softly, so close that his beard tickled the hair inside the animal's ear. They couldn't hear what he shared with the mare, but whatever he said seemed to have an effect. The horse relaxed almost instantly, its breathing slowing considerably as it laid its head down. Without moving from the spot, he reached down across the mare's body and felt for the tiny hooves of the failing life within her. The hooves disappeared in his grip as he leaned down and again whispered to Granny. Mabel and Everett could see the horse's muscles ripple along its ribs as another contraction washed over her. Paul tugged once at the hooves and nodded approvingly as the foal started to slide easily from the birth canal. Before the contraction was done, the foal was out and suspended from his strong yet gentle grasp. He laid the foal down gently and backed away as the mare swung her head around to it.

Half an hour later mother and newborn son stood, both on wobbly legs. Granny swung her head down and nuzzled the foal, removing much of the detritus of birth from his coat and sniffing

at him. The foal was as white as snow. Only its hooves had any colour, and they were as shiny and black as a new Ford. Paul smiled broadly then scrubbed his hands in the remaining water.

“Sorry for being so forward, ma’am. But people say I’ve got a way with animals, and she seemed to be in trouble.”

“No need for that, Paul,” Mabel said, still gapping back and forth between the foal and the giant in her barn. “But I’d say you just earned your lunch.” she added with a smile. “Come on, men. Let’s leave these two alone.”

“Ma, who’s that?” he asked in a loud whisper as the odd trio walked back towards the house.

“That’s Paul, Everett. He’s a handyman that stopped by this morning. Just in time, too, it seems.” Mabel looked up at him. The morning sun rode just over his shoulder, casting his head in cameo and casting her fully in his shadow.

“You sure are big, mister,” Everett said from the safety of his mother’s skirt. “How’d you get to be so big?” he asked with childhood innocence.

“Everett Sinclair! Don’t you be rude!” said his mother.

“Aw, ain’t no harm ma’am. See Everett, I got so big ‘cause I ate my momma’s cookin’... every day and every bit of it! Vegetables, too. Then I did all my chores and got all that good air and sweat out of it. That’s how you get big an’ strong.”

“Really?” Everett said in awe.

“Why, sure! Just something ‘bout a mother’s cookin’ just seems to stick to your ribs.”

“Wow!” Everett exclaimed as they neared the house, then “Ma? What’s for lunch?”



The twenty-year old truck flew down the dirt road far faster than Mabel liked to see. By the way he drove and the way he skidded to a stop by the barn though, she knew her eldest son didn’t bring good news with him. The balloon payment was due on the ranch next month, and they had tried unsuccessfully to get an extension. If they couldn’t come up with it in a few weeks, they would lose the ranch.

Billy had been all of eighteen when his father

died. The army had refused to draft him since the war had already taken his father and Everett was only in diapers, and it bothered him to no end. All his friends were off to serve their country and fight the Nazis while he was left working the farm. Mabel knew Billy resented it, but she wouldn’t have had it any other way. They took her husband, but at least they left her sons. In deference to not going off to war, Mabel taught him all she knew about the ranch. When his father was gone, Billy took over the reigns with a tight grip and was determined to make something of the ranch to prove he was just as valuable as his friends that had gone off to fight the Japs and the Gerrys. They had had a few bad years recently, though, and the payment coming due seemed to grow larger each day.

William Sinclair Jr took after his father in many ways. He had his father’s honey-coloured hair and dark brown eyes, as well his cleft chin. He also shared his father’s temper, something Mabel could have done without. The one thing he didn’t get from his father was his size. Billy was closer to his mother’s modest 5’6”. Large in temper and small in stature, Billy had gained a reputation around town as a “one-punch drunk”. Most of the locals simply let him be, but that didn’t stop travellers from giving him a sound thrashing when he crossed the line after one too many at the town’s only tavern. He was becoming a bitter young man, and the only thing that grew was bitter old men, and only if they made it that far.

Mabel watched out the window as he got out of the old truck. The late morning sun had grown warm, and the young man had rolled up his shirt sleeves and loosened his tie for the long, dusty ride in from town. Bill Sr never gave the bank the satisfaction of putting on airs for them. They would accept him into their cosy offices in his over-alls and boots or they wouldn’t accept him at all. Bill Jr though tried hard as he could to broadcast the image of a gentleman rancher. But he was young, and though he could tell you the ins and outs of ranching he lacked the polish he so desperately craved. Mabel let him go, partly for the guilt he couldn’t go to war and partly because she didn’t want to crush his spirit.

Sometimes the urge to correct what he did was overwhelming and she found herself going behind his back, altering decisions and agreements he made in the best interests of the ranch. They would sometimes go for weeks without talking over it.

Billy stumped up the walk and through the front door. Mabel stared at him for a moment and marvelled at how old her son looked. Only 28, he looked twenty years older in the light of the sun-dappled kitchen. He sat down at the table and rubbed his temples as she put down a cup of coffee.

"Didn't go well?" Mabel asked without having to.

"Morganstern picked my plan apart like he was looking for a needle. Fat old bastard..."

"William Sinclair! You watch your mouth. There's no call for talk like that in this house."

"Can't help what he is, Ma. I got the deal in Spokane provided I could transport 'em out there. Can't do that without the bank financing the move," he said dejectedly.

"Did he say why he wouldn't?"

"He says he sees a drop in the cattle futures in the next two weeks. He says by the time we get 'em out there they'll drop fifteen cents on the hoof. Wouldn't be able to pay the bank back on that note and on the mortgage, too. Says we'd be over-extended. What the hell does he know about ranchin', anyway?"

"He's doing his job, Billy. We'll just have to find some other way." Mabel knew the bank was their last chance at the money to move better than 600 head all the way to Spokane. And as much as she hated to say it, she'd also heard from the other spreads around the county that prices were going to drop. They could have easily made enough to pay off the loan for transporting the cattle and make the mortgage payment at the current price. But the bank president was right. They would have to find another way to make the mortgage.

"There ain't no *other way*, Ma. Not unless we sell off some of the spread. Hell, we wouldn't have a buyer in time for that even." Billy sipped his coffee. The sound of a saw in wood roused

him up out of his seat. "Everett! If you're playin' with those tools again..."

The bad news had made Mabel temporarily forget about their handyman. "That's not Everett. Just a man looking for some work," Mabel told him.

"Aw, Ma! We can't afford to pay a man! We been through this..."

"He works for food in his belly, William."

"Oh! So he's a bum, then? Well, I'll take care of that!" he barked and went to the kitchen door. Mabel stopped him with a hand on his forearm.

"Now you listen to me, William... never let it be said that a man willing to work for his supper was ever turned away from this house. That's the way your grandfather and your father pulled this spread out after the Dust. He does good work. And if it weren't for him, Granny would be dead right now."

"She went?" Billy asked. "But that shouldn't have..."

"I know, but she did. I could never have gotten her through it, but he did."

"Well... still don't make for much of a man, having to go around workin' for food."

"Oh, I think there's plenty of man in him, probably two or three, truth be told." Mabel smiled at her private joke.

"Well, I'm goin' out there and make sure he knows who's boss here."

"Don't let me stop you." Mabel relented and took her hand away. "You just remember he ain't done anything but good."

He snorted, pushed through the screen door and stopped midway through. He found Paul on his knees at the foot of the stairs readying a new board to replace one of the rotted treads. Even with Billy standing on the porch and Paul kneeling on the ground below it, the giant's eyes were level to his own.

"Morgninn, msstr..." Paul said, his words garbled. What Billy had first thought were toothpicks he now realised were ten-penny nails stuck between his lips. The giant pulled the nails out of his mouth and spit off to the side. "Your pardon. Meant to say *mornin', mister*." Paul's smile beamed with teeth nearly as wide as a man's finger, his eyes laughing along. Billy stood and

stared at the man then stepped back slowly and calmly into the kitchen.

"What... the hell... is that... why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Mabel asked with an innocent air.

"That he was as big as a damn barn!" he hissed at her.

"Billy! Language!" she shot back. "And you didn't ask."

"The man's a freak..."

"I'll bet he's a freak with good ears, though." Mabel said quietly. Billy shot a look outside and saw Paul raise a fist into the air and bring it downward, out of his view. The floor under their feet trembled with the blow. The giant didn't seem to notice Billy's remark and kept about his work.

"Where's Everett?" Billy asked with a quiver in his voice.

"He's outside helping Paul."

"Helping? You let Everett alone with that... that..."

"Big ears, too." she reminded him gently. "He's doing the work you don't have time to do and Everett and I don't have the size or know-how to do. He chopped up better than two cords of wood before he had a bite of breakfast, and he nearly finished in the time it took me to get a plate for him."

Billy nodded once and went back outside. The giant wasn't even using a hammer. Billy watched in awe as Paul jammed a nail into the board, sinking it nearly a quarter of the way in with only two fingers. The man made an impossibly large fist and let it fall on the nail, driving it through the board and the riser beneath in one bare-handed strike. Billy watched him repeat the process several times. Satisfied the tread wouldn't budge, the giant wiped his hands on his shirt and stood up, dwarfing the young rancher. He extended his meaty hand and smiled down at Billy.

"Name's Paul. You must be Mr Sinclair. Your Ma told me 'bout you." With nothing else to do about it, Billy extended his hand and waited for the crushing grip that would certainly come. But even though his own hand disappeared in the

bigger man's paw, it felt no different than any of a number of good, solid handshakes he'd performed over the years. "You got a beautiful spread here, Mr Sinclair. Any man would be proud with a patch of heaven like this."

"We're proud of it," William said with a forced bravado.

Everett came around the side of the house with a few short boards in his arms. The boy hurried over as soon as he saw his brother and dropped the wood beside Paul.

"Billy! You should have seen it. Granny was in trouble! But then Mr Oaks just talked to her and reached back there and there was the foal! You should have seen it!"

"Wasn't nothin', Mr Sinclair. Really. And it's Paul. Not Mr Oaks."

"Paul, that's just my brother Billy, not Mr Sinclair," Everett said dismissively.

"Everett, your Ma told me that your brother's the man of the house. That makes him *Mr Sinclair* to the likes of those that work for him." He glanced first at Everett then at Billy. "Or do you prefer William?"

"Mr Sinclair'll do for now," Billy said, his chest a bit more puffed than it had been.

"As you will," the big man said as he picked through the boards Everett had brought. Billy watched him work for a moment and couldn't help but notice Everett's rapt attention on the new hired man. He selected a board and put the handsaw to it. The tool passed clean through the board in two passes.

"I've never seen you round here," Billy said as Paul grabbed the next tread and pulled it free as if it were a toothpick. Billy paused as the giant gripped each of the old nails with the tips of his fingers and shoved them back out the board as straight as the day his father had hammered them in some 20 years ago. Paul eyed each nail to make sure they were straight then used them to install the new step. Billy had seen big men in his day, but never one so strong. But he couldn't help respect the man. It wasn't many hired men that would go so far as to reuse nails.

"Oh, I been here and there and a few places in-between," Paul said offhandedly. He stepped back and checked his work with one eye closed

and the other staring down across his thumb. "Yup. Straight as an arrow. Would you like to inspect the work, Mr Sinclair?"

Billy went down the steps slowly, bouncing his weight on each one. The only sounds from the steps were from his footfalls. He went back up them in an unconscious desire to try and keep as eye to eye with Paul as he could.

"Fair bit of mending," he commented.

"Got to see to that creakin' barn door now. Unless you got somethin' else you need for me to do, Mr Sinclair?"

"Ah... no, no that'll be fine," Billy said as dismissively as he could. Paul nodded and gathered up the unused wood.

"Can I help, Paul?" Everett asked brightly.

"Ask your brother. If'n it's alright by him, it's alright by me," Paul said with a smile. The gesture caught both Everett and Billy by surprise. Everett had never needed his brother's permission for most anything before; he'd always asked his mother when needed. He paused a moment to take in the foreign concept then looked to his brother.

"Is it okay for me to help Paul, Billy?"

"Sure... sure."

The boy's face lit up as he fell into step behind the giant as they headed for the barn. When they were out of sight, Billy kneeled down and inspected the stairs more closely. The nail heads had actually been sunk past the top of the board, like a screw that had been counter-sunk. He shook his head slowly in disbelief and went back inside.

Billy and his mother saw little of Everett and the big man for the rest of the day, at least officially. William made a point to check in on them from a distance. The only time he didn't see them working was when they took a few minutes to watch Granny and the new foal out in the pasture. The foal seemed exceptionally healthy and strong, and mother and babe both seemed in excellent spirits. The foal was already running around the pasture at breakneck speed. Though he'd seen them before in other places, Billy had never seen a pure-white horse on their spread. They still used horses for the ranch work, and he'd make a fine addition. By the time his own

horse, Surefoot, was ready for pasture the foal would be grown into an animal that any man would be proud to own.

Mabel had packed a basket and taken lunch out to the largest and smallest men on the spread. She'd found them in the horse pasture, mending a gate that they had been holding together with a few bits of twine. Luckily the horses were well trained and never strayed too far when the wind or rain would open the gate. They'd fixed that though, and by the looks of it the gate was stronger than the day that Bill Sr's father hung it. She'd fixed half a roast, biscuits and corn on the cob for the hungry pair and watched as they devoured everything but bones and basket. Everett had never liked corn much, but he made a point of devouring three ears himself. The wink she got from Paul when the boy reached for his third ear of corn told her all she need know about the giant's character.

Later in the evening, Billy saddled Surefoot and guided Paul out to the old bunkhouse. It was a long row house that could easily sleep and house twelve men, built back in the days when the Sinclair ranch was a much larger and more prosperous affair. Billy tried to offer Paul a large draft horse they used to plough the family gardens, but he declined and kept up easily with Surefoot's steady gait across the south range. By the time they returned to the house, Mabel had dinner on the table. Paul took his dinner on the porch as was his place as hired help, much to Mabel's dismay. Billy had started to warm to the giant somewhat, but he insisted they keep things professional with the new hand. Paul didn't seem to mind though and doubted they would have a piece of furniture appropriate for his stature for the dinner table.

"Ma, can you pass the carrots?" Everett asked. She looked at him oddly then handed him the bowl.

"I didn't think you liked carrots," Billy commented around a mouthful of liver.

"It's like Paul said... I ain't never seen a rabbit wearin' glasses." The last he delivered in his best deep, manly tone in respectful aping of the big man. Mabel suppressed a laugh while the boy shovelled a spoonful of the orange bits onto

his plate. "Hey, Billy! Did you see the pasture gate? We fixed it up real good!"

"Yeah, I saw it. It'll do, I suppose," Billy answered flatly as he wiped his mouth and got up from the table. He snatched up his tobacco pouch from the top of the icebox and walked out onto the back porch without another word.

"Ma? Why doesn't Billy like Paul?"

"Oh, I think he likes him, all right. He just takes a while to warm up to people is all," his mother assured him, though she wasn't so sure herself. Billy's ego was a bit fragile right now, especially with his Spokane plans falling apart. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

Billy found Paul sitting on a stool made from an old oak stump. They usually used it as a table, but it seemed the only seat the man could use and not look ridiculous or uncomfortable. Billy sat down a few feet away and rolled a cigarette in the dark. He sealed it and started to pat his pockets for a match when a sudden spark flashed in front of him. Paul held out the wooden match and waited patiently for the young man to light his cigarette before bringing it up to his pipe bowl. They sat in silence for a few minutes and smoked, each with their own thoughts.

"Paul? Why are you really here? There's plenty of farms that would pay good money for a man like you."

Paul remained quiet for several moments, then pulled his pipe away from his mouth and examined the rim of the bowl with a critical eye. "More to life than money, Mr Sinclair." They fell silent for a while before Billy spoke again.

"Were you in the war?" he asked.

"Oh, I've fought a time or two, but I missed this last row. Don't think they had uniforms my size." Paul chuckled at his own joke, a deep, warm sound.

"Where'd you work last?"

"Great North. Did a bit of loggin', some ranchin'."

"And now you're here? Seems a bit of a stretch. You know a trade?"

"Loggin' and ranchin'. Ain't that enough for a man to know?"

Billy knew it wasn't enough. In his grandfather's day, even in his father's, that might have

been enough. But the war seemed to change everything. A man's word and handshake just weren't enough anymore. The lawyers and the government had decided they needed more and more. It was so a man couldn't even build a barn on his spread without a permit and new taxes. It was clear that Paul was from a bygone era. That or an impressive liar. Men of his size couldn't live in anonymity, even if they wanted. Stories of the giant would have spread from the ranches or the forests he'd worked. He should be in a circus or Hollywood right now, not here, eating his mother's cooking and mending gates.

"Don't take it personal, Paul, but as your boss I need to ask ya how long you plan to stay on."

"Oh, I don't take nothin' personal Mr Sinclair. Truth to tell, I don't rightly know yet." He put the pipe back in his mouth and took a deep pull. The air around the porch took on the smell of deep woods after a rain, a cloying yet endearing scent as the tobacco smouldered.

"So you're not lookin' to settle in somewheres then?"

"I go where my path takes me," Paul responded simply. "Same as we all do, I reckon." He stood and stretched, his arms bent at the elbow to avoid hitting the porch ceiling. Billy winced as several bones and joints popped and creaked, sounding for all the world like fireworks. "If you got nothing else for me this evening, Mr Sinclair, I'd like to make sure that mother and babe are doing okay and close up the stable for the night. I smell somethin' on the wind... wolf, maybe. Might even bed down in the barn just in case. With your permission, of course."

"What makes you think there's a wolf about?" Billy said, suddenly alarmed.

"Just the way the rabbits was acting on the south range this afternoon. They don't usually move around in the mid-day sun without reason, and that reason is usually 'cause somethin's about that wants to have 'em over for dinner if you catch my meanin'."

Billy nodded in the darkness and stared at the massive ranch hand. With only a few slivers of light from the windows facing the porch, he actually looked somehow bigger, if that were

even possible. "I guess that'd be all right. If something does happen, there's an old bell on a pole out there. Ring it and I'll come runnin' with the scattergun..."

"Oh, I don't take to guns Mr Sinclair. Never liked the feel of 'em, or the smell. Just not... natural, if you take my meanin'. If'n it's an animal that troubles ya, you just have ta think like one and you'll keep 'em away every time. You'll thank your Ma for me, won't you? She's one of the best cooks I've seen, and I've ate from the wagons a' some of the best."

"Yeah. Sure Paul."

"Well then, g'night Mr Sinclair." Paul stepped off the porch without using the stairs and strode across the yard down to the barn.

It was already clear to his brother and his mother that Billy didn't fully trust the man. And if Billy were any judge, Paul was probably even more keenly aware of Billy's distrust than any of the rest. Something just didn't seem right about him, the obvious notwithstanding. He went inside, picked up a stack of plates his mother had just dried and put them in the cupboard above the sink.

"Paul's staying in the barn. Seems to think there's a wolf or something running around. Best to lock the doors tonight."

"Billy Sinclair! We haven't had need to lock a door on this ranch in the space of your life. No need to start now. Besides, if there is a wolf out there, Paul may need to come inside for his own sake. Now, are you worried about a wolf getting in, or is it Paul you're worried over?"

"Look! You don't know the man from Adam, and he's sleepin' not more than a few hundred feet from our front door. Times have changed, Ma. We need to change with 'em. I'm just lookin' out for our best interests is all."

The sound of a truck coming down the drive outside pulled both their attentions to the front of the house. Billy went out to the front porch with his mother behind him. A new pick-up truck came to a gentle stop near the base of the front steps.

"Must be Reynolds. Heard he got a new truck. Must be comin' by to show it off."

"I've already got coffee on. Have him come

on into the kitchen," Mabel said as she went back inside. Reynolds was an older man and had grown up with Billy's father. Their ranches had never been direct competitors, something Billy always assumed could only be a by-product of the two men's upbringing. He could still remember Reynolds and his father sitting up till late at night, right on that very porch, talking about their spreads and the government. Reynolds had been 4F on account of his feet and hadn't gone off to war, something that had been of obvious benefit to his spread. But he'd certainly helped the effort by keeping the wives of his hands that went off on a stipend and donating cattle to the war effort.

"Evening, Mr Reynolds."

"Evening, Billy," he returned as he climbed the steps and shook the younger man's hand. "Beautiful night, ain't it? Moon'll be full tomorrow night, first pretty moon we'll have of the season."

"Seems likely," Billy returned. "Ma's got some coffee on." He opened the screen door for the rancher and followed him through the house to the kitchen. The men sat down as Mabel poured coffee for the three of them and sat down herself.

"I know I'm a day early, Mabel, but I got business in Billings tomorrow mornin', and tomorrow bein' Friday and all I figured you'd want to take care of this so's you could get it to Morganstern on tomorrow's business." Reynolds said as he sipped on his coffee. "Always did make the best coffee, even better than my Jeanie's. You just don't be tellin' her I said that, though." He chuckled and pulled a long envelope out of his coat pocket.

"What're you talking about, Mr Reynolds?" Billy shot dark looks at both the old rancher and his mother. "What's he talkin' about, Ma?"

"I set up a deal with Mr Reynolds, Billy. He's buyin' out 300 head," Mabel said simply as she took the envelope and pulled out the contract within.

"Ya can't do that, Ma! That'll take us down too low! I can't do nothin' with that in Spokane!" Billy nearly yelled as he pounded the table.

“Now, Billy...” Reynolds soothed. “Don’t you think that they offered the Spokane deal to me, too? The futures just ain’t there, and anybody that takes that deal now is gonna lose big. Why do you think they’re offerin’ in the first place? They know most ranches ain’t gonna bite on the deal, so the futures price won’t go up in anticipation of it. But the few that do’ll make them a tidy profit. Man’d have to be desperate to move that many head then. Best to move ‘em now when you can get a better price.”

“But that’s gonna leave us nothin’!” he argued as he snatched the contract away from his mother. He scanned it quickly and threw it down on the table. “That price ain’t much better than what the futures are sayin’! You trying to rob us, Reynolds?”

“Now slow down, son. Times ain’t the greatest right now. Your Ma said you needed to make a quick and fair sale to help out with the bank, and I’m bein’ more than fair.”

Billy seethed as the mood in the room darkened to match the storm behind his eyes. “Ma! You’re makin’ me look the fool! No! We ain’t doin’ this!” he shouted as he pushed away from the table and stood quickly. “No way in hell you’re doin’ this!”

“You watch your mouth William,” Mabel said, her words as rich in quiet dignity as his was in passion. “And I’m still responsible for this ranch. I still say what happens and what doesn’t. The day I die is the day your say is all that’s needed, not before. We can make the mortgage and have enough to tend the rest through the summer. It’ll take a year or two, but we still have breedin’ stock, and the markets won’t stay down forever. If we time it right, we’ll be back on top in a few years. We’ll be out from under the mortgage then and running in the black...”

“I can’t believe you’d do this behind my back, Ma! Fine! Sell our lives away! Paul was right... there is a wolf around. But he drives a new truck, and the rabbits ain’t got nothin’ to worry about unless they have a few pennies!” Billy stormed from the kitchen and out the door. Moments later their old truck was tearing down the drive.

“I’m sure sorry about this, Mabel,” Reynolds

said into the silence. “I didn’t know the boy didn’t know about the deal.”

“He ain’t a boy anymore, Harry. Just wish he’d realise that. It’s just been hard on him is all. He’ll calm down in a day or two. Got the makings of a good man, if he’d just let it happen.”

“I sure hope so, Mabel.”



Early spring had brought the young ranchers and hands out in full force. The young men worked hard and long from sun to sun, and the odd occasion that brought them to town made sure that the *Mustang*, the only tavern in Hardinsberry, kept its reputation. It could be a rowdy place, especially on paydays and the changing of the seasons as the young bucks sought to spend their money and act like they thought real men should. The sheriff turned a blind eye to the place, so long as the proprietor kept the noise and action inside.

The mood inside was charged with youthful adrenaline and not a little alcohol. Beer and hard liquor were the only things served in the place, and any man that dared ask for a glass of wine would be run out as a limp-wristed dandy. The only women that dared enter the place were those that worked there or cared little for their reputations. The war had made more than a few women into ranchers overnight, and they had had to adapt to the increased presence of the fairer sex nearly overnight. The intervening years had seen more than a few women in the place, but it still lacked even a separate facility for them, not counting the rooms upstairs for the working girls that depended on a lonely ranch hand’s pay to keep her. The saloon still sported the open stairway leading up to these rooms so that all could see from the bar if their favourite girl had a ribbon wrapped round the knob.

Billy had been there for nearly an hour but had drunk three hours’ worth. One of the girls had seen him for an easy mark and had been working him for nearly as long as he talked and bragged to his few friends in the place. Everyone knew Billy, and most had known his father. Few ever called him on his boasts and bravado, chalking it up to a dying ranch. A few had

already gone, bought up by large companies that found it far easier and cheaper to raise the cattle themselves than to work through the ranches. Even the men that worked those ranches frequented the place, but there was little fraternisation between the family ranches and the corporate ones, unless you counted the fights.

Billy had his back to the bar as he sat on a stool, the harlot to his left and a double shot of rye to his right. A friend from the Arbuck place in the southern end of the county had turned the conversation to horses, and Billy was regaling one and all with the birth of the new foal that morning.

"White ash shnow, I tell ya!" he said more loudly than needed even in the crowded saloon, his slurred voice betraying his condition. "Never had one like that on the shpread 'fore. Be the fashtest in the county, I reckon'!"

A tall, thin man in a worn drover coat to his right turned to Billy and tipped his hat. "'Scuse me..." the man said. "Did I hear you say you got a pure *white* foal?"

Billy turned to the man and eyed him up. "Yeah, yeah I did mishter... but I don't shee where it'sh any buishness a yersh..."

"Don't mean no trouble, just askin' is all." The stranger flagged down the bartender and laid a silver dollar on the bar with his gloved hand. "Drinks for me and my friend, here." He turned to Billy and tipped his hat again. "Please. For my speakin' out of turn." He offered the drink to Billy and saluted with his own glass. Billy eyed him warily, but only for a moment. A free drink was a free drink, after all.

"Thanksh..." Billy said and downed the rye. "You from around here?" Billy asked as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Me? No. But I do have reason for askin' about your foal, though." He waved to the bartender again and overpaid for another drink for Billy.

"Whatsh that?" Billy asked, the distrust back in his slurred voice.

"See, I work for a man that collects horses. Has a big spread out in Colorado, a real gentleman rancher. He collects odd horses, don't have a pure white one yet. I bet he'd pay handsome

for yours. If it really is pure white though. Not a fleck of colour on it?"

"You callin' me a liar, mishter?" Billy shot back even as he took the second drink from the stranger's money.

"Nothin' of the sort!" the stranger shot back. "I don't buy drinks for liars. Just that my boss'd want me to make sure before I wired him for several thousand dollars."

"Thoushansh?" Billy mumbled.

"He pays top dollar, 'specially for somethin' he don't have one of yet," the stranger answered simply. "If you'd be interested in sellin' such an animal, that is."

Billy thought for a moment. They could make the mortgage without selling a single head, leaving him free to work on the Spokane deal. He smiled and extended his drinking hand. "William Shinclair..."

"Edgar Barnhart..." the stranger returned as he gripped Billy's hand. There was strength in the stranger's grip that belied his thin stature. Billy paid it no mind, though. His head was firmly on the topic of money. "Think I could see this horse of yours? You know, just so's I could tell my boss what I seen with my own eyes?"

"Why, sure! You jusht come on over tomorrow mornin' and..."

"I got business in the morning. How 'bout tomorrow evenin'?"

Billy took a piece of scrap paper from his shirt pocket, scrawled some directions on it and handed it to Barnhart. "If ya can't find it, jusht ashk around for the Shinclair place, besht damn shpread in the whole county!"

"I'm sure it is," Barnhart answered and shoved the paper into his coat. "Tomorrow evenin', then." He tipped his hat once more and walked out of the saloon. A ranch hand from one of the corporate spreads took the stranger's place and hailed the bartender.

"I sure hope that foal's all you said it was," he cautioned Billy. "You know they can change colour on ya, don't ya? We had one was born white like that a few years ago, turned paint 'fore its first month."

Billy turned quickly, nearly knocking the whore down as he went. "And just what would

you know 'bout it, mishter? Huh? Or are you callin' me a liar, too?"

"Easy there, son. Just tryin' ta help, that's all. Wouldn't want you to get shamed or nothin' if the man comes back in a few months with a paint and wantin' his money back."

The corporate hand had a few years and several pounds of muscle on Billy, but rye has a way of making a man see past these minor differences.

"Why you sonofa..." Billy pulled back and struck the man with a rabbit punch to the side of his head. He stumbled into the man beside him, a hand from the Warner family spread a few places over from the Sinclair's. The corporate hand turned back to Billy and swung a hard right hand without so much as a word. The bartender yelled at them, but it was too late. Though they couldn't have heard the exchange, many had seen them trade blows. With tensions high and booze flowing free, the testosterone in the room built to a fever pitch as everyone in the place thought that a row was starting up again between the corporate hands and the family ranches. As soon as Jeb Warner turned the corporate hand around and clouted him across the jaw, the place erupted into a brawl.

Glass broke across the room as tables splintered and waitresses and whores ran for cover. The bartender pulled a sawed-off shotgun out from under the bar and fired into the air, but even that noise didn't quell the violence. He roared a few times and let the second barrel go with the same effect. Not wanting more holes in his roof, he threw down the empty shotgun and grabbed a baseball bat from its accustomed place behind the bar. He'd worked and owned saloons all his life, and if there was one thing the old man knew it was how to stop a brawl. He waded out into the bar and started taking shots at anyone that wouldn't break up their battles. A few of the older hands had taken his meaning and had backed out of the fray, retreating to the tables that lined the far wall to watch the young ones. Being nearer the door, they were the first to see Paul come in.

He was well better than a foot taller than any man in the room, and probably two feet wider.

He waded into the press of bodies easily, and those that wouldn't get out of his way required only a gentle hand that covered their entire shoulder to guide them from his path. He scanned the room and found Billy, held by one man and being worked over by another. He took three long strides and knocked several duelling men out of the way as the combat in the bar died away. Most had seen the giant now and were licking their wounds, waiting to see what would happen next.

The bartender had gotten into the spirit of the battle royal and was doing far more damage than a sensible man should. It served them right, though. Who was going to pay for all this damage? Who was it that was going to be up until dawn cleaning up the mess? Not the drunken bastards wreaking havoc on his place that was for sure.

The man holding Billy saw the bartender coming, bat swinging all the way. But he also saw Paul coming up behind the bartender. He paused for a moment and slacked his grip on the young man, giving Billy the chance to push off and get free. Billy swung a haymaker at his surprised assailant. The swing, driven by fear and pain and booze dropped the man to the floor just as the bartender brought his Louisville Slugger around in a wide arc. Billy registered the bat and knew there was no way to avoid the blow headed for his temple. He closed his eyes and waited, but the shock never came. The bar grew eerily quiet as he opened his eyes and saw the bartender stopped in mid-swing like he was posing for a baseball card. There was no mistaking the massive hand that held the bloodied business end of the bat. Paul's fingers were so large they actually came back to touch his palm around the bat.

"Sorry, friend. But what kinda man would I be if I let you do that to my boss? Not much of one, I'd wager," Paul said in his easy, friendly manner.

The bartender struggled with the bat for a moment, still fuelled by blind rage. He spun in a circle and tugged on the bat, expecting it to break free of whoever held it. He stopped cold and stared. Where a man's face should have been

was a broad, flannel-clad chest. He stared ever upward until he had to crane his neck to look Paul in the eye.

"Now why don't you all just settle down and get back to what it was you were doing before all this nonsense, eh?"

The bartender stammered for a few moments, then pulled his bat free with a violent jerk. He brought it back around in the highest arc he could against the giant. No man, no matter how big, could take a beating from a Louisville Slugger. It was a motto he had lived by, and one that got disproved with harsh clarity that night in the Mustang. The bat struck Paul across the face with an audible crack, a blow that would have easily sent a ball sailing out of the park. The giant swung his head to the side from the force of the impact, but his feet never moved from the spot. He put the fingers of his left hand up to his cheek and touched it gently as the bartender rallied for another blow.

"Mister, you ought not do that again..." Paul warned him quietly. His voice was even, and though it lacked a bit of the buoyant quality it normally had it still held no sign of anger or malice. "Just came to pick up my boss is all. I don't want any trouble..."

The bat swung again, this time accompanied by a war cry and coming from the opposite side. It struck this time on the right but with much the same result. Paul wiped at his right cheek with the back of his left hand and looked at the tiny smear of blood across his knuckles. The bartender staggered back a step and stared at Paul. His face had gone white as his knuckles as he stared up into great, narrowing eyes.

"The Good Lord said I should turn the other cheek, but I guess some people just see that as another thing to aim at," he said softly. The saloon had turned quiet as a funeral as everyone held their breath. "Mister, I like to think I follow His word best I can. And I think He tests us every day. Guess you're my test for the day." His right hand shot out, grabbing the end of the bat firmly and lifting it up. The bartender tightened his two-handed grip out of reflex and found himself suspended off the ground several feet so he

could stare into the giant's eyes. "Mister, you're gonna need a new bat when you wake up."

Paul squeezed the fire-hardened ash in his grip and was rewarded with a satisfying crack as the wood snapped and oozed out from between his fingers. Shattered as it was, the bat couldn't hold up the man's considerable girth and he plummeted towards the floor. But before he could land, Paul's left hand snaked out and grabbed the man by the leg. With a swing of his arm, the bartender sailed across the room and crashed into the large mirror behind the bar. More than one hardened ranch hand cried out as the sound cut through the silence like a knife. A few of the regular patrons and hired help ran behind the counter to check out the old man.

"Mr Sinclair, you ready to go?" Paul asked as his smile returned. Billy looked up at him and staggered a bit from the rye and the beating, then back to one of his friends as they nursed his own blackened eyes.

"Billy? Who the hell is that?"

"That? That's my new hand..." Billy said more easily than he thought he could.

"He got a brother?" the man asked enviously.

Paul waited for Billy to walk past then fell in step behind him. The crowd parted easily for the pair as they crossed the shredded tavern and made for the door. Billy walked out the door as Paul stopped short and motioned for one of the barmaids. The girl was understandably reluctant but was drawn by the big man's warm smile. Hesitantly, she came over within a few feet of him. He dug around in his pocket, pulled out two golden coins and placed them in her hand. "One's for your boss to help fix the mirror and the place, and the other's for you ladies to divvy up how you see fit. Never let it be said Mr Sinclair don't pay his own way. Now there's a good girl." He winked a huge, bright blue eye at her and continued out the door.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" Billy yelled.

"Your Ma was worried 'bout you. I was getting a bit thirsty myself, so I thought I'd come down for a drink."

"I can handle myself just fine, Paul... you did-

n't need to come in there, throwin' your weight around."

"Truth to tell, Mr Sinclair, I just couldn't see lettin' the proprietor clout you like that. Wouldn't be real honourable-like of me to let somethin' like that happen to the man that pays my wages, now would it?"

Billy stared at the man for a moment then almost laughed despite himself. "The look on old man Ferguson's face *was* pretty funny when you grabbed that bat like that..."

"Well, been my experience that some men just don't know when to leave well enough alone," Paul responded simply. "With your permission, Mr Sinclair, it's getting late. I really need to be headin' back to the spread and check on things. I still get the feelin' somethin' ain't right."

Billy silently agreed with the hand. But he wasn't sure if they were referring to the same thing. He looked at the hitching post and didn't see the big draft he'd given Paul permission to use. "You walk here?"

"Beautiful night out, thought the exercise would do me some good, walk off some of your Ma's fine cookin'."

"Well, hop in the back, I'll give you a ride."

Paul stepped up easily into the bed of the truck and leaned against the cab. Billy wasn't being impolite. They both knew that there was no way he could fit comfortably in the cab of the truck. Billy got in and started up the old truck in a haze of blue smoke and eased it into gear and down the road away from town. Paul felt around his palm and picked a few errant, blooded splinters from it. He smiled and tossed them out the side as the truck picked up speed and sped along the dirt road into the moonlit night.



Billy opened his eyes and immediately cursed the effort. Bright sunlight spilled into the room and assaulted his senses as he tried to pull the blanket up over his head. The movement produced pain that threatened to black him out. The events of the night before filtered slowly back to him. His ribs would be incredibly bruised right now; some might be broken. His head pounded and his mouth tasted like cotton as he rolled over

onto his side and gingerly stood up. He paused once he got to his feet and swayed unsteadily as he made sure his legs wouldn't betray him. From the sunlight in the room, he knew it to be well past dawn. He looked down and saw someone had bandaged his battered ribs. Seemed he owed a debt of thanks to Paul for that. His mother would have let him bear the pain before she would have done such a thing over a barroom brawl. Of course, he couldn't just thank Paul. After all, that wouldn't be the proper thing for a man in his position. He slowly, carefully put on his shirt and buttoned it, neglecting to tuck in the tails. The pain would have been more bother than it was worth.

He remembered clearly his meeting with Barnhart and his offer for the foal, though. The thought brightened his mood a bit as he went downstairs a step at a time. If everything went according to plan, he would have saved the farm and still left their options open. He found his mother in the kitchen washing the breakfast dishes and sat down at the table. Without a word between them, she set down a cup of lukewarm coffee and two aspirin and continued with her chores. He sipped then winced at the tepid coffee and took the aspirin dry.

"Don't do nothin' with that cheque Reynolds gave you last night, Ma. I've got a better deal in the works."

"A deal is a deal, Billy," she said without turning away from the sink. "If we go back on our word, what are we then?"

"Smart is what we are, Ma. I met a man last night that's interested in buying the new foal. Works for a collector out of Colorado and pays good hard cash for odd ones. Seems he doesn't have a pure white horse yet, and I aim to provide him one for a healthy sum. Enough to take care of the mortgage and leave the herd out of it."

"Pure white horses ain't that rare, Billy. And I'm certainly not going to stake the ranch on some drunken deal you cooked up at the saloon. Man was probably just pulling your leg."

"I don't think so, Ma. He was a stranger and pretty free with his money. I've heard tell of men that has more money than they know what to do with, and I think I've just found one."

"Well, I'm not ready to put the future of the ranch in those kind of hands." she said sternly, still with her back to him. He slapped the table and instantly regretted it as waves of pain rippled across his gut.

"Damn it, Ma! You go around behind me and do this, and then when I do have the chance to make everything work out you still want to treat me like I'm a kid!"

"If you acted the part of a man, I'd be more inclined to treat you like one."

Billy felt like his mother had slapped him across the face. He stood up and ignored the pain from his ribs as he charged for the back door.

Mabel stopped what she was doing and stared down into the sink. She hadn't meant to say it that way, but she was never known for holding back when it came to the important matters in life. The sooner her eldest son realised that he didn't know everything there was to know, the sooner he might actually learn nothing came as easy as he thought, and for the ranch to grow would take far more elbow grease and far less dreaming. Of course, that didn't stop her from going to the back door and watching him cover the ground to the barn. She shook her head and sighed, hoping that one day he might realise that she was only trying to do what was best for everyone.

Billy stormed through the barn door and found the mare's birthing stall empty. He went out the other side and crossed to the horse pasture and found mare and foal standing at the fence facing Paul and Everett. Paul had his massive hand extended and seemed to be rubbing the foal's head while the mare looked on. Billy had been around horses his entire life, and he couldn't remember ever seeing a foal so fearless so soon after birth. He closed with them and watched as Everett extended his hand slowly to the foal. It shied a bit, but Paul seemed to be talking to it, calming it. He was too far away to hear what Paul was saying, but he had already been regaled with the tale of the foal's birth and Paul's seeming ability to calm the mare. Maybe there was some meat to the story after all. He approached the gathering slowly out of reflex, not wanting to spook the animals.

"See? As long as you show 'em you're a friend, they'll come to you every time," Paul said to Everett. His large thumb was rubbing the centre of the foal's forehead and it didn't seem to mind the attention. Everett had cupped the foal's chin and was speaking to it in his best Paul-voice, telling it how beautiful it was. As soon as Billy came to stand behind Everett though, the foal ran off as if stung, followed by Granny.

"Billy! Did ya see? Did ya see that? He let me touch his head and everything!" Everett beamed at his brother and turned back to watch the foal run and jump around its mother. The mare cast a baleful glance at Billy and went back to watching her foal.

The look almost gave Billy the shivers. He shook off the feeling and stared at Paul for a moment. With the giant still kneeling, they were as near to eye to eye as they had ever been.

"Everett, go see if Ma needs any help."

"Aww! Do I haveta? Me and Paul was going to go out and work on the fence some more."

"Do what I tell ya, Everett," Billy answered harshly. Everett stared at him for a moment, cast a fleeting look to Paul and headed off for the house at a run. Billy leaned against the fence and watched as the foal cavorted around the pasture. It was truly amazing how strong the foal was. He was acting weeks older than he was. "You the one that wrapped me up?"

"Yup."

The pair watched in silence while the foal explored his new world and the mare looked on. "I don't ever want to see you do that again," Billy said quietly, his voice shaking slightly. "I can handle myself, don't need no one playin' mother hen on my behalf. We clear, Paul?"

"Not a problem, Mr Sinclair. Just thought your Ma'd been through enough what with losin' your Pa and all."

"And what would you know 'bout that, huh?" Billy suddenly turned on him. "You been snoopin', huh?"

"Nope," Paul said simply as he lit his pipe. "But it don't take a dog's ears to hear all the way down to the barn, neither."

"You just mind your own business, Paul. It's got nothin' to do with you. I'd let you go but Ma

and Everett seem to have taken a liking to you. That don't mean I won't, though."

"Mr Sinclair... a wise man once told me that you learn more by watchin' and listenin' than you do by talkin'. Words I've always tried to live by."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nuthin', I guess," Paul stared out into the pasture and watched the foal. "He's gonna make a right fine friend for you, Mr Sinclair."

"Might be a friend, but no friend of mine. Got a buyer comin' out to look at him this evenin'."

"You selling him? You can't sell him!" Paul said suddenly. "He's far too young yet, have to wait at least a year or so."

"He'll stay on till he's off his mother, but no longer."

"Mr Sinclair, with all due respect, I think you're makin' a mistake in sellin' him..."

"Well then... that's my mistake ta make, now ain't it? Make sure he looks presentable before supper. Seems he's taken a liking to you, too."

Billy walked away, leaving Paul to stare after him. Laughing eyes narrowed ever so slightly. He needed more time; it was too early for this now. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled low. The horses immediately turned their ears then came back to the fence. He rubbed the foal's head again and stared hard into its eyes. It was still too early to tell. The moon would show tonight, if his hunch was right. But he still couldn't shake the feeling that the moon would tell something else, too; something far more dangerous than a man-child in the throes of growing pains.

The day passed uneventfully. Mabel and Billy had reached an agreement that they would put the cheque in an escrow account at the bank, with Morganstern knowing full well its intent to stave off any issues with the bank. That done, the house seemed to fall into more of a peaceful nature for the rest of the day. Everett spent his time with Paul working on an oft-patched section of the horse pasture fence to make it more presentable for the company they expected later that evening. Billy spent the bulk of his day out on the range with Surefoot. He hid the pain from his bruised body and tried to use it to create a

stoic and wise air about him. Barnhart seemed a decent enough sort, but if his boss trusted him with his purse strings, it was obvious that the man would come from shrewd stock.

After lunch Everett lost track of the giant, a feat odd enough in itself. He searched for him high and low and finally found him outside the old equipment shed out behind the barn. A pile of tangled chains and other bits of steel was at his feet as he mumbled about his thick fingers and the comparatively small links he was trying to untangle. Everett came up behind him and stared around his thigh at the rusted, wickedly-barbed steel jaws in his hands.

"What's these for?"

"There's still a wolf about. Thought I'd oil these up and see about putting 'em out around the scrub near the chicken coop and the outside of the fence around the horse pasture. Can't be too careful with the curs."

"Need some help?" Everett asked hopefully.

"Well, I don't want you handlin' the traps. Those teeth're sharp and full a' the lockjaw. But I bet those fingers of yours would do a fine job on separating these chains." He smiled at the boy and handed him a mass of rusty links almost as big as he was. Everett sat down on the ground and started worrying at the lengths while Paul doused the jaws with bar oil. With his strength, even the most stubborn of them soon swung free and easy. Paul disliked working with metal. It was a cold, dead thing with no real life of its own. Not like wood or animals or stone. These had a true personality and didn't need man to be complete.

"I heard Ma say that Billy wants to sell the foal," Everett said quietly. "Wish he wouldn't. He's one of the prettiest things I've ever seen on the ranch."

Paul stopped for a moment and looked down at the boy. He could tell that the boy was upset by his brother's plans. But you didn't make it on any kind of farm by wearing your attachments on your sleeve. What was a pet today could be food or in an auction tomorrow.

"Your brother's just doin' what he thinks is best. Not for us to say one way or the other, though just between you, me and the foal I agree

with you.” He opened one of the freshly-oiled traps and slipped the catch over the mechanism. He laid it down on the ground and stepped back, dropping a thick stick on the pressure plate as he went. The old jaws still had some life and snapped together almost instantly, burying the teeth almost completely through the green wood with an audible crack. Satisfied, Paul threaded a bit of the chain through the catch and set it off to the side.

Everett suddenly stood up and laid the chain down on the ground. “Shoot! I clean forgot Ma wanted me to help her with the chicken for dinner tonight. I better go and find her. Sorry, Paul.”

“That’s okay Everett. You just make sure you wash up good, get all that rust off of ya.” He tousled the boy’s hair and watched as he ran away. Times like these Paul wished for even a small sliver of such youthful, naïve energy. He’d never actually had a childhood for himself, and deep down he almost envied them. But then, he’d never really had to experience the pain of having childhood dreams and absolute truths shattered, either.

He sighed and went back to work. Within a few moments, he had arrayed the half-dozen jaw traps around him and had enough chain to anchor each wherever he would. He went to the small pump behind the shed and washed the oil and rust from his hands before reaching into an old wooden toolbox. He wiped the pliers on his flannel and examined the jaws. A bit worn, but they would do. He clucked his tongue a few times and looked up to the sun. He only had a few more hours of good light left.

The last hours of the afternoon had turned hot and muggy. Billy wiped the sweat from his forehead and hung his hat on a hook by the back door. Despite being early in the season, the spring grasses were starting to shoot up. Better for the herd and far better for their feed and hay budgets. The streams they depended on to water the herd were high and clear, fed by runoff from the winter snows. He couldn’t ask for a better start to a season, and each of these factors would play heavily on the success he was planning for the ranch this year. But it all hinged on Barnhart and his eccentric employer buying the colt. True,

he would have to wait till it was old enough to be taken from its mother, but business etiquette would demand at least half the agreed-upon amount as a down payment. He looked out and saw Paul washing his hands at the old well-pump at the edge of the yard. He shook his head slowly as he watched. It was a good thing the giant was as well-natured as he was. He vividly remembered the events at the saloon and shuddered inwardly at the broken bat and fat old Ferguson sailing through the air. Ferguson had to go better than 300 pounds, and with only one arm Paul had thrown him nearly twenty feet. But the man seemingly knew his place, and aside from a scant few instances he’d done nothing to indicate he was anything other than what he seemed.

Mabel came out on the porch and struggled with the legs of a large, folding card table. Billy helped her set it up and stood back while she threw a clean, chequered table cloth over it.

“What’s this?” Billy asked.

“Too hot to eat in the kitchen, what with the weather and the cooking. I made extra. I suspect Paul’s been eatin’ less than his fill, what with his size and all. Man that works as hard as him shouldn’t be keepin’ modest when it comes to the dinner table.”

“You tryin’ to say somethin’, Ma?”

“What I’m sayin’ is that no man should go away from the table hungry when that’s what he’s workin’ for. That means you and Everett, too. Sakes, that boy’s eatin’ everything I put in front of him now. Even carrots.”

“Everett hates carrots, Ma. Always has.”

“More of Paul’s doin’ I figure. Told the boy that if he wanted to get big and strong, he needed to do like he did and eat all his Ma’s cookin’.” She finished straightening the cloth and watched Paul come up the yard towards them. “Strikes me as a man that’s been ‘round children before, the way he is with Everett.”

“And by the looks of him, he probably ate ‘em, too,” Billy joked. Mabel slapped the back of his head playfully and went back into the kitchen as Paul stepped up onto the porch.

“Need to be mindful ‘round the coop and out past the horse pasture fence, Mr Sinclair. I set

some of those old foot traps you had back in the shed.”

“Still have wolves on your mind, Paul?”

“Yup.” Paul caught sight of the table and removed his ever-present knit cap. “Oh! Didn’t know I was in the dinin’ hall.”

“Ma’s idea. Said it was too hot to eat at the kitchen table tonight. Though I suspect it’s as much for your benefit as for anything else.”

“Shoot! That ain’t a necessary thing, Mr Sinclair. Ain’t too many cook shacks and long houses built for a man of my girth. I’m well-used ta takin’ my meals outdoors. Fact, I’ve come ta prefer it in a way.”

Mabel interrupted them with a platter holding all the best parts of four fried chickens and hefted it onto the table. “Everett!” she called out, “supper’s ready!”

“That sure is a lot of chicken, Ma,” Billy commented.

“And a lot of other fixin’s inside. Why don’t you help me bring the rest out?” Billy followed her back into the kitchen as Paul looked down at the mass of chicken on the platter. He’d been eating somewhat sparsely since he arrived, making sure that he wasn’t placing an undue burden on the family. Truth be told, he could probably polish off the platter by himself. He could fool a lot of people, but apparently a woman and mother always knew when a man was hungry. He smiled and went about collecting chairs and moving his stump around to the table.

Mabel had outdone herself. When the ranch was running strong, they had had more than a dozen hands to feed. Mabel had done the cooking chores along with the book keeping to save money on hiring a cook. One of the things that any man that ever worked the Sinclair spread during the heyday could be counted on to recollect was the three squares a day. There wasn’t a woman alive in the county that could cook as well and in such quantity.

The men of the present-day Sinclair Ranch dug in with fervour, and even Billy was in better than usual spirits. They talked about the work they’d been doing and what was still to be done and how they would do it. But the mood dark-

ened somewhat when the subject of the newest horse came around.

“I wonder if the man that wants to buy Drahkshin is with the circus,” Everett said excitedly over his second helping of carrots. “He sure would make a pretty horse for those acrobats like we saw at the state fair last year.”

“Drakh *what?*” Billy asked.

“Drahkshin. I heard Paul calling it that this afternoon out at the pasture fence. Is that a foreign name, Paul?” Everett asked innocently.

“It’s Dutch,” Paul responded before he filled his mouth with mashed potatoes.

“Don’t matter what it is. You all shouldn’t be namin’ it anything,” said Billy, irritated enough to put down his fork. “It ain’t gonna be here long enough for that. His new owner can name him.”

“Now, Billy. Everything needs a name. Don’t seem right to just call it *horse*, now does it? ‘Sides, you don’t even know that this Colorado man is going to buy it. Just don’t see the big fuss, anyway. No dime a dozen, but a white horse ain’t exactly rare, either.”

“Well, apparently in Colorado they are. And an all-white horse, without a speck or mark on it, is pretty far between,” Billy said, his agitation growing. “You all just do what I tell you to do tonight and I’m sure it’ll all go right.”

“Mr Sinclair, beggin’ your pardon, but I still think it’s a bad idea to be lookin’ to sell that colt right now. It’s still way too early. Besides, it could get spots tomorrow mornin’. Those things take time to really show. Wouldn’t want the ranch to get a name for sellin’ what it don’t have.”

“Well, Paul... I really don’t see it as your place to worry ‘bout the reputation of the Sinclair Ranch. You let the Sinclairs worry ‘bout that.”

“Just sayin’ is all,” Paul said. He swallowed the potatoes and looked at Mabel. “Mrs Sinclair, this is one of the finest meals I’ve ever had the pleasure to sit down to.”

“Why, thank you, Paul. It’s nothing, really. Just wanted to make sure all my boys were fed right.”

“And how!” Everett remarked. At first, the boy had tried to keep up with Paul, but by the

giant's third helping of potatoes and beans all he could do was clear his plate and watch in awe as the big man devastated the table. The man was no messy eater though, just fast and hungry.

After dinner was cleared away, Billy paced the length of the front porch and smoked, waiting nervously for Barnhart to show. The sun was ready to set before the man came down the drive in a pick-up with a small trailer attached to it. Paul came out of the barn and stood waiting while Billy met the man at the drive and walked him over to the horse pasture. Mabel came out of the house and joined them as they stood at the pasture fence.

"It's too soon to tell..." Paul mumbled to himself as he cast a glance at the setting sun. He strode over to the group with Everett in tow.

"Oh, this here's Paul, Mr Barnhart," Billy said as the giant towered over them. Paul stared hard at Barnhart. The man stared back at him, eyes narrowed slightly. Paul sniffed the air and kept a stern look on his face, disconcerting for more than just his size. "He's one of our hands."

"Paul..." Barnhart acknowledged and tipped his hat.

"Barnhart..." Paul returned his nod and folded his massive arms across his keg-barrel chest.

"There they are!" Everett exclaimed and pointed out into the pasture. The mare and colt had come to investigate the humans to see if they'd brought the customary carrots or sugar. They came across the pasture at a gallop, then stopped short as the mare cut slightly into the foal's path to stop it a dozen yards from the fence. The mare's nostrils flared a few times as it regarded the group and turned to conceal the foal even more.

"Now what do you suppose has got into 'em?" Billy wondered aloud. "Granny ain't usually like that."

"More like as not me," Barnhart said easily without taking his eyes off Paul. "Bein' a stranger and all."

"Could be." Paul said simply. Billy was too busy to notice, but Mabel and Everett could sense the tension between Paul and this stranger Barnhart.

"Paul, you seem to have a way with Granny... see if you can get her to come over so Mr Barnhart can get a look at the young'un."

Paul looked out into the pasture and shook his head slowly. "'Fraid I can't do that, Mr Sinclair."

"What? Paul, I ain't askin', I'm tellin'. Now get that foal over here," Billy said sternly as if he were talking to Everett.

"She don't want to come over here, Mr Sinclair. If I make her, she ain't gonna trust me again."

"Paul..." Billy started. Barnhart put the back of his hand to Billy's chest, interrupting him.

"Don't worry about it, Mr Sinclair. I'll get 'em over here." He hopped the fence as if it weren't there and walked slowly towards the pair of horses. He spoke softly to them and finally got the mare and foal to look into his eyes. They continued to stare as if frozen in place as he approached them slowly. Though they didn't move, Granny's nostrils continued to flare and her chest had started to heave from her heavy breathing. She obviously wanted to move but didn't seem able. The rest of them couldn't see the foal for the mare from this angle.

When Barnhart got within a few feet of the horses, Granny could take no more and suddenly leaped from her place towards Barnhart. Billy shouted out a warning as the terrified horse bolted for the man. With unnatural speed, Barnhart sidestepped the mare's charge and lashed out with his right hand. He hit the mare in the side of the neck, the blow stunning her and dropping her to the ground.

The foal still seemed transfixed and rooted to the spot. Everett cried out for Granny and started to mount the fence. Paul reached out and snatched the boy up by his shirt collar and set him down gently at his mother's feet. Billy stood and stared at the downed Granny, then at Barnhart as he kneeled before the colt and started rubbing its forehead as he had seen Paul do.

"Mrs Sinclair, Mr Sinclair... I thank ya for the best grub I've had in a long time and the chance to see your beautiful spread, but I'm afraid I have to give you my notice. It's been a pleasure workin' for you." He looked down at Everett, then to Mabel. "Everett, son... you stay here

with your Ma. Mr Sinclair? You, too. This ain't for you now."

The sun finished its descent quickly and had cast the world into dusk as Paul stepped over the fence. Everett made to run to him, but Mabel grabbed his shoulders and quieted him.

"What the hell is going on here?" Billy managed to gasp as the mare twitched and jerked on the ground. The clear day had left a cloudless night, letting the moon take the sun's place in rapid succession.

"This ain't no horse, and that ain't no man," Paul said without looking back at the group.

The colt suddenly spasmed and bleated as it reared back away from Barnhart's touch. It bucked and started to run in tight circles, first around Barnhart, then its mother. It suddenly broke from its path and ran to one of the fence posts, slamming its head against it and rubbing vigorously. Chunks of fur and flesh tore away as it frantically butted the post, spurting blood across the rough wood. Everett screamed and nearly broke free of his mother's grasp. Mabel's maternal instincts were on overdrive now, making her nearly as strong in body as she was in will. She restrained Everett with a single arm and reached out, dragging Billy toward her as well. Paul changed his course and went to the foal, turning his back on the oddly-smiling Barnhart.

Paul kneeled and tried to calm the young horse. It took several seconds before the colt could recognise him through its blood-filled eyes. Paul ran his thumb over the spot and nodded in satisfaction at the small protrusion that had just crested the flesh. He could feel it elongate under his thumb, growing several inches long in the space of a few moments. The horn was twisted in a tight spiral that shimmered like wet porcelain and seemed to glow with an inner light in the growing dusk.

"I been lookin' for you everywhere!" Paul said happily.

"And so have I," Barnhart said as he started to walk towards the giant. "This is not your matter, Green Man. You have no jurisdiction here." The man's voice had changed considerably as he

walked, losing its homey accent and becoming far more powerful and low.

"Aye, and that's where you are wrong," Paul said as he stood to his full height and turned to face Barnhart. "One got loose and came to the World. Had a bit of a dalliance with yon dame... Drahkshin here was the result. The sire is from the Realm, hence the foal is under my protection and will return with me. Do not toy with my patience, Wolf. Be on your way and trouble these good people no more."

"Hmmm..." Barnhart growled low in his throat as the full body of the moon came into view. "I think not."

"Do not violate the Pact in my presence, Wolf, else I'll have the skin of yet another of your kind to lie before my hearth," Paul warned.

"You are in the mortal world, Green Man... you do not know how truly limited your power is here. I will take the bastard offspring with me now. My master has use for it." Barnhart stopped and threw back his head as his skin started to bubble and change. The Sinclairs watched, transfixed by fear as Barnhart's arms and legs elongated. His entire body gained thickness and mass as his clothes shredded off his body, unable to contain the growing ferocity within. Claws nearly a foot long sprouted in great gouts of blood and ruined flesh from Barnhart's fingers, while his face grew and stretched into a muzzle full of impossibly sharp, jagged teeth. Long, pointed ears sprouted from his head, knocking his hat to the ground as a thick coat of ragged, gray fur erupted like a spreading fire across his body. He dropped to the ground and lifted his head, howling to the moon. Later, everyone in the county would claim to have heard the horrible sound. And the answer to the call.

The woods surrounding the pasture came alive with responding howls and not a few yelps of pain as nearly a dozen creatures broke from various points in the scrub and made for the pasture. Those unlucky enough to be near the chicken coop and the northern side of the pasture found the traps Paul had laid earlier in the day in the worst way. The silver Paul had taken from his own mouth and used to cover the jaws of the traps went to work on those servants of the wolf,

searing their flesh from the inside out. The werewolves that remained came across the pasture at a full run, some on two legs and some on all fours and broke around their leader like a wave bearing straight for Paul.

"You should all run for the house now," Paul said over his shoulder to the family. "The boy doesn't need to see this."

Mabel nodded her head mutely and started pulling both her boys across the yard towards the house. Billy broke free of her grasp but didn't move back towards the pasture.

"Everett, go get my gun," Billy said quietly.

"Billy! Whatever this is, we got no part in it!" She reached for him but Billy pulled away and broke for the barn.

"Get Everett inside and lock the doors!" he yelled back. Mabel screamed for him twice, then grabbed up her youngest and ran for the house as the wave of fangs and flesh met Paul.

Paul roared and threw his arms out. There were only four of them left, the traps having done their work well. If he wasn't careful, though, four of these overly-large curs would be more than enough. The first one didn't even slow as it neared him, intending to bowl the giant over. It slammed into his chest at full speed and seemed to bounce off, falling to the ground in a heap. It shook its shaggy head a few times and stood up on its hind legs as the other three rushed past and fell upon Paul.

"Kill the Green Man!" screamed the thing that was Barnhart at his minions. He took advantage of the giant's distraction and ran after the tiny unicorn. Drahkshin, still groggy from the emergence of his true nature, looked back and saw the werewolf coming for him. It turned in a slow circle as it tried to decide if it could run.

Paul let out a war cry that shook the ranch house windows as he tried to pick the smaller werewolves away. They held on with rending claws and crushing jaws as they tried to open every vein the big man possessed. They had been successful in a few places, but not enough to bring the man down. One had sunk its claws into his chest and was snapping for his neck as he darted his head back and forth. Another of the creatures had had the misfortune to be caught in

his vice-like hand. Paul swung the creature around and bashed at the one on his chest with all the power he could muster. Both yelped, then the one used as his weapon went limp, its throat crushed. Paul knew that the animal wasn't truly dead, that only a bit of silver to the heart or an old-fashioned beheading would completely destroy them. He would have to settle for putting them down for the moment. Dazed, the werewolf stopped trying to tear out his throat for a moment. Paul drubbed it again with its pack mate and finally succeeded in knocking it off his body.

Paul threw his weapon away and watched it land near Granny. The mare had struggled to her feet and stood swaying, watching her foal and its impending demise. Paul whistled for her and tried to remove one of the werewolves from his left bicep, but he knew that she wouldn't come. The mare brayed fiercely and moved quickly if drunkenly to intercept the large werewolf. Barnhart was so intent on the foal that he didn't realise the mare was bearing down on him. He caught her movement a moment too late as the mare rode him down. As he fell, he swiped with his great claws, opening four long, fatal gashes across the mare's neck. Granny keened and stumbled then fell to the ground as her life's blood seeped into the new grass.

Paul used his free hand against the side of the werewolf's head and bashed it against the fencepost. Post and skull cracked with equal volume as the creature fell whimpering to the ground. He turned to go to Drahkshin and felt another of the creatures leap onto his back, its fangs buried deep into his shoulder. He roared in pain and tried to reach behind him, but the thing's rear legs were going to work on his lower back. Paul could feel the blood roll under his shirt as he got a hand on its scruff and tried to pull it free but the jaws were clenched tight, letting even more of his blood roll down his chest. Just as he was about to fall backwards and use his weight to crush the creature, a peel of thunder split the night. Paul could feel the buckshot crash into the werewolf's back. He knew the shotgun blast wouldn't kill it, but the sudden and unexpected attack shocked the creature enough that it

opened its jaws to scream. It was the break Paul had been looking for. He reached behind his head with both hands and grabbed the thing fully by the scruff, like a mother would her pup. He pulled and lifted with all his considerable strength and threw the thing over his head to the ground as its grasping claws tore chunks of flesh from his body. Raising a massive boot, he stomped on the thing's head, the results best left to the imagination.

Paul turned quickly and saw Billy standing in the moonlight, the old shotgun from the barn still levelled at him. Billy dropped the muzzle slowly and shook his head as if clearing it of a fog.

"Thought I told you to get in the house?" Paul said off-handedly.

"Couldn't let someone do that to my best hand, could I?" Billy said. Seeing the beast on the ground galvanised him. He broke down the barrels, extracted the shell cases and reloaded. He flipped the barrels back into position with a practised motion as Paul made for the foal.

Drahkshin watched as his mother fell in a gush of blood. He could see as well in the gloom as he could in the noon-day sun, and the bright red and coppery smell broke his trance. He turned from the screaming werewolf and ran as hard as he could for the far side of the pasture with the werewolf in pursuit. Instinct took over as the colt ran in a random pattern, changing course and direction with blinding speed. Barnhart howled and slobbered as he tried to keep up and anticipate the unicorn's next change, making him look like a grotesque rodeo clown. After a few moments, the werewolf got lucky in his anticipation and leaped, landing immediately in front of the unicorn. Drahkshin bleated and changed course almost instantly in the opposite direction, but not before the werewolf landed a long graze from its claws on the unicorn's left flank. It bleated again and ran in a pain-filled haze for the shelter of the barn, the werewolf hot on his hooves.

Everett could just make out the combat in the pasture from the safety of the sitting room window. His mother stood at another window by the door, waiting for Billy to come back to the

house. They both saw the young man fire on the wolf and Everett nearly cheered. Everett had asked his mother if the creatures really were werewolves. Her only answer had been to shush him and tell him to watch the window for any trouble. Mabel had already tried the phone and found the line dead. She was sure if they made it through the night they would find the service line out at the road slashed in two.

"Ma! Drahkshin!" Everett screamed as he saw the werewolf bearing down on the days' old colt.

"It'll be okay, Everett," Mabel said quietly, tensely.

Everett watched in horror as the werewolf chased the young horse. He waited until his mother's attentions were completely fixed on the events outside and slipped out of the room. Hurrying as quietly as he could, he made it up the stairs and into his room. He dug around in his "treasure drawer", the place he reserved for all the tiny mementos and other assorted bric-a-brac of his young life. He passed by small photos of the father he'd never met, his first merit badges and several flint arrowheads before he found it near the back of the drawer. One of the main reasons he had wanted to go to the Fair last year was to meet the Lone Ranger in all his glory. Billy had used the opportunity to enter a few steers in one of the competitions, and Everett's vaunted, masked hero served as a celebrity judge for the event. Not only did his screen idol sign the plastic grip of his official Lone Ranger cap pistol, he even gave him a silver bullet from his own cartridge belt as a souvenir.

Everett clutched the bullet tightly and ran for his mother's room. Having been born and bred on a ranch, Everett had come to regard guns in the same way as anyone else in the area did. They were tools, plain and simple. He'd been taught gun safety from the time he could walk and as all farm people did developed a healthy respect for them. But he also knew the rudimentary workings of every type of firearm in the house. Billy had even taken him target shooting with some old cans on the eastern side of the range on more than one occasion.

The boy threw open his mother's closet and dragged a chair to the doorway. Climbing up, he

rooted around the upper shelf at a fevered pitch until he found an old hat box. He remembered the dull red box from when he and Billy went shooting and pulled it down. He jumped off the chair and threw the lid off the box. The old Colt .45 revolver looked incredibly large in the bottom of the box. He let the box drop to the floor, stuck the gun in the front of his pants and ran for the back door.

Paul chewed up the ground as he made for the barn. It was the worst place it could have ran and robbed the unicorn of its only real advantage; speed. It wasn't old enough yet to use its horn as a weapon and lacked any of the real strength and size it would hopefully live to gain. Paul reached the open barn door and stopped short. He pulled his knit cap off his head and tossed it into the room. A huge paw swiped at it from inside the doorway. Paul grabbed the still-closed right hand door and ripped it from its hinges with a shriek of rusted metal. The werewolf leaped from the shattered doorway and was caught by surprise as Paul used the heavy door as a shield, battering the creature. It bounced back into the barn and barely had time to get to its hind feet as the giant came after him.

The werewolf was nowhere near Paul's equal in size, but the transformation had still made it a head taller than an average man. The two locked in struggle and danced across the front of the barn, smashing each other against walls, tools and anything else they could find to try and gain the advantage. Billy ran to the door and took several steps back as he watched the two. He raised the shotgun but knew that he had as much chance of hitting Paul as he did the werewolf. He looked back to the house and saw that every window in the house was lit up. His mother came out onto the porch and started screaming Everett's name. Mabel caught sight of Billy in the light from the barn and ran off the porch and across the yard.

"Everett's not in the house!" she screamed as she came over the pasture fence and towards Billy. "He's gone!"

"Get back Ma!" Billy shouted, his head swivelling between his mother and the supernatural battle before him.

"I have to find Everett!" she screamed. Billy met her several feet away from the barn to keep her back from the battling figures and stared wildly around them, waiting for any of the creatures to come around. The moon was swollen, impossibly bright in the cloudless sky, and lent an eerie glow to the ranch. They were in the open with only the barn to block their view, letting Billy see the entire length and breadth of the pasture. Mabel called for Everett continually while Billy stood a tense guard. The ones that Paul had put down were noticeably twitching and moving, still alive even after the giant's assaults. He kept an eye on them and said a tiny prayer for his family and Paul.

Paul let the wolf's arm slip from his right hand and dropped it, coming up with an uppercut that nearly severed the animal's tongue. Its head snapped back violently as it let fly with a pained growl from deep in its throat. The force of the blow made the wolf slack its own grip, allowing Paul to get both hands on the creature at once. He heaved and sent the werewolf crashing against the barn wall and took a precious moment to breathe.

Barnhart hit the wall with such force that the thick boards cracked behind him, sending slivers of harsh electric light out into the night nearly at Billy's feet. Billy spun at the cracking noise and levelled the shotgun as the werewolf pulled itself away from the torn wall. A flash of movement caught Billy's eye towards the rear end of the barn. He immediately recognised Everett's darkened form as it raced down the pasture and disappeared behind the barn.

"Everett!" he called out. "Come on Ma! He just went into the back of the barn!" The two took off at a run as Mabel screamed for her son to get out of the building.

The werewolf recovered far more quickly than Paul had expected. It hit the floor in front of the wall and sprung through the air towards him almost as soon as its feet touched down. Paul let fly with a backhand at just the right moment and sent the beast hurtling through the air. It hit the straw-littered floor and slid like a howling puck nearly the length of the barn. It caught the edge of a stall with its claws and pulled itself around,

disappearing into the darker part of the barn. The sound of its claws scrabbling on the walls and then overhead on the thick beams echoed, making it difficult to track his movements. Paul walked slowly down the aisle and opened his senses. He could smell the wolf, but with the scent of so many of them on his clothes and the collected scents of hay, animals and years in the barn he couldn't rely on it to betray the master wolf's direction. He spun in slow circles as he went, straining his ears to catch the slightest murmur of movement in the place. One moment, it seemed the thing was to his left, another directly above him. He kept moving until he was near the end of the barn and looked down into the stable that had witnessed the birth of the colt less than two days before. There in the far corner was Drahkshin, his head held securely in young Everett's arms.

"You won't let the werewolf hurt him, will you, Paul?" Everett asked quietly, his eyes full of tears. He had already found a saddle rag and was keeping pressure on the colt's flank where the werewolf's claw had raked it.

Paul held his finger up against his pursed lips and turned his head to the side as the werewolf's claws sliced through the air. Paul pulled his head back but couldn't avoid the tips of the claws as they passed his cheek. Two thin gashes like paper cuts opened and bled freely as he shifted his bulk and twisted at the waist. His balled fist shot like an arrow and caught the creature in the centre of the chest, briefly pinning it to the roof support he clung to. It hit the stall floor accompanied by Everett's scream and the colt's bleating, then coiled and came up at Paul with every ounce of strength it had.

The beast hit Paul with the fury of a hurricane, slashing violently at any part of the giant's body it could. Paul deflected most of the blows, but more than one hit home. The creature wasn't as strong, but it was far faster than Paul, especially with the man's loss of blood. Paul knew the mortal world kept many of his abilities dampened, but it had been so many years since he had walked it that he had indeed forgotten just how taxing it could be. He let the beast dig both sets of claws deep into his chest to still its paws, and

then grabbed it under the arms. He spun and lifted the werewolf off the ground in the same motion and watched as the beast's claws slid free of him. It hit the stall floor and flopped about for a moment before it came up in a crouch facing the unicorn and the human boy.

"If I can't have the bastard, neither shall you!" the thing that was Barnhart growled. It coiled and leaped through the air before Paul could grab hold. Billy and Mabel came through the back door of the barn in time to see the werewolf spring towards Everett and the colt. Mabel screamed for her son as Billy raised the muzzle of the weapon and let loose with both barrels at the wolf's back.

The werewolf felt the lead pellets tear into its thick hide. The attack did little more than anger it and did nothing to change either its course or resolve. He knew he could at least reach the soft, smooth coat and the equally soft flesh hidden under the colt's mane before the Green Man got to him. It would take less than a flick of a single claw to send the human boy's spirit to the Undermaster. They were all soft and would be so weak and stunned from the loss of both young animals that he would easily escape their grasp and make good his getaway. He howled as he went through the air, the noise stilling abruptly when he saw the muzzle of the revolver levelled at him. He had been shot, stabbed, beaten and otherwise assaulted hundreds of times before, but an argent glint caught his notice just as the cylinder rolled in the revolver's frame.

Everett touched off the revolver, sending his hand skyward from the recoil. The distance between them was less than three feet as the silver bullet slammed into the werewolf's chest and buried itself in its heart. It crashed into the wall above and behind them and fell into them as it clawed at its own chest. Unicorn and boy screeched and tried to separate themselves from the tangle of the werewolf's limbs as it howled and yelped.

Paul reached down and plucked them away one in each hand and stepped back to the stall opening while the beast thrashed and rolled on the straw-carpeted floor. He set the young ones down gently behind his thick legs and watched

the werewolf in its final death throes. Fur and flesh melted and slid from it, bubbling and roiling onto the floor as it ripped pieces of itself away. After a few moments, all that remained was a very human and very dead Barnhart still wearing bits of fur and gore from his murderous alter ego. The eyes were the last to change, losing their greenish glow and fading away to dull, glassy, dead brown orbs. Paul and Everett stared into the dead man's eyes for long moments before Mabel and Billy rushed forward and pulled him away from the stall.

"Everett!" Mabel screamed and hugged the boy. "What were you thinking? Why did you run out like that? That thing could have killed you!"

"I couldn't let it hurt Drahkshin, Ma," Everett said into her shoulder as she held him close to her again.

"What happened?" Billy asked, the shotgun held at port arms. He was still scanning the barn nervously, waiting for the next thing to leap out at them. Paul walked into the stall and toed Barnhart's body gently. He bent over and picked up the revolver from where Everett had dropped it. He examined it for a moment and shook his head, then smelled the cylinder.

"Silver," Paul said and dropped the gun with an air of disgust. He had no use for guns, or anything designed solely to help intelligent creatures kill other intelligent creatures for that matter. Paul had always been reasonable himself and disdained violence committed by intelligence. He expected wild animals to fight for their survival the way nature intended them to. Violence should always be the last resort of an intelligent species. Humans seemed well-versed in ways to destroy and only precious few to create. But in this instance, he had to admit the boy was completely justified.

"Silver?" Billy gasped. "Where in God's name did you get a silver bullet?"

"Last year, at the fair..." Mabel let him go and started going over his face and hands, looking for any injuries. "Ma, I'm okay..."

"Well I'll be... guess the Lone Ranger really does use those things," Billy said softly.

"Mr Sinclair? Mrs Sinclair? Everett? I need you to stay here. There are still matters that need

my attention that are not for your eyes to see. If anything happens, call for me."

"Billy," he corrected as Paul walked towards the rear door of the barn.

"Mabel," she added. Paul looked over his shoulder and smiled at them.

"Billy and Mabel it is then," Paul said.

"Paul, what are you?" Everett asked sheepishly, childish innocence and real curiosity coming to the fore. He quickly added, "I don't mean no disrespect or anything by askin'..."

Paul stopped and hung his head for a moment. He turned and regarded them with a deep sigh but a wide smile. "Just think of me as the grass beneath your feet and the trees overhead. I am one, yet one of many, yet the greatest and yet most humble of my kind. I am the first, yet not the last. You may call me Paul."

"Are you... are you *the* Paul?" Everett asked. "Paul Bunyan, I mean."

Paul laughed in a deep, warm tone and hitched his thumbs into his belt. The sight would have been reminiscent of picture books and children's tales if not for the gashes on his face and the shredded, bloody flannel that clung to his body.

"I have been known by many names, child," Paul said warmly. He laughed again as a soft light seemed to grow from his wounds. The gashes and punctures from his battles with the wolves shrank and closed, sealing themselves and leaving the flesh whole and unmarked. "And in many times. I walked this world in the days before memory and have walked it many times since. Now, stay and tend the unicorn, if you would."

Paul went out behind the barn and found several of Barnhart's minions caught in his traps. They lay on the ground, writhing in agony as the silver continued to boil their flesh at the site of the wound. A few had even gnawed at the trapped limb in an attempt to escape, but the pain of that and the silver soon made the effort impossible. He pitied them, most likely innocent humans led into a trap that would guarantee them a place in their own purgatory. The strength of Barnhart's curse wouldn't die with his own death in these ones, but Paul knew that after these were gone, any that they might have

infected would be purged of the mark of the wolf. He went to each in turn and apologised for what he must do. Paul snapped his fingers and a woodsman's axe made to his proportions appeared in his hand. The thick, wedge blade was made of silver and the haft of the finest oak that had ever grown in any realm. The tool glowed softly in his grip and he regarded it with a smile. The axe would not have come to him in battle, for it was even more prone to peace than Paul himself. But it had let itself be called up from its place of honour at his hearth for this task. The battle with the werewolves had been just that; battle. But this was now a task more for mercy than violence, and it knew the purpose he had called upon it to serve.

Paul showed far more mercy in ending their curse than Barnhart would have showed bestowing it. Each succumbed instantly to a single blow from the great axe as it cleaved the head from the body, the axe head glowing with a white-hot intensity that could be seen through the cracks in the barn wall and seared both halves of the ruined bodies, keeping the blood from flowing into the hungry ground. He produced a velvet pouch from his trousers and gently placed a bit of the night-blooming wolfsbane in each of their mouths. Their curse broken, he went to the horse pasture and repeated the process with those he had defeated and stacked all the bodies into a neat pile in the pasture. He then went back into the barn and without a word removed Barnhart's body while the Sinclairs wisely looked on in silence.

Paul carried the body out and added it to the pile made from the bodies of the minions. He bowed his head and said a prayer to the Lord of All and Nothing, asking for the gentle treatment of those that had unwittingly become minions of the beast while at the same time praying that the spirit of the true werewolf be damned to the Pits for his willing service to the Undermaster. The axe head glowed with the intensity of a small sun as he placed it against the pile. White flame spread rapidly, searing the bodies within so quickly and completely not even a hint of smouldering hair could be scented on the wind. The fire burned for no more than a few minutes and

left not a single trace when it was done. Even the grass beneath the horrendous pile lay untouched and a vibrant, early-spring green. Paul gently, reverently kissed the axe and went back to the barn.

The family had watched the burning of the creatures from the safety of the ruined barn door. They parted for the giant as he ducked through the doorway and smiled at them. He turned and spread his arms, a hand on each doorframe. With a smile and a knowing wink to Everett, the wood slowly reformed into its intended shape. The door rose up from the ground and reattached itself to the hinge works, making sure not to hit the mystical carpenter as he finished the job. Without a word, he left the family and went back to the birthing stall.

"Paul..."

"Yes, young Everett?" Paul answered as he kneeled down and lifted the colt in his arms. It looked like a carnival prize in his grasp.

"Do you have to take Drahkshin away? Couldn't he stay here? We won't tell anybody 'bout it! Honest!"

Paul sighed and scratched the new unicorn's head. It nuzzled into his barrel chest and snorted in content. "I know you would not speak of it, Everett, nor would your family. But there are things in this world that would sense the unicorn and would come for it. I could not do that to any of you. No young one. Drahkshin and all of you will be far safer when he is back in his sire's care, in the realm where he belongs."

"Where... where is that?" Billy asked. "Where do you come from? What was all this?"

"There are things best left from the eyes and minds of mortals, William Sinclair. Just know that you have my gratitude, as well as that of Mashorie, Drahkshin's sire." He hefted the colt easily in one arm and tousled Everett's hair. A soft glow emanated from his hand, almost unseen in its subtlety. "You will make a fine man someday, Everett. Like your brother." He nodded to Billy, then a more solemn nod to Mabel. "You are to be commended for raising such fine sons in the face of your adversities, Mabel Sinclair. There are few mothers in any realm that could do as much. I thank you for your hospital-

ity and the fine food. Your skills will be the envy to all that I tell the tale. Goodbye, family. Again, my thanks to you.” He smiled at them and walked out of the barn and started across the moon-drenched pasture. He stopped and seemed to be speaking to the unicorn, though his voice was too far away to hear. He set the unicorn on the ground gently and watched along with the family as Drahkshin approached his dead mother. The unicorn whinnied once and tipped his head towards her. His horn touched the dead horse’s smooth neck and glowed softly. Granny’s entire body glowed with the same, soft light. A few moments later, Granny opened her eyes and snorted, getting to her feet just as the glow faded away. Mare and foal regarded each other for a moment before Granny turned away and loped off across the pasture.

Paul reached down, picked the unicorn up again and started to walk away toward the far side of the pasture. Instead of shrinking in the distance, though, the giant’s body seemed to grow even more. The silhouette of a huge animal seemed to appear out of nowhere just past the pasture fence. Obviously bovine in its profile, it waited patiently while Paul secured the now tiny-seeming colt to its back and led it away into the night.

As Paul disappeared from sight, the family found themselves incredibly tired and physically weary to the bone. They secured the barn and traipsed off, the soft, pulsing green glow through the chinks of the barn walls unnoticed behind them as they made their way to the house. They found their beds and fell immediately into the deepest sleep of their lives, oblivious to the green aura that played over each of their faces as they slept.

Mabel slept after the dawning sun, something that had occurred few enough times to be counted on two hands in all her adult life. She had breakfast finished before she remembered that Paul had left the night before for parts unknown. She stared at the extra food and smiled. There weren’t too many men like Paul left in the world, and she hoped the world wouldn’t kill the rest of them off out of spite. The man had only been there for two days, but

he had done so much to help them, from dealing with Barnhart to trapping the wolves that would surely have slaughtered their chickens and maybe even would have gotten to the new colt. She was happy that the colt would be staying on with them, and not just because of Barnhart. Everett would need a horse in a year or two, and he and the colt Paul had provided in place of Drahkshin would do a lot of their growing up together.

She set the plates loaded with eggs, bacon and biscuits on the table just as her boys sat down to eat. “You boys need to eat up. I plain forgot that Paul wasn’t here anymore, think I made too much.”

“No worry there, Ma, I’ll take care of it!” Everett said as he loaded his plate. Mabel stared at him intently and paused. Had he gotten bigger?

“Could you believe that about Barnhart? I can’t imagine that!” Mabel said as she sat down to the table.

They ate in silence, enjoying the closeness of family. Had any one of them mentioned an odd dream they each had that night, about werewolves and unicorns and Paul, they might have thought it odd. As it was, they were happy to leave their nightmares behind them, and even happier to keep looking towards the future.



Billy walked out of the bank and smiled up at the late morning sun. He adjusted the strings on his new bolo tie and walked across the street to where he’d parked the brand new pick-up truck they’d bought just last week. He looked down the street to the hanging saloon sign and smiled as the memory of Paul and Ferguson’s run-in came back vividly in his mind’s eye. Billy hadn’t been back in the place since and had nearly sworn off the stuff altogether.

He hated to admit it, but the Sinclair streak of good fortune seemed to have started with the short time the big hand had come on at the spread. As it turned out, Barnhart was a con man wanted in three states with a fat reward for his capture in each. If it hadn’t been for Paul telling Billy about it, he would never have known.

That's how the family remembered it, at least. The reward money from Barnhart's capture had been an easy way for Paul to help them out of their financial straits, since an offer of charity would have been more of an insult to the Sinclairs than a boon. With the proper manufactured memories in place, and couched as a reward for Barnhart's capture that night, the reward was more than enough to pay the balloon payment. With the ranch secure, he was free to take the deal out west. No one was more surprised than he when the futures prices didn't drop as predicted, a happy coincidence that hadn't needed the hand of the Green Man to coax to the Sinclair's favour. The resulting profit allowed for an expansion of the herd and improvements to the ranch. In that short year, the ranch had become prosperous enough to add on three hands and clear away the rest of their debts. Paul had even been right about the wolves, and the traps he had set had saved them from a great deal of loss when Billy had found two of them full the morning after Paul had left.

"Billy!" he heard Everett call from down the street. He had sent him over to the feed store to pick up a bag of sweetfeed for the horses. The boy had grown half-again his size in the past year alone, and at just past twelve he was now nearly as tall as his elder brother. The boy ate voraciously and had become strong as an ox in that short time, and according to his climbing pant cuffs he was due for another growth spurt

any day now. Billy turned and watched the strapping boy coming down the sidewalk with a hundred-pound burlap bag of feed thrown casually over his shoulder. The boy hurried down the street and tossed the heavy sack in the back of the truck like it was filled with feathers.

"Hey! Easy on the truck!" Billy barked then smiled.

"Wanted to make sure ya didn't forget about me. Ma's makin' chicken for lunch..."

"Is that all you think about? Food?"

"Can't help it. I'm hungry. Let's go!"

The brothers got in the truck and headed east out of town and home. Billy looked past Everett and out the passenger side window as they made their way down the road. He swung the truck off to the side and pointed out the window. There were more than a half dozen over-sized ash trees growing a few yards from the road. "Weren't those just saplings a few months ago?" Billy wondered out loud.

"Naw." Everett answered and pulled a chocolate bar from the front pocket on his over-alls. "Nothin' grows that fast. Just must not have noticed 'em before is all."

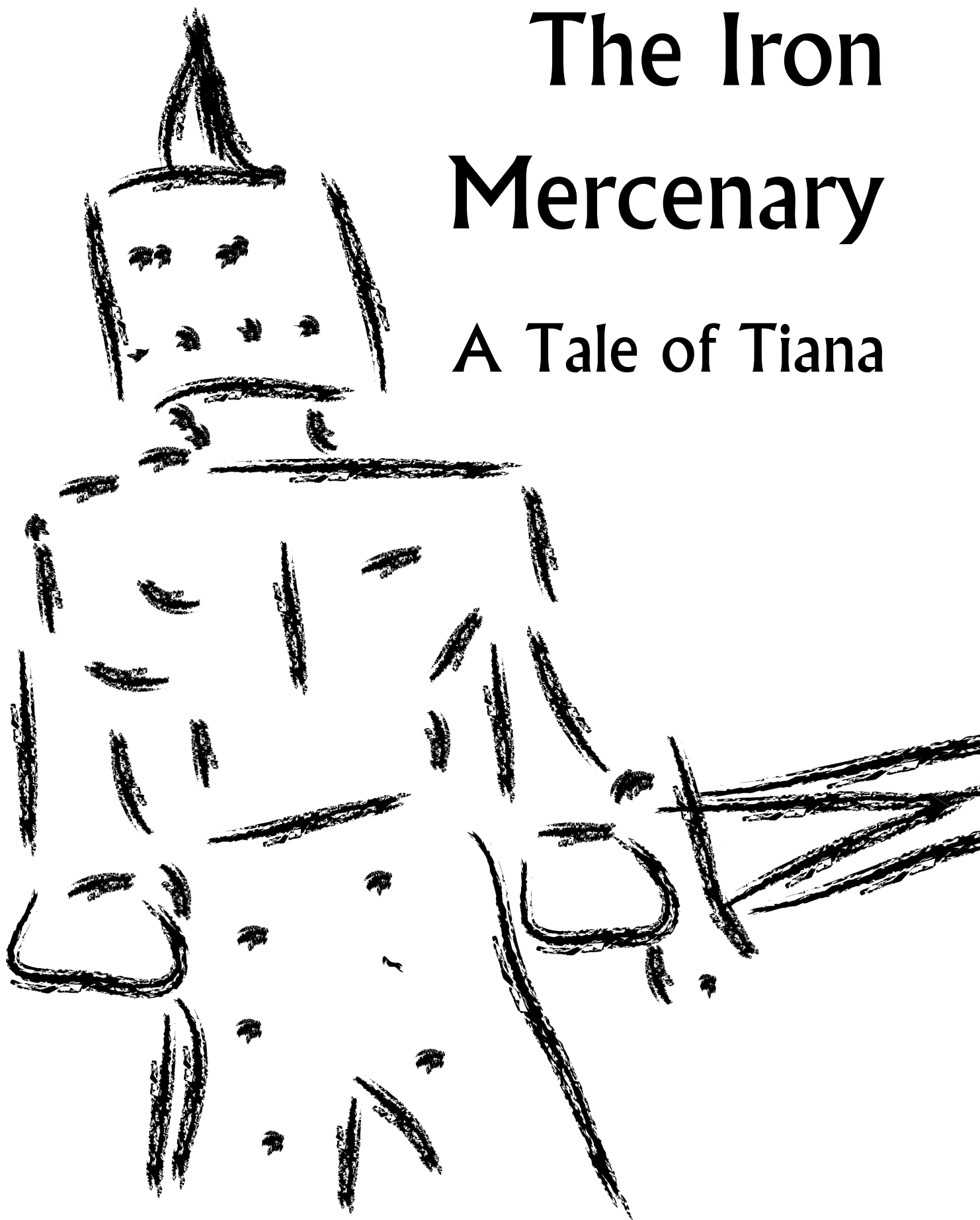
The brothers smiled at each other as Billy started the truck and eased it onto the road and back towards their lives. Had they looked close, they would have seen what could only have been deep smiles formed into the trunks of the great ash trees.

TQF



The Iron Mercenary

A Tale of Tiana



Richard K Lyon & Andrew J Offutt

“At last! Now we crush that fire-haired slut and her male seraglio!”

The speaker was a giant of a man, all in iron. Tarnished black plate had been laboriously screwed and heat-fused to chain. Despite its weight, he moved about the bow of the Narokan merchant ship with the grace and ease of a stalking cat. His spike-tipped helm concealed all his face save the eyes, which were blue and hard as sapphires, and burning with hate and an innate cruelty oft fed but never sated. Staring ahead, he watched the Ilani carrack closing fast with his own big ship. The banner of the other vessel showed the red outline of a fox’s head against a

field of black: the well-known sigil of *Vixen*, ship of her called the Pirate Queen.

Against her, commanding stout Narokan marines on an

innocent-looking merchanter, Naroka had sent a

mercenary of Bashan: Iron Althax.

“Don’t underestimate the enemy, Althax. Tiana’s pirates squander more gold than any three other crews, and they come by that gold by taking ships just such as ours. Aboard that ship is no mere girl, but Naroka’s worst enemy.”

That common sense warning came from the Narokan who stood beside the man called the Iron Mercenary. His gold-chased mail-shirt and plumed helmet made him resemble a toy soldier, over-painted. His once-strong face showed the effects of rich living, though the black eyes still sparkled with cunning.

“Great Cow eat your caution, Hrochma!” Althax snapped. “Because of it my men may

well have to row home from this – Tiana’s last battle!”

“It is standard practice,” Captain Hrochma said tightly, “to chain galley slaves to an anchor, and drop anchor as soon as combat is joined. Continue to appear to be fleeing, helmsman. They overtake us anyhow.”

After a glance at the helmsman, Althax swore a fulminous oath that was also deliciously obscene. “But I am Iron Althax! I command two hundred marines! There can’t be more than a hundred pirates on that ship – and it commanded by a *woman*! These black galley slaves of yours are mere rabbits. In battle they could do nothing, Hrochma, nothing.”

“True enough,” Captain Hrochma said equably. “But you’d get credit for ending the mutiny, while I’d be blamed for letting it start. I’ll not sacrifice my position to further your ambitions, Althax of Escallas!”

Althax dropped the useless argument. The Narokan captain was right, of course. Most of Althax’s marines were hidden below in the prow, in order to trick these damned pirates into attacking an apparently weaker foe. To fight most effectively, the marines had to be able to move freely to the stern. As the catwalks on either side of the rowing pit were too narrow to be of use in battle, the rowing pit had to be cleared. Althax had argued for sparing the slaves; what he really wanted was the glorious pleasure of slaying them by hand. Such exercise was good for his men, and their morale.

The Bashanese mercenary glared at the slave-drowning apparatus that was one of the proudest triumphs of Narokan naval architecture.

The anchor chain led from the rowers’

benches to a small watertight door in the ship's starboard side. When the anchor was dropped, this door would spring open; to close once the slaves were pulled into the sea. The total length of chain from anchor to the last slave was precise, short enough that even in shallow water, all the oarsmen would have been tugged into the sea before the anchor hit bottom, and long enough slack so that the lengths of chain between the rowers gave no opportunity to use their collective strength against the anchor's weight.

The people of Naroka were not known for their sweetness. They did have a reputation for ingeniousness, and thoroughness.

Now the ships were close enough that a storm of arrows flew between them. The effect of that blizzard of shafts was minimal; neither Ilani pirates nor the Narokan navy excelled in archery, and both crews were well protected.

Knowing his armour was proof against light Ilani bows, the experienced mercenary stood disdainfully tall in the prow. He laughed while arrows crashed into his breastplate and snapped or skittered away. At his side, Captain Hrochma of Narokan Shamash squatted ingloriously behind the ship's rail.

Hrochma had made no serious effort to use his ship's ram against the more manoeuvrable *Vixen*. Instead, he used the threat of the brass-headed ram to force the sea-wolf to approach from the port side. A reef lurked menacingly twenty yards to port. Once battle was joined, *Vixen* would not be able to break away without being crushed between the reef and the Narokan ram.

Naroka had wanted Captain Tiana and *Vixen* for a long, long time.

Closer the two ships came, and closer...

The setting sun painted the sea red as blood when the craft crashed together. Braced against impact, men on both sides recovered to hurl grapnels that locked the vessels together. Too late for the marauder captain to ponder on the obvious fact that the Narokan "prey" wanted combat as much as the Ilani predator!

With the most ghastly freezing war-cries they could shout forth, the pirates poured into the

stern of the other ship. Behind them, a burly black man hefted a two-man harpoon.

"Drop anchor!" Hrochma shouted.

Even as he spoke, the huge black pirate hurled a harpoon. It was in air when the anchor fell. The galley slaves, wailing their despair, were pulled toward a grave many fathoms below. At the same time the harpoon, driven by the incredible strength of a shining, burly arm, flew straight and true – and slammed into the anchor chain!

The chain was split in twain. Broken links rattled away and vanished into the sea while the harpooner shouted a blood-chilling Simban cry of triumph.

For a moment the slaves were motionless and mazed. Then one shouted, "It's Caranga!" and echoed the horrid yell of the rescuer. Another slave took up the cry, and then another. The shouting spread like flame through dry grass on the veldt whence these men had come. Their shouting awoke bloodlust in them, and fury. They moved. Arms, as gleaming black as Caranga's and nigh as powerful from their forced labour in the rowing pits, smashed rowing benches and broke oars into clubs and ugly spears.

Pirates tossed axes into the hands of eager men. Those of *Vixen*, familiar with Narokan ways, had planned well – and supplied themselves with desperate allies. Captain Hrochma was aghast at this turn of fortune. The broken, defeated men he would have drowned like so many unwanted kittens were become furious black panthers. He neither spoke nor understood any of the tongues of the southern isles, but the meaning of the slaves' thundering chant was too obvious.

"Fire and Iron, Fire and Iron! Shed blood and burn flesh! Death to our enemies! The colour of God is BLACK!"

Hrochma was appalled at the unqualified rage and lust for blood taught these men by their harsh homeland and their treatment by Naroka. Althax seemed only amused. Smiling in the manner of a child who has just conceived a vicious joke, he spoke. "Come, Hrochma – let's butcher some black rabbits!"

Signalling his marines to follow the Iron Mer-

cenary strode toward the rowing pit with the captain on his right – and the second harpoon came singing. It was aimed at the mercenary, but with a stroke of his steel-clad arm he sent Hrochma stumbling into its path. Hrochma was transfixed by the heavy, reinforced spear like an insect in a boy's collection.

Face up on the deck, a thin stream of blood trickling from his mouth, the captain struggled to give some last order despite his smashed chest and lungs.

As Althax strode to the rowing pit, his iron foot crushed Captain Hrochma's face. He stared contemptuously down into a raging sea of black faces. Without hesitation, the mercenary from Escallas up in Bashan raised his sword and sprang into the rowing pit, feet first. Althax had no more name for cowardice than he did for mercy.

The man on whom he landed gave off a sickening snap as his spine broke. And then Althax was down, buried amid black humanity. The slaves had passed a few of their weapons forward, and Althax's armour rang like a smith's anvil under their attack. The giant mercenary was trapped; he could neither swing his sword nor thrust. Mailed, he could and did slowly force his sword's keen edge and point through the naked bodies that surrounded him.

Within moments he was buried in a tangle not of men, but of corpses. Most he had slain himself; some were killed by the Narokan marines who had entered the rowing pit.

Shaking himself free with a spattering of blood not his, Althax exulted. This was easier than killing rabbits! Rabbits could run, but the slaves were chained together and bunched. Only a small group had been able to gain a position where they opposed entry to the rowing pit. These the big mercenary had slain. Now he faced an unarmed, helpless tangle of men. He longed for time to enjoy the butchery, but felt the need for haste. The bulk of his marines were now on deck, behind him in the ship's prow. The smaller group in the stern was being bloodily attacked by the main pirate force and could not last long.

Suddenly a cry came from high above.

“Althax! Bloody Althax – do you dare pit that blade against *Tiana*?”

The mercenary glanced up to behold what appeared to be a shapely girl swinging at the end of a silken rope. With her rich red hair streaming in the wind, her deep laughing green eyes and her exquisitely moulded limbs, Tiana was easily the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. And *this* was captain of *Vixen*! Much of her magnificent body was exposed to Althax's devouring gaze, for she wore only a tightly fitted silk shirt and short silken breeches, both green. Her creamy skin contrasted nicely with her bright hair and clothing. Althax scarcely noticed the supple rapier in her right fist. At sight of her, he felt a surge of desire.

What a prize that sea-slut is! Surely the King of Naroka would make him a well-rewarded general were Althax to bring him the head of Captain Tiana of *Vixen* out of Reme!

“Slave butcher,” she called out, “will you fight *me*, Tin Sell-Sword?”

Shaking himself from his sadistic reverie, Althax shouted back: “Aye, bitch! Leave her alone, lads; she's for Iron Althax himself!”

It mattered not to Althax that the delay for this duel doomed his men in the stern, or that the blacks would be freed and armed during the respite. Victory over the sea-wolves still seemed certain and Althax's pride called loudly. Slaying the pirate leader in single combat would bring fame and reward; no pirate from any port was feared so much as Tiana of Reme.

Althax stepped back from the tangled heap of corpses he had created. “Back,” he ordered his marines. “Most of you – out of the rowing pit!”

He expected Tiana to drop into the space thus provided for their fight. Instead she thumped onto the upper deck at the head of the ladder giving into the rowing pit.”

“Up here, Althax,” she called; “the floor down there is too wet and slippery!”

Flattered that the best of pirates knew him, he who considered himself the best of warriors, Althax shouldered past the marines in the pit. With jingles and clanks from his mail, he climbed the ladder. Over his shoulder he snarled

a brief ugly order: "Continue the slaughter." And he stepped onto the deck.

He and the so-called Pirate Queen faced each other in a clear area the width of three sword-lengths. At the edge of this shipboard arena, Narokan marines stood shoulder to shoulder, creating a solid wall of steel. And a mere *girl* stood gazing coolly at him, her eyebrows so high as to be mocking him, daring him to come at her. A one-man castle, the Iron Mercenary glared back.

Althax swung his broad, heavy sword in a horizontal arc. Cat-lithe, she shifted slightly to the left so that the sword missed her by a hand's breadth or less. Before the man could recover from the missed slash and begin his backstroke, the woman's slender rapier flashed in the sun, leaping out to kiss the elbow joint of his armour. It was heavy and hot, and Althax wore it to make himself an unassailable fortress, without having to bother always with a buckler.

In his unassailable fortress, Althax felt a pinprick, and the rapier's tip whipped away trailing red droplets.

"First blood!" Tiana said, flashing her teeth.

Suddenly, with that smile, she was not so beautiful.

Raging, Althax swung another horizontal stroke. Seeming to dance, she eluded that – and smiled. Whipping his sword back into position, Althax held it poised, and advanced in an effort to force this surprising woman into a corner. He saw what appeared to be fear in her green, green eyes – and at the last possible moment she leapt past him, pursued by his hungry blade. Even as he swung, her rapier rapped his heavily mailed arm, to no effect.

About the small circle Althax stalked the incredibly lithe, swift woman, feinting to left and right, ever seeking to force her to a place wherein she could not evade his sword. Tiana continued to cheat the rushing blade by the narrowest of margins, and his attempt to grab her got him a slash across the back of his left hand. The rapier looked like no more than a silvery wand, but any of its three cutting edges was a blood-bringer.

The dance of battle on the Narokan ship

resembled an imperial ballet, with Tiana the most lovely and agile ballerina ever to perform before crowned heads and Althax an iron monster of legend. The marines gazed, hypnotised by the spectacle of Tiana's superlative body – and the prospect of its being rent asunder by their surely undefeatable leader. They gave no heed to the cries of their comrades in the rowing pit, who had been charged to "continue the slaughter" of the slaves, and were continuing the slaughter indeed – as victims.

One lean Narokan, realising that Althax did not truly desire a fair fight despite his order to leave Tiana alone, thrust out a booted foot. He was right in his surmise, clever in his attempt to trip, and bad in his timing. Tiana's foot shot behind his and the man fell into the path of Althax's sword. An instant later he lay howling on the deck, his belly slit open. His cries diminished as his entrails became a slippery mass on the planking.

Meanwhile, among the benches and in the stern, the liquidation of the marines was complete. The galley slaves were free of their chains and armed with axes.

Caranga's deep voice bulled out: "NOW, Tiana!"

Althax's sword whistled in a deadly arc at the woman addressed; she stepped lightly back, only a half pace, and then, reaching over the rushing blade, flicked the tip of her rapier across the mercenary's helmet. The bigger sword caught her because she had chosen to make her slash rather than duck completely; below her right shoulder a red line appeared and blood oozed. Tiana made no sound.

Althax did; he screamed as if he had just wakened in hell. The rapier's shallow cut had crossed both his eyeballs. Tiana whirled to cut the throat of one of the marines and leap into the opening thus created.

"Here I am, Althax!"

Rabid with rage and despair, the tall, mail-gleaming mercenary lunged blindly after her. His sword whined and chopped through flesh and bones. Dimly, Althax knew that he was slicing his own men. It mattered not; they were only Narokans, and all who stood between him and

that accursed she-demon were enemies, mere obstacles to be got out of the way. He chopped and slashed, moaning, and the marines fought to clear a path. They realised: Tiana had but kept him busy while their fellows were slain and the oarsmen freed!

Tiana retreated, calling taunts. Althax advanced clanking, a blind reaper cutting a gory harvest. Iron Mercenary had become blind behemoth.

The marines of Naroka, disciplined into witlessness, were unmanned by this horrid turn of events. Some raised impotent blades against Althax while few thought to attack the woman – who danced among them, weaving a pattern of death with her slender, triple-edged blade.

One man, seeking to topple the heavily armoured mercenary of Bashan, threw himself at Althax's legs. His head split like a dropped melon when Althax's iron boot struck it. The unassailable fortress had become a blind monster, blindly slashing and trampling all within reach.

Behind him the slaves boiled out of the rowing pit like demons from Drood's hellish domain. Falling on those Narokans who had escaped Althax and Tiana, they held a revel of blood-letting. Small pockets of marines fought bravely – to little avail. Heedless of the cost in individuals, the black tide swept over them.

Tiana had meanwhile led Althax on a bloody path through the marine ranks. Now she poised on the ship's rail. Grabbing a line, she swung out over the sea.

"Althax, you stupid slime! Here, little man! Can't you see me, Althax?"

Smashing the railing to kindling with his blindly wielded sword, Althax charged forward and pitched into the ocean. The Iron Mercenary sank without a trace.

Swinging back to *Vixen*, the pirate queen surveyed the scene. The battle was over, though here and there a few Narokans were still being massacred. While the merchanter was awash with blood, there were no Narokan wounded. As soon as he fell, each marine was hacked to pieces. The life of the galley slaves had been

horror beyond belief, and now they were paying off a long-held debt.

Tiana hurried to her cabin and swiftly donned high boots and a long concealing cloak; it was black, braided with cloth-of-gold at the shoulders. If those fool Narokans wished to gape at her body when they should be using their swords, that was their problem. That was tactics; now Tiana saw no point in arousing her own crew and new allies.

Stepping out of her cabin, she faced that which was for her the most dangerous aspect of this day of slaughter. The freed slaves were not going to accept her as captain merely because she wore a cloak gleaming with gold braid.

And she was captain; since her foster father had retired and then changed his mind to return to *Vixen* and, as he called it "the sweet life as it should be lived by those of us without fear", Tiana had held her command and Caranga had consented to be mate.

Blacks and Ilani pirates alike were filled with a lust for destruction that the extermination of the Narokans had whetted without having sated. Soon they would turn their rage on Narokan property, destroying the loot they had fought to gain. This Tiana could not countenance; it was not common sense, and she told herself that she was ruled by logic and common sense.

Yet to most pirate captains trying to prevent such waste would seem as sensible under these circumstances as trying to snatch a joint of meat from a starving wolf pack. That *was* common sense. Tiana was in truth ruled by Tiana.

The last Narokan was dead. Now was the time to establish command of all. Striding to the railing, she roared with the wind.

"Belay your shrieking, you FREE MEN! Ilani! Man the rigging! Regain those grapnels, boys, and make sail. Simbans! Bend the steer – board oars – as free men! It's turn these ships or be smashed on the reef, and you know it. Here you – that man at your feet is a mate and he's bleeding to death. Bring him here so I can sew him up. *I* slew Iron Althax; *I* doctor the wounded! You three – yes, you – bring the other wounded. Hurry now, lads, we don't want blood

all over these fine decks and corpses to pray over – we've enough!"

Men stared at the woman, looking taller in the long cloak of black. The set of her chin, the snap of command in her voice and the flash of those green eyes; her erect proud stance; all proclaimed that Tiana was to be obeyed. And it was true; she had obviously played with Althax long enough for the slaves to wipe out his men, and only then mocked him to his death. For a moment the men stood staring, still trapped by a red nightmare of destruction.

Seeming to awake, though groggily, they began to obey. The menace of the reef was soon past and some of the men were tossing the debris of battle over the side to the waiting sharks, white pirates and black ex-slaves working together. Scavenger birds squealed about the two ships. Many red-splashed blacks dazedly watched Tiana sew up a disembowelled pirate.

Strapping Caranga and two Ilani had brought four kegs of ale up from the Narokan larder. Caranga knew Naroka and its ways. Three of the kegs' contents he tasted, and ordered them transferred to *Vixen* for dinner. The fourth mouthful he spat out and, continuing to spit, ordered that keg thrown over the side. Watching oarsmen had too often seen white masters waste food and drink while they suffered want, and they muttered. As an Ilani took hold of the keg, a Simban (named Yadra, as Tiana later learned) sprang forward and tried to seize it.

Perhaps, as Yadra's fellows later avowed, the Ilani reached for his knife. All were certain that the Simban, with a deft stroke of his new-gained ax, split the keg-holder's skull. Outraged whites cried murder and demanded instant retribution. Grouping menacingly together, the Simbans swore to defend their comrade who had slain in fair fight. Black and white stared at one another through a new red haze of hate. Tiana started to cry out that Caranga was her second, and had issued a command; she decided against it. Not this time. Only a fool issued commands sure to be ignored. She watched weapons spring into hands as both sides moved through that slow, uneasy dance that precedes battle.

A huge black man in bright yellow pants –

stained with dirt and blood – snatched up the disputed keg and thrust it at Yadra.

"Here," Caranga shouted. "You slew for it against my orders; now drink!"

The two men stared at each other. Kidnapped long ago from the huge southern isle of which Simba was only a part, the oarsman smiled deliberately, showing the piratical black foreshortened teeth that had once been filed to points. In a slow and deliberate act that was not a smile at all, Caranga showed Yadra the same sort of teeth.

Blinking in astonishment and dazed by the offer, Yadra seized the heavy keg and proved his mighty strength by hoisting it, and drinking.

All about, men from Ilan relaxed. They put aside their weapons and laughingly began to make wagers on "before or after moonrise".

With sudden fear clutching at his heart, Yadra set aside the keg and demanded to be told the subject of their wager. In an equable and matter-of-fact tone, Caranga told him. "You well know the treachery of those spider-loving swine of Naroka. Such are dangerous even in death. To take posthumous revenge on pirates and mutineers, they are always prepared: any Narokan ship carries ale, and one keg is poisoned. The action of the venom is swift, unstayable, and its death is painful in the extreme. The wagers, O you who would not obey your wise fellow, are on when you will die."

The wagers were never settled. Yadra, his reason blasted by fear, stared and stared and commenced to shudder. Too late to spit. Abruptly he half-whirled to run blindly forward and join the Iron Mercenary in the sea. Almost before he struck the water, he was surrounded by triangular fins. The Simban screamed once and vanished, leaving a red stain in the water.

Seconds later two Simbans, free men who considered themselves in the command of Caranga and his Captain Tiana, sent the keg splashing after.

Richard Lyon's latest book, TALES FROM THE LYONHEART, is available from www.amazon.co.uk and www.lulu.com.



When the Sun and the Moon Did Not Shine

Sam Leng

The dainty town of High, with its company of elegant buildings – quaint little cobbler shops and prissy boutiques, traditional stone-clad public houses and fresh smelling delicatessens – became decidedly more sombre and, quite aptly, a shadow of its former self on the day of the great blackout.

It was a Monday in mid July when the hammering sun finally fizzled out, leaving only a dull darkness lingering, so far, of course, as all darkness is dull. It lasted a minute, then two, then an hour, then four. It lasted, in fact, the whole of the morning and then the whole of the afternoon. And as the clocks ticked in time to the usual moment of sundown the podgy moon also refused to rear its bloated face, and, in turn, failed to cast its shining aura down on the gloomy streets of High.

Naturally, as you might expect in such bizarre circumstances, the absence of those skyward residents – whose presences were, as a rule, greatly taken for granted – caused immense distress to all dwellers of High. Short, stumpy, peg-legged men ran frantic circles of panic in the cobbled lanes, shouting vulgar obscenities and futile inanities at the heavens, while dust-sprin-

kled housewives wielded brooms and marched in soldier-like protest through their sitting rooms. Screams of “the end is nigh!” and “forgive us our sins!” replaced the more commonly heard “could I interest you in a scone?” and “it’s your round, buddy”. It can only be observed that in this bleak twenty-four hour period of Highlanders lives, the gloomy town was in absolute chaos. Chaos, that was, save for two aging fellows who seemed to positively revel in the darkness, and, indeed, in the ever mounting alarm.

The duo sat on a park bench sipping piping flaked tea in cheery reflection. They watched silently as the children ran wild, pursued at all times by their weeping mothers. Fathers cursed, lovers cried and dogs urinated carelessly up every erect pole-like entity, human legs included. The meows of disorientated house cats could be heard for miles around, but the unnerving sounds of the flustered did nothing to deter the two surveying happy-chaps. Quite the opposite, in fact. It rather encouraged their contented mood and prompted great delight in their seemingly apathetic minds.

One man, around the age of sixty, sported a grandfatherly-like plumpness. His round belly



wobbled like quivering jelly if he so much as shifted position. His eyebrows could only be described as furry; great sweeping arches of grey/white hair. His ring of orbiting head-wisps matched this smoky colouring, and his centre piece – a shining mound of complete baldness – seemed like nothing if not the underside of a well-boiled egg. His face puffed out in a squirrel-like manner and his thick lips smacked with satisfaction as he savoured his steaming tea, while his beady, piggy eyes flicked back and forth through the shady oblivion as if piecing it. He wore a hand-stitched, multicoloured pullover – red, blue, green and yellow, striped respectively – and baggy, earthy slacks complete with sagging pockets for the gentleman's convenience.

The other chap – younger, taller, straighter and altogether more healthy looking – appeared the more thoughtful of the two and he took in the blackened surroundings with an expression of great interest. His face was long and narrow and could possibly have been considered stern had it not been for his glimmering, mischievous eyes which donated an air of lightness to the otherwise subdued atmosphere. He proudly modelled a curled, brown moustache and severe squared-off sideburns which plummeted down towards his twitching lips from his head of ruffled hair. Wire framed spectacles were perched decoratively on the end of his ski-slope nose, giving him a somewhat scientific appearance. His attire was that of a suited gent: a navy garment,

finalised superbly by an almost luminous purple shirt residing underneath his wide-cuffed jacket. A handkerchief was stuffed frivolously into the snuffbox-sized pouch of this external sheath, which completed the look of affluence he was so clearly striving for.

And so it was – this misfit two-some inhabited the park bench and watched in companionable calm. They watched the children and the women and the men and the pets.

They watched the cars and the vans and the artificial lights of their headlights as they penetrated the eerie dark. They watched the unopened shops and the empty shelves of window displays. They watched the curtains twitching in the charming houses of High and the worried, tiny faces peeping through the panes. They watched everything with unyielding interest, and finally they watched each other.

“It's remarkable,” said the thin man, who, for ease of reference, we shall name Mr Lean. “Truly remarkable and simultaneously delightful. Observe, my friend, the way these folk scurry and scuttle like frenzied ants. Have you ever seen such an astonishing sight?”

“I can't say I have,” the other man – Mr Round, if you will – admitted. “It is quite a spectacle. Humph. Yes, quite a spectacle indeed.”

“It's gleeful! Simply lovely.”

Lean sipped his tea, curling his taut lips around the rim of the plastic mug. His big eyes shone with childish curiosity as if he were in the throes of Christmas morning, opening presents he had longed for the whole year through. His friend, of course, like all good friends, was no less enthralled.

“Do you think,” Round began, “that these people are terminally afraid of the dark? So afraid that they can't bring themselves to simply *enjoy* the experience?”

“Afraid of the dark...” Lean repeated the phrase as if a solution was wedged somewhere deep down in his brain, buried underneath similar forgotten answers and lost conundrums. He

eventually, after one big tug, managed to wrench a reply to the surface of the jumble and quickly translated it into comprehensible words. “No, I don’t think these folk are afraid of the dark, old friend. Rather, I think they’re afraid of change. Petrified of it actually. And this...” – he motioned to the darkness encasing them – “is far too abnormal for their little minds to accept as harmless. On the contrary; they fear this *change* with considerable anguish. They believe this is, as they say, Judgment Day. They fear the Apocalypse is upon them.”

“Humph! Balderdash! Complete twaddle!” Round ho-hoed into his mug of tea while contemplating Lean’s theory. “I can’t begin to imagine how anyone would fear change. I absolutely adore such metamorphosis. Life becomes such a monotony if a routine continues for too long. It becomes plainly mundane, an utter bore!”

“Exactly, my friend. I quite agree with you.”

This concurring statement brought an end to their discussion and they reverted to silence once again for another few moments. They glanced around them and then down in unison, eyeing up a small knapsack which had been lugged along to accompany them in the park.

“Bagel or baguette?” Lean asked of his companion.

“I think I’d like the bagel, please. That is, of course, unless you’d prefer it?”

“No, no, old chap. I’m more than happy with the baguette.”

The two men chuckled, removed their chosen nibbles from the knapsack and began tucking in.

“Humph,” said Round, with his mouth full of flavoursome dough. “I’ve heard on the grapevine that there’s a bus strike about to happen.”

“Is that so?!” Lean rhetorically questioned while crunching on his crusty French bread. “Quite unbelievable, it is. What on Earth do bus drivers have to strike over?”

“Poor pay, apparently.” Round shuffled in his seat. “They believe they’re undervalued.”

“*Undervalued!* They receive far more credit than *I* ever have done and I’m sure *you* can back me on that!”

“Absolutely! It’s ludicrous. Completely. Humph.”

There was no one in the park anymore, nor anyone on the cobbled streets, except for Lean and Round. The time was midnight and behind the locked doors of the pebble-dashed cottages the dread subsided into troubled bouts of sleep. Dreams consisted of silent prayers and hopeful wishes that the light might soon return to bathe the humble town of High in its radiant glory once again. Men cold-sweated in their beds while women twisted this way and that. Children lay quietly but shivered every now and then at the passing of a shadow in their REM vision.

Meanwhile, after they had finished their savouries, Lean and Round packed up their effects – a pair of tea flasks topped with synthetic cups and the crinkly wrappings of their now-consumed snacks – and tidied it all away neatly into their sole knapsack. It was Lean, then, the more athletic of the two, who hauled the bag over his shoulder before the pair of them set off – mindlessly whistling to the tune of “Dance Tae Yer Daddy” – on their trek down one of the many cobbled lanes.



The dainty town of High, with its stash of restless couples and its hoard of panicking families, became decidedly more joyful on the day of the light’s return. The sun beamed brightly upon the charming rooftops at the earlier time of 4.00 am as if making up for the previous day’s absence. It was a Tuesday in mid July and all was well in the town.

Up in the Heavens a tall and slender chap, fictionally named Lean, worked the bicycle of light that lit up the sky. On a soft futon recliner the fellow who would be Round snoozed with content, snoring noisily while waiting for his night-fall cue. The strike had done the Sun and Moon justice, that you can be sure, for every day following the notorious Dark Monday the townsfolk worshipped the astral couple like Gods. By all accounts, Lean and Round had, if nothing else, made their points blatantly clear with their picketing blackout on High.

tales of yxning

North of Glethbrook near the Tvugglian border, cavalymen rode up to a remote farmhouse. It was getting dark and the chill of late fall was in the air. While some of the horsemen went searching for chickens, pigs or sheep, Captain O'Goura and three others burst in through the door.

The farmhouse had a very large stone fireplace and a series of iron cauldrons nearby. Most of one wall was taken up with shelves on which rested several human skulls and innumerable jars and pots. In one corner was a complete skeleton of a child. Near the table stood a series of three old-fashioned brooms. The slate floor had dark stains on it.

Next to the hearth stood an old woman who glowered at her uninvited visitors.

"We've been riding for the last two days in the rain. Are any of those things edible?" asked Captain O'Goura, pointing at the jars and pots.

"You can eat any of them, but they won't taste good," the woman replied. "They are mostly

ingredients for medicine or perfume," she added, smiling a bit.

"You're lying."

"Yes, Captain O'Goura, you know I am. But you aren't going to kill me after all. Old Jinna Crondale is doomed to die of old age and I've got one foot in the grave already."

The Captain frowned. Where most people would see a simple, old-fashioned straw broom, his second sight revealed a human identity, a pale wraith crying out for help. He said: "What spell have you put on the broom in the middle there? Can you undo it?"

"Why should I do that? I'm a good house-keeper. I need a good broom to keep my house clean."

"You don't need that broom. Undo the spell, or I'll have no pity on you, old as you might be."

"Very well, very well," she whined, shuffling over to the broom. Swirling her right hand in the air she muttered: "Aruthquuth thmuthnuthnaquuth."

the REMARKABLE LIFE OF YREN HIGBE

BRUCE HESSELBACH

There was a sudden puff of breeze, the strands of straw in the broom flew apart, and one of them turned into a boy. A short, skinny, blonde boy about nine years old.

“Oh! Oh! Thank you sir,” said the boy, kneeling before the Captain. “I’ve been trapped in that broom for nearly a year.”

“Why did you do that?” the Captain demanded. “What did he do to you?”

Jinna said, “He did nothing to me, but he was such a picky eater and he distressed his parents so bad I didn’t think they would mind if I turned him into a straw in my broom. Oh well, the parents have died since then, so he should be happy I’ve taken charge of him.”

The Captain’s men were aghast. Some said he should kill the witch; others said they should leave immediately and refrain from eating any of the livestock, which might have been people the witch had transformed.

“Let’s ask the boy what he thinks,” the Cap-

tain said. “What is your name, boy, and what do you think we should do?”

“I’m Yren Higbe sir, and I don’t want to kill anybody. I just want to get as far away from here as I can and never come back.”

“Spoken like a true gentleman,” Terence O’Goura said. He told his men to truss up the chickens and pigs they had scavenged, and mount up.

“But before I go,” the Captain said to the witch, “I only think it fair that you should give the boy some parting gift, to compensate him for all the sweeping he’s done on your behalf. And it better be a good gift, too, else I might reconsider how merciful I am being to you.”

“Waall noo, waall noo,” said the witch, clutching her head with both hands. Then her eyes glazed over and she slowly extended her hands with the palms up. “This little skinny lad will grow up to be the strongest man of the age, and he will be a great favourite of the ladies, but he will fall in love with one lass that will prove

untrue to him. I see him in high office, and then, after that, mounting up higher still. Yes, yes, verily, verily, accept or deny, the old lady dinnae lie. So mote it be.”

The Captain, satisfied with this prophecy, took the wide-eyed boy in hand and left. The sun was just at the horizon like a large blazing forest fire, and the shadows cast by the trees were long and sinuous. The cavalry rode off at a gallop, leaving the witch muttering to herself.

After his liberation from the broom, Yren Higbe worked as a servant for the cavalry, ate heartily, and grew healthy and strong. When he had come of age, he struck off on his own to the various agricultural festivals and fairs of the Lesser States, engaging himself as a professional wrestler. The minstrels composed verses about him saying:

*Yren Higbe was a wrestler; from fair to fair
he went,
winning many a prize and match and many a
maid's consent.*

His 24th birthday found him in the town of Freshbrook, taking a boat down the Ulzie River. He had grown into a tall and powerful man with broad shoulders, a slender waist, a bit of a moon face, blue eyes and short blonde hair.

“Aren't you the famous wrestler?” asked a young passenger. “I saw a sign about you at the fair in Drompelsnert.”

Yren smiled and puffed out his chest. “Yes, that's me in the flesh. I'm going to a wrestling match in Saferus.”

“I'm Weebly Pumrod,” the passenger said. “I'm going further downstream, but I suppose we'll have a stopover at Saferus.”

“Sure we will,” Yren said. And then a happy thought occurred to him: that with a friend on board, he had a chance to do some things he otherwise could not. “And in the meantime,” Yren added, “we can have ourselves some fun right here.”

What Yren Higbe had in mind was some gambling, with passengers betting on his ability to win at arm wrestling. Weebly caught on to the idea quickly. Weebly would announce the challenge and bet on Yren to win. When Yren was

successful, as he always was, Weebly and he would share the profits. The key to the whole thing was to slack off a bit to make the matches look more balanced, whereas if Yren used all his force at the beginning he would vanquish everyone instantly.

The duo won a small fortune and Yren never had a jollier time in his life.

When they landed in Saferus for a two-day stopover, Weebly and Yren hit every tavern in town. With all their winnings they felt as rich as kings.

At this point Yren met a barmaid named Doris Demorre, and he quickly fell head over heels in love with her. She was a beautiful young woman of 22 with dark red hair. Not a kind of orange-red, but a dark burgundy-tinged red. Her big green eyes gave her a very vulnerable, innocent look, but in reality she was as tough as granite. When she saw how much money Yren had, her stony heart melted and she, too, thought she was in love.

In the same bar, Weebly met Phyllis, a dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty who was every bit as much of a gold digger as her friend Doris. As the four of them went from bar to bar, Weebly endeared himself to Yren forever by talking up how strong Yren was and how limitless his prospects for wealth, fame and advancement must be.

When the boat's stopover ended, Weebly and Phyllis continued downstream, vowing to meet up with Yren and Doris again. Of course, Yren Higbe won his wrestling match, and then afterwards he and Doris were married.

The two of them dreamed of becoming rich landowners. They bought a very attractive farm, but to their surprise it proved to be hard work to make ends meet.

“When I feel the good earth under my feet, and smell the hay, and look up at the blue sky, I feel really alive,” Yren Higbe said.

“That's all well and good,” Doris replied, “but the price of hay is down; I'm too stuffed up to smell anything, and if it doesn't rain some more our lettuce crop will wither. And if we don't get a good lettuce crop, where are we?”

“Yes, very true my dear; where are we? That's

so. I don't really know where we are. Somewhere, I guess."

The course of matrimony did not run smoothly for Yren Higbe. In time, Doris decided that he was an insufferable fool. He tried so hard to make himself agreeable to her that anything she said he would agree with. Finding this rather unmanly, Doris would intentionally contradict herself and get Yren to agree with her both times. "What a clod," Doris thought.

One moonless spring night Doris slipped quietly out of bed while Yren was snoring away loudly. Using the smouldering coals in the hearth, she lit a small candle. She then found and grabbed a small bag of implements and tiptoed out the door. The grass was wet with dew; innumerable fireflies traced tiny torches in the high branches of the ash trees along the stream and down into the apple orchard. Stars and her flickering candle lit her way over to the barn, where she found Yren's saddle hanging near the door.

With an awl from her little bag of tricks, she cut a perforated line across the saddlegirth on Yren's saddle so that it was connected only by weak threads, then she took out a vial of brown clay to help keep the cuts in the leather from becoming visible.

At dawn, Yren Higbe jumped on his horse to ride out to the north fields to check some traps he had placed there. Before he was 50 yards from the barn, the saddlegirth broke and he went flying off the side of the horse, tumbling and sending up a cloud of dust.

"Oh Yren!" Doris exclaimed. "Are you hurt? Are you hurt? Speak to me!"

"Oh, ugh, oh," he said.

She hugged him so that he could not see the disappointment in her face.

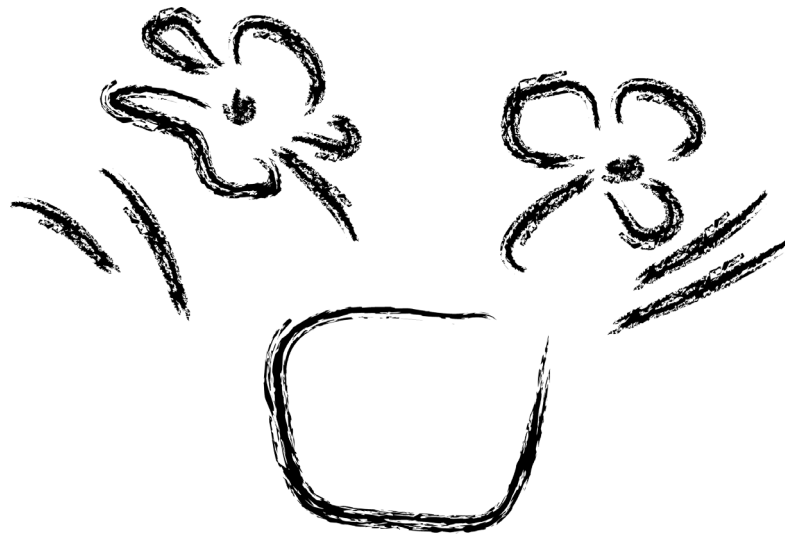
A week later, Doris insisted that Yren Higbe plant some small junipers near the house. While he was bent over with this project, she dropped a flower pot from the second floor of their farmhouse directly down onto Yren's head. It hit with a loud thunk and clay shards flew in all directions. She said, "Oops!" and hurried downstairs to see the results.

Yren Higbe lay on the grass moaning. There was blood and a gash on his head, but upon close

inspection of the scalp below his thick, matted blonde hair, the wound was relatively minor. "Oh, what happened?" Yren muttered.

Doris thought to herself: "Surely the man must have rocks instead of brains."

A week later, on the theory that the third time is a charm, Doris brought Yren Higbe up to the roof of the barn on the pretext of looking at a loose shingle. When he went over to the edge and bent over to look at the shingle in question, she gave him a lusty kick and he went flying off the roof. However, his trajectory carried him somewhat sideways and he landed on top of a large pile of rope that he had placed that morning on the side of the barn. Bouncing off the rope, he was bruised, but not seriously hurt.



At this point, Yren Higbe began crying because it finally dawned on him that his wife's ardour had cooled.

When Yren Higbe recovered enough to hobble back into the house, Doris was there. "I'm sorry I slipped up on the roof," she said. "Have some nice apple cider I fixed; it will make you feel better."

Yren drank it all down, both of them wishing it was poison, but instead it was just ordinary cider. "What did I do to deserve this?" they both thought.

In the spring Doris said, "Come with me to the fair in Spudley to sell the calf and buy some piglets."

"Spudley? Fair?" Yren replied. "Isn't that the town with all the strange customs?"

"Well, what's a few old superstitions?" Doris answered. Yren nodded and agreed to go.

It was a beautiful bright sunny day and Yren Higbe forgot about all this woes. Here he was, strolling around like a wealthy farmer with his beautiful wife. What could be better?

What Yren Higbe didn't realise was that this was Women's Market Day, a special ancient exemption from all laws and morality, when it was legal for women to sell anything at all.

Yren and Doris strolled around booths where women were selling pies, blankets and baskets. They saw booths where women were selling whisky, burglar's tools, rat poison and garter belts with daggers in them. "What an interesting fair this is," Yren thought.

Then suddenly Doris jumped up on a table and pulled Yren Higbe up with her.

"Ladies of Spudley!" Doris shouted. "What am I bid for this fine specimen of husbandhood? He has been a champion wrestler in his day and makes an outstanding ploughman! Look at his brawny arms! I have to sacrifice him at a bargain price to make way for a new model. Do I hear a schilling? Surely he's worth more than that. Bid me a schilling!"

A worn-out, overweight spinster in the crowd said, "Two schillings!"

A thin but plain looking woman near her said, "I bid one florin."

"Two florins!" said another woman.

Yren Higbe stood there with his mouth agape. *How can this be happening?* he thought. *Yes, at times she was unhappy with all the hard work of the farm, but she seemed so pleasant and happy this week. Who can understand women? I've heard of some strange customs and superstitions, but this one beats them all. You can't just throw someone away like an old broken-down horse. Or can you? These people seem dead serious. It must be some kind of a joke. They can't really be serious about this. Can they?*

The bidding was fast and furious and before he could so much as collect his thoughts he was sold to a tall, pudgy woman of about 60 years of age for the sum of two ducats, four florins and a schilling. By the end of the day he was packed off to the woman's farm.

"I'm Blanchefloure Gibbons," she said. "I've been a widow too long and I need someone to take good care of me." She winked at him.

"What have I gotten myself into?" he thought.

She had him load some sacks of feed into the back of a carriage and he himself rode back there as the carriage bounced over a rutted road to a lonely, broken-down farmhouse.

"Just wait here by the hearth while I go and change into something more comfortable," Blanchefloure said.

There was something about the old farmhouse that made him uneasy. Large sheets covered unknown furnishings or equipment, and masked bookcases on the wall. He was afraid to look under them.

Then he saw it: a miniature painting on a shelf near the window, just peaking out from a corner of one of the sheets. *It couldn't be? No!* His legs went weak and he felt queasy.

Jinna Crondale cackled with maniacal laughter as she emerged into the room, having shed her disguise as Blanchefloure Gibbons.

For all his size and strength, when Yren Higbe saw her, he became like a trembling rabbit in the sight of a ravenous wolf.

"Heh heh heh heh hah!" Jinna said. "A good broom is hard to find these days!"

"Oh no!" Yren gasped, then he turned and fled through the nearest door, which he expected would open to the outdoors. But no! The door

opened into a corridor and Jinna chased right behind him.

He rushed into another door down the hall, and that too opened into a long corridor of doors. "Come back here!" Jinna Crondale called. "I could use a broom in high places – to clean up all these cobwebs." Again and again Yren Higbe tried to escape, with the old witch close at his heels, her laughter echoing in his ears. He thought: *It's an enchantment! A trap! I'm trapped! Trapped like a rat!*

Then he noticed a window at the end of the hall. He raced for it and dove through it head first.

When he recovered he was on the grass outside the farmhouse. He dashed away towards a wooded area and a tall wood fence, hoping to get onto a neighbour's land and escape.

Jinna leaned out the smashed window. "You'll not get away with this! My magic is too powerful for any mortal man!"

As Yren Higbe started climbing over the tall wood fence, it began turning into green gelatin. *Whoa! Whoa!* he thought as he wobbled up in the air, unable to surmount the enchanted fence.

He fell back into the yard, hearing the witch's insane laughter at this predicament. *I've got to get away!* he thought.

Yren Higbe ran at the fence, thinking to try to jump over it, but he tripped and hurled into the fence headfirst.

The tremendous SPLAT! was heard for miles around.

When Yren Higbe next gathered his senses he realised he had run through the fence and was now running downhill into the woods on the neighbour's land.

"You'll not get away from my clutches!" Jinna shouted. "Demon birds! Come, demon birds! Demon birds from the far winds! My ravenous demon birds! Catch this miserable fugitive from a broom factory!"

There was a loud fluttering of wings as a flock of ravens appeared in the distance. As they neared, however, they looked too big to be ravens. In fact, they were the enchanted souls of murderers, which Jinna Crondale had summoned into the bodies of ravens the size of

eagles with exceptionally sharp talons and beaks and a taste for human blood.

Yren was running as he never ran before. He ran downhill through the forest on a hillside strewn with boulders and fallen logs. The demon birds came after him, flying all around with the speed and vindictiveness of a swarm of gnats. They pecked at his face. They cut gashes in his clothes. He was cut and bleeding everywhere. He fell, hit his head and blacked out.



When Yren Higbe began to regain consciousness, he found that he was lying on the ground on some wet rocks. He looked up and saw a sign, "St Agnes' Holy Well". There were voices. Was he in heaven?

Two young ladies were looking over him. "He must be a brave knight," one said. "Look at all the stab wounds he endured."

"Oh, he's a wonderful specimen of a man! Won't the mistresses be pleased he's alive!"

"He's moving. I think he's coming to."

"Oh, sir knight, please don't move suddenly. You must be very hurt. We sisters of Agnes will take care of you."

Yren got up gradually and looked up at the sign. "The Holy Well of Saint Agnes has saved me!" he said.

"Oh tush," one young lady replied. "That's just there for nostalgia."

"Nose alga?"

"No, silly. The abbess just put the sign up to remind us of our former life. We're all rich noblewomen who were kicked out of convents for worldliness. Our present mistresses took pity on us and formed this sisterhood so that we don't have to go back to our families in disgrace."

"We act like a convent, but we're really much more fun."

"We have a fine clothing business for wealthy noblewomen. That's how we support our estate."

"We'll fix you up in no time. Just move slowly now. Are you sure that nothing is broken?"



After Yren Higbe was brought to the "convent", his wounds were bathed by bebies of young

ladies, his bulging muscles were ogled repeatedly, and he was measured for a fine suit of clothes.

Just before nightfall the twins came to visit, a pair of beautiful young brunettes. The twins had a calm, blank expression on their faces which contrasted with their rather vibrant voluptuous figures.

"We're the mistresses of the Sisters of Saint Agnes," one said.

"We're told you aren't seriously injured," the other whispered. "Is that true?"

Yren Higbe nodded.

"Good. Can we get into bed with you now?"

Yren Higbe said, "Sure." The two of them removed their clothes and hopped in.

"We're twins you know," one said. "We've learned how to share."

"Yes," the other added. "We like to lead a communal type of life."

Higbe said, "Wow."



Life in the convent was very exciting and demanding for Yren Higbe. In the morning, he had to practice inausterities. At midday, he had exercises and instructions of the most uplifting kind. And in the evening, there were many visitations.

Nevertheless, Higbe still wondered about Doris and whether someday she might take him back and resume their rustic life together. "There's nothing like the black sod in your hands, a red barn, and a buff-coloured wife like Doris," he thought.

In the meantime, however, he tried his best to fit in among the excessively worldly sisters of Agnes. He catered to their every need, and they had quite a few of them.

All things come to an end, and so did Yren Higbe's sojourn with the friendly sisters of Agnes. When war broke out again, the prying eyes and ears of military recruiters found him and he was drafted into a unit of militia in the Sandever army. In time he was shipped south and served in the campaigns by Sandever to annex Cwethan and Gleter.

Legends of his feats in the wars abound. He is

said to have used a battering ram singlehandedly to break down the gate of a castle in Uthgar. He rolled a huge boulder into the walls of Tloithbury Castle, opening a breach for soldiers to enter. He pulled wagons loaded with cannons out of the mud in Cwethwick, when the horses were too weak for the task. At the battle of Bluster Bay, he killed eight soldiers with his sword, and then hurled the bodies over the ramparts into the camp of the frightened defenders.

His commander said that one Yren Higbe was worth a whole regiment of militia. He was promoted to a captain in the light cavalry and his men felt invincible.

When the fighting was over, Yren Higbe was knighted by King Dravnoius I of Sandever, and given a small estate near Scaldwell up in the north of the Lesser States. Through a quirk of fate, and due to his uncanny resemblance to a famous witch hunter, Weebly Pumrod, Yren's old friend, was made mayor of Scaldwell for a short time. After Weebly's misadventures led him to abdicate, Yren Higbe himself served as interim mayor for a month.

Disenchanted with politics, and eager to get back to his ideal of a rustic life on the farm with his first true love, Doris, Yren Higbe sought out the help of the mightiest wizard in the north country, the incomparable Cerumen the Off-White.

Now this Cerumen lived in the remote village of Bunkwood far to the north, across many high mountains such as Mt Molehill and Blast-of-Wind Peak. Yren Higbe brought three mules carrying supplies and saddlebags full of all the gold and silver he possessed.

Here in a valley filled with fields of weeds and grasses, and a few ruined farm buildings, Yren Higbe approached the seat of Cerumen. It was midsummer and swarms of gnats were in the air. As his mules travelled on the pathway, they stirred up little black and white grasshoppers that flew clicking through the air. He passed a few hayricks and some dilapidated remnants of stone walls.

Looming over the drowsy valley was a large tower built of reddish-brown bricks. Near the top of the tower protruded two large semicircles,

one on each side, which reminded Yren Higbe of mushrooms or sea shells. There was no door, and no ladder to the tower. What to do?

Yren Higbe stood outside the tower, baffled. *Should I give up? Should I try to scale the tower? Should I shout and make a fuss?* He fidgeted and rubbed his chin. He looked high and low. He gazed at his mules, but they provided no guidance. The sun beat hot on his brow. He felt an itch and began scratching the inside of his left ear. Then suddenly it happened.

The ground shook as in an earthquake. The walls of the tower trembled. A door opened.

“Rasp not the esoteric paraffin of your interior auricle, where sorcery waxes thewy,” Cerumen said. He was a short, thin man in a rather dingy off-white robe, with a long brown beard having a spot of white in the middle of it. His dishevelled hair had the mingled appearance of salt and pepper. Long white hairs protruded from inside his ears. His eyebrows were dark as angry beetles; his eyes looked as if they would pierce to one’s inner soul. However, his voice was rather thin and squeaky.

“Huh?” responded Yren Higbe.

“Brother, I have comprehended the anguished ululations of your melancholia. I, Cerumen, the most consummate wizard in all of northeast Raynemouth, have taken pity on you.”

Yren Higbe tried to speak, but all he said was, “Duh...”

Cerumen pulled out a seashell from his pocket; it glowed with a faint light. “Sir Yren Higbe, do you comprehend why you are the strongest man in the world?”

Yren Higbe wrinkled his broad brow. The thought had never occurred to him.

“Well,” he replied, “the witch predicted I would be.”

“Epiphenomenal,” Cerumen grunted. “A prediction must be contradistinguished from a causative factor. The reason that you are so strong is that your maternal grandfather was an earth elemental. Your mother, like you, had prodigious strength. However, being a woman, she concealed her abilities. She must have concluded that it would only mean more labour for

her to perform, or would lead people to suspect her of witchcraft.”

“That is truly amazing. Does that seashell tell you all that?”

“Oh yes, that and much more besides. I can even detect the sonorousness of the ocean.”

“Do I have any other special abilities besides strength?”

“No, that is the totality. Why would you want others?”

“Well, uh, you see...” Yren began, and he found himself getting choked up. He was so inadequate and pathetic, and now he felt he would ruin his chances. But he could not find the words to express his innermost desires.

Cerumen said: “My occult powers, surpassing all others in the sublunary orb, detect the natural virtues of inferior objects, and pierce to the very fibre of their beings. Through these powers, inevitably, it is a mere bagatelle for me to recognise, *eo instanti*, the fountainhead of your perturbation. It is a woman, is it not?”

Yren Higbe burst into tears. “Oh, great wizard... great cult fiber of consumme... and all that other looney stuff... you’ve bagged my head for sure!”

“Please, restrain your lachrymation.”

“A woman!” Yren continued, as if the dam of his feelings had finally burst. “A woman you said! But what is a woman when she’s the first and only and bestest love of your whole life? How can anyone get along without that love? When it grabs you in the gut and tells you how lonely you are every minute?”

“This is more pestiferous than one might have initially cogitated. But see here, Sir Yren, relief is not inapproachable. We must get to the source. We must visit your pulchritudinous damosel. Where there is an inclination, there most certainly exists the *modus operandi*!” And with that he went back into his tower and emerged with a small jar.

“Apply this feathersauce,” Cerumen commanded, “to the nape of your neck. That’s the methodology; bedaub liberally. Are you curious as to what your true love is doing this very instant?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”



“Then I shall transmit you to that very locality. We both shall be transformed into diminutive swallows, and we shall aviate to her domicile and scrutinise her divertissements. Do not attempt to converse, since it will only actualise as chirping. Merely emulate my trajectory, then monitor, and assimilate. Subsequently, we will return hence.”

The wizard’s verbiage bounced around in Yren’s noggin like a confluence of flying tennis balls: *Swallow sauce, eat mice, screw tins. Ejaculate, moniker and substitute.* Yren started to feel strangely lightheaded and a bit giddy.

In a few moments, Cerumen and Yren Higbe transformed into swallows and flew up and around the mysterious tower. Oh, this was wonderful! It was like being a part of the wind and the clouds. It was exhilarating.

In the excitement of the moment, Yren Higbe forgot Cerumen’s admonition to avoid speech. He tried to call out to the wizard, but the words only came out as chirping. Still, he followed the wizard and swooped around and up and high over the tower. Why did anyone need to talk anyway? It was enough to be free and alive and part of nature.

Such freedom to be flying! Such fun! They flew up and over the clouds and out to Mugwald, in Saferus, where there was a great estate with large formal gardens. Here, seated on a marble love seat in front of a large boxwood hedge, Yren saw his wife Doris.

His heart almost stopped. She was next to a man.

He almost fell from the sky. She was kissing this man.

Landing on a branch of wisteria, Yren felt extremely woozy. This man Doris was kissing was old and ugly. He had a bald head and a scraggly goatee. His lips were full and he had a pointy chin. Overall he was heavysset and had a large paunch.

“How could she throw me over for this awful man?” Yren Higbe wondered. “He looks like some corrupt tax collector.” And then it dawned on Yren Higbe. This man was wearing a very large leather money belt with an official insignia

on it. It was true: Doris had thrown him over for the tax man. Yren put his wing over his eyes.

Soon afterward, Cerumen and Yren flew back to his tower, but this time Yren did not soar breezily as before, but seemed to lop heavily close to the ground, just barely clearing the trees and mountains as he came.

When Cerumen and Yren Higbe returned to the wizard’s tower, Cerumen said: “Do you nonetheless want this woman back?”

Yren looked at Cerumen with great pain on his face. “I will always love her, but now I know that I can never win her back. How can I, a simple wrestler, compete with the lure of bilking people and squeezing them like a python to extort piles and piles of money? No, it’s hopeless, and I might as well just give it all up and die right now.”

“My dear acquaintance,” Cerumen said sympathetically, “your affliction is a lack of congruity with your intrinsic identity. Your exceptional muscularity and stamina have their etiology in the earth. While you perambulate as a mere mortal man, it is inevitable that you will feel disconnected and alienated.”

Yren was baffled. “What do you mean?”

“I can transform you to maximise your elemental nature and bring you into equilibrium and peace with yourself. Are you content that this should be done?”

“Yes,” Yren said. “Transform away.”

★★★

There is a remote mountain range in Tulbagh, east of Lake Godfrey. Here, in 1025 CE, for the first time, rose a new mountain. Although it was new, it had great spiritual strength and beauty. Tall pines covered its lower flanks and its high, pointed summit was girt with spruce and balsam fir. Around its peak swirled a constant sighing wind, moaning for a lost and unrecoverable love. Ever thus, Mt Yren Higbe continues to this day, rooted deep in the strength of the earth, but with its head in the clouds of nostalgic youth and bittersweet yearning for a time, place, and love that will never come again.

The Broadest Divide

David McGillveray

“Do you think you’ll use that?”

Albert looked at the dull sheen of the shotgun that lay next to him and gently touched it with the tips of his fingers. “I don’t know. I suppose we’ll all know if it comes to it.” He ran two fingers down the cold metal of the barrel then returned his gaze to the valley below them.

“They keep a fire burning all night now, look,” Edward said, his breath smoking in the air. There was a glint of orange flame that danced at the centre of the settlement. “And there, see?” He pointed with a thin arm to a dull glow in front of the fire, nearer to where they waited.

“That’s the greenhouse, you know that, right?”

“Of course I do,” Edward growled. They were both nervous. “But they squander their resources, keeping a fire like that. What are they trying to frighten off?”

“Us?”

Albert shifted his weight on the hard rock under his body and his teeth shone in the hard light from the stars. He looked across to the far side of the valley where the broken silhouette of the *Fallen Drake* disturbed the smooth line of the horizon. He imagined the long scar the dropship had burned into the rocky ground twenty years ago reaching away across the land. It was

a bitter symbol for them all, an announcement of traumatic arrival and of failure. It would be the only thing left here when the settlement died.

“They should be frightened, but not just of us. They’re dying down there.” Edward’s face was taugt and pale in the darkness, the eyes hidden in their deep sockets. A scrag of dirty teenage beard dusted his chin. Patches of thin stubble dotted sunken cheeks.

“We’re all dying, Edward. We need that bird, or we’ll die before them.”

“We might die first all right,” spat Edward. “But we won’t sit and wait for it like them, that’s agreed. This raid, this bird, then we can leave. Make our own journey.” His voice was edged with something like anger. It was in the eyes that searched the valley floor, too, in the set of his face and the tension that held his body. He pointed, said: “Lempton.” Another light moved within the settlement. It pitched and swung as it shifted between the dark outlines of the settlement’s meagre collection of makeshift buildings. “The old bastard’s on his rounds as usual. He’ll get a shock tonight, no mistake. Maybe we’ll give him the heart attack I always hoped for him.”

“And you’re worried about me and the gun? I should worry for Lempton.”

“Don’t. He ran the orphan house, remember? I know him, you don’t.”

They lapsed into silence; the only sound their breathing in the cold air. In the short days, the land offered a sullen beauty. The endless black rock of the surface reached away in a landscape polished and rounded by the wind. The subtle yellow and rust of lichens that clung and collected water in sheltered hollows patched the rocks. It was not a giving beauty; their new home gave nothing without payment. But Albert had come to appreciate it even as he cursed it. They could live here. He was sure there was more for them here.

Sounds behind the two watchers made them turn their heads sharply. Albert’s hand involuntarily closed over the stock of the shotgun. The shuffle of booted feet and the slap of hands on bare rock told of others climbing the steep ridge behind them, and then a blonde head emerged from behind an outcrop. The figure was followed by two others.

“Edith,” breathed Albert. She returned his look with a fleeting smile and flattened herself on the ground next to him. The two men with her nodded greetings and settled behind them in silence.

“Cold?” she said. Perspiration from the climb moistened her forehead.

“And hungry,” nodded Edward.

“Ah, then just as well I remembered.” Edith pulled two sealed pots from a satchel on a long strap around her shoulders. She handed them over. Albert and Edward both scooped quickly at what was inside with their fingers, licking at every morsel until they were clean. Albert grimaced at each swallow.

“Exquisite as ever,” he winced. To make it they pounded the mulch from the green lichens found on some of the rocks and mixed it with salt and egg whites to make a paste. It was proof that native life could nourish them, at least in part. But it tasted foul and always left Albert with acid burning in his stomach. “How are the others?” he said to Edith.

“Fine. Not strong. Worried about you.” Her hand rested on the small of Albert’s back, under his jerkin. She pushed the palm of her hand gen-

tly against his skin. Edward watched them in the dim light.

“They won’t need to worry after tonight,” Albert assured her. “We’ll get our strength back and then we can go south. How about the hens?”

“Only three eggs today. They’re old, Alby. They’re not laying enough for us any more.”

“I’ll make sure the weakest of us get the protein when I get back. Maybe we’ll even be able to slaughter one soon, eh? Imagine that meat and make sure we get it right tonight.”

“Let’s hope so, babe.”

“George, Solomon.” Edward beckoned the two men waiting behind their group to join them on the lip of the ridge. They were as slight as he was, rough clothes hanging off their shoulders like flags on a still day. Five heads looked down at the settlement below.

“So we all know what we’re doing?” asked Albert. “Opposite ends. Give Edith and I time to get round the other side. Then you lot go down the hill. Make some noise. Lempton’s around so look out for him because he’s got one of these.” He hefted the shotgun in his right arm. It was heavy, dangerously reassuring.

“We’ll look out for him,” muttered Edward.

Albert looked hard at his friend’s shadowed face, then took Edith’s hand and helped her up. “OK? Let’s get that rooster.”



Keisha stood by the plastic window of their hut. It was sealed into the metal walls with crude putty, but a cold draft from outside still blew at a strand of greying hair that had fallen across her face. A trudging shape passed on the other side of the street swinging a lantern.

“Mr Lempton has just passed,” she said.

“Doing the circuit again, is he? I swear that man never sleeps. I suppose we should be grateful to him.”

“For what?” she asked without turning.

“For keeping a look out. He is trying to protect the settlement.”

“In his way,” she allowed. “It’s quiet.”

“Everyone is asleep. It’s late.”

“They’re worried, Mikey. Everyone is worried for the future.”

"It's just night-time."

"Do you think there will be another raid?" she asked suddenly, still looking balefully out of the window. She could hear the gentle hum of the generator that linked the six huts in their grouping. The low huts and outbuildings were indistinct in the darkness. A stuttering glow at the end of the street marked the position of Lempton's bonfire.

"Maybe. Probably. They can't survive long with what they took the last time. They'll have to come back."

"I want them to come back, Mikey. I miss them."

Mikey sighed. "They have made it clear they don't want to stay here, love. I don't think they will change their minds. And outside the settlement they will die. There is nothing to live on out there. It's an empty world. It will not support us. All they live on is pride, but they're not so proud as to stop from stealing from those they have abandoned. Think about that."

"You're still angry."

"I am. I have a right to be."

Keisha turned from the window to look at her husband. He sat on a wide chair salvaged from the ruined cabin of the ship they had all come to call the *Fallen Drake*. She thought he looked tired in the dim light cast by the two fluorescent tubes they had been rationed. But then, who was not tired?

"What if the survey maps were right and there is more water nearer the equator? What if there is more complex life down there?"

"What ifs. There may be, there may not. Keisha, we know all this. Even if there is, the journey will kill them all. It's nearly nine hundred miles, for God's sake. No, it's better to stay here. There will be another ship."

Keisha's face suddenly reddened with anger. "You've been saying that for the last twenty miserable years, Mikey!" she flared, "You and Lempton and the fools on the council. Another ship will appear in the sky and everything will be all right. It's time to get rid of false hope. It's time the people here faced that, because it's stopping us from doing *anything*. No one else is coming, Mikey. Why would they? The syndicate

gambled everything on us. Without any positive communications from us they would never be able to raise the funds for a second colony ship. The whole thing was a mistake from the start."

Mikey rose from his seat and put his arms round his wife. She sniffed into his shoulder. "You never said we were fools before," he said quietly in her ear, but there was no challenge in his voice.

She pulled back her head and looked into his eyes without removing her arms from his waist. "I've never thought you a fool, Mikey. But we have to be realistic. The others: at least they wanted to do something."

Mikey pulled away from her. "And what have they done, eh? Abuse us and then steal from their own people. They will die if they go south, simple as that. They have been told. We are together here, and we have enough. Not much, but enough."

But Keisha had stopped listening. She stepped again towards the window and held up a hand. "Did you hear that?"

"What? No. "

There was a shout outside in the distance. She turned back to him, her mouth open and a hand to her mouth.

There was a shot.

★★★

Under a night sky without a moon, Edward led George and Solomon down the steep slope that led to the settlement that those who still lived there called First Touch. Their feet rolled on the loose gravel that lay on the paths between barren rocks. In some places the rock flattened to form natural platforms and on these lay piled mounds of broken stone that marked the graves of the settlement's dead. They were many.

The three of them crossed the unmarked perimeter of the settlement-proper bent and in silence, hoods pulled low over their faces so they would not shine in the sharp starlight. The corpses of broken machinery, empty fuel tanks and dead computers circled First Touch like a curse washed up on a pestilential tide. There were things that had never worked, that could not be salvaged from the torn wreck of the

Fallen Drake. There were things that could not be made to work because there was no power and because all their operators were long dead. Edward knew people stayed here only because there was nothing else. At least their own camp was not surrounded by painful reminders.

They stepped through the rubbish, making their way towards the glow of the greenhouse ahead of them. Edward watched for signs of discovery, but most of the townsfolk lived nearer the centre and the settlement slept. They would come soon enough.

Edward could see green through the glass and plastic that held the settlement's crops. There were tomatoes and potatoes and rice growing inside, even strawberries. He remembered tasting a strawberry one Christmas when he was a kid, bitter and sweet and like nothing he had ever had before. His dormitory had shared five between them.

Everyone knew the greenhouse would not give the settlement life indefinitely. The native soil would not support what they had brought with them, and everything here grew from the stock of nutrients and the bones of the hydroponics systems they had gathered from the ship. It would not last forever.

They were not here for sabotage. He would not murder everyone here, despite their differences. He was here to give Albert some time, nothing more. Edward hefted a fist-sized chunk of rock he had picked up on the way down. He looked at the glass that protected the settlement's treasure and pulled back his arm.

Then blinding light pinned them. Solomon and George flinched and fell back. Edward shaded his eyes with a hand and peered through his fingers, but there was only the light.

"Put those down, all of you," commanded a voice from behind the light. Edward knew that voice. It was Lempton. He heard the thumps as his companions dropped the rocks they held and released his own. It clattered on the hard ground and rolled against his foot.

"So you've come back, then," said the voice. It was hoarse and scratched. "And you return the way you left, sneaking in the night. And you

come back to bring more hurt to First Touch, I see."

The light disappeared and for a moment there was nothing, except narcotic colours splashing on Edward's retinas. Then a softer glow grew and Edward saw Lempton straightening from a lantern that lay at his feet. There was a pair of night goggles on a strap around the man's neck and a shotgun in his hands. It pointed from his hip at the three intruders now held in a circle of light.

Still the three of them said nothing.

"Hello again, boys." Lempton said. His mouth twisted into a smile devoid of goodwill. He was a big man, tall and broad but his skin, emptied of fat, hung from his body. Loose jowls of flesh fell ugly and wrinkled from his face. Long grey hair was scraped back from his high forehead and tied at the nape of his neck. "So where do we go from here?"

"We weren't going to destroy it," blurted George.

"No?" Lempton shifted his eyes momentarily away from Edward and then back. "But you are here to steal, eh? Like last time. All full of pride about living off the land but still you come back as thieves. Stand still!" He moved the barrel of the gun at a movement from Solomon.

"Why've you not called for help, Lempton?" Edward spoke for the first time.

"Well, you know me, Edward. It is Edward is it not? You've lost so much weight. I like my moments of privacy. You remember that as well, George, eh? When you were out of line. Well you're all out of line now. Way out." His voice was harsh now, but still low. "I can't just let you go back to whatever pit you sleep in now, can I? To come back again and take our food, to take what you said you did not need. No. So should I march you into town, let them show you justice? You are just children and they are soft. But only I know you need to be shown discipline. That's how it has always been between you and me. And now you are out of chances." Again, the barrel of the shotgun moved higher.

Edward watched the black glint in Lempton's eyes and knew. "You were always an evil piece of shit, Lempton."

Lempton laughed. His hands moved.

"Bastard!" Edward screamed, percussive in the quiet. His voice rolled across the cold air of First Touch. He rushed at the older man.

★★★

"Don't go," begged Keisha, eyes wet. Her arms held Mikey's shoulders but he shook them off.

"I need to. This can't go on."

"Just leave it to the others for once." Already there were voices and running feet outside. Light and heat escaped from opened doorways.

Mikey looked at the worried face of his wife and reached out to touch her cheek. She clutched at his hand, arguments forgotten.

"I know what's happening here," he said. "Don't worry."

But when he left he carried with him the wooden bat he had owned since he was a boy. He remembered swinging it under a bluer sky and carrying it with him on a long journey.

★★★

The gunshot had scared them as they came down into the valley. They crouched and waited, but there was no movement on this side of the settlement. No more shots came. They had decided to chance it, hope the shot had been a warning. Albert had found the compound and broken the lock.

The rooster regarded its assailant with malevolent eyes. Albert was breathing hard and looked back across the enclosure with a hate of his own. The damn bird fought a good fight. It was quick and strong and well fed, a sign of its importance to First Touch. Albert's arms were marked with long bloody scratches where he had tried to hold it still, and then watched his foe slip away in a storm of feathers and angry spitting sounds. He thought he heard Edith giggle from where she stood guard with the shotgun. He hoped that Edward's diversion would keep the townsfolk busy at the other end of the settlement but nevertheless wished she would pay less attention to his own efforts.

Albert eyed the rooster again. It was strutting up and down at the other end of its wire compound with its chest puffed out. The hens in the

adjoining coops clucked softly in admiration. He readied the cloth sack he had brought with him and crouched down. He began to creep slowly forwards.

The rooster watched him come, moving from foot to foot and insolently pecking at the ground with its sharp beak. Albert got to within less than a body's length of his quarry. He had been here several times already. His knuckles were white on the coarse material of the sack, his eyes held the bird's in a contest of wills.

The rooster darted to the right, its stubby wings held out for balance and its head pushed forward. But this time Albert had anticipated correctly. He dove at the bird with a grunt, arms outstretched. The mouth of the sack went cleanly over the rooster's body, trapping it against the ground. Albert scrabbled to his knees and quickly tightened the neck of the bag. Angry squawks and kicking came from within. He wiped sweat from his face despite the cold air and rose to his feet. He held his prize up in triumph and turned to show Edith.

But she was not there.

He started forward to the gate and stopped dead as another shape appeared from the shadows. Starlight caught the sheen of metal. Albert dropped the sack, which complained and pulsed at his feet.

"Hello, son," said Mikey. A baseball bat rested against his left leg, his fingers resting lightly on the grip. A gun was cradled in his right arm, the barrel pointed at the ground.

Albert took a step forward. "What've you done to her, you bastard?"

"Calm down. She'll be OK." He stepped aside and Albert saw Edith's slumped body. She groaned softly. "Easy now."

Albert grimaced. He stared at Mikey, who stared back. His father had aged in the year since they had left. His face was thin and lined, his hair greyer and sparser. Albert imagined he did not look too good himself. In profile, their noses were long and pointed, their chins matched. Both faces were pallid with malnourishment. Albert was angry with himself, but then he straightened his back and squared his shoulders.

"It should never have gone this far," Mikey

sighed. "You heard the shot?" Albert just looked glassily into the night. Then: "Your mother misses you."

Pain twisted across the younger man's face. He nodded. "We won't change our minds."

"Don't die in the wasteland for a dream, Albert. Keisha... we... want you to stay."

Albert shook his head. He indicated towards where Lempton's fire still burned. "It's too late for that now, I think. At least we have some hope, dad."

"We have hope."

"Oh yes," Albert sneered, angry again. "We'll all be saved by the coming starship. It's a myth: a myth of deliverance. The religion of the elders of First Touch! A cult preaching lies to a dying people, nothing more. It makes me sick."

"Albert..."

But Albert continued. He pointed up to where the ragged outline of the *Fallen Drake* brooded over the valley. "Just look at that thing up there. You haven't exactly come far in twenty years, have you? It's like a tombstone, standing over all your graves. *We* won't live in the shadow of failure, a monument to stupidity and fear."

"At least we're alive."

"Yeah, and you look well on it," spat Albert. "Answer me this, dad. What's your legacy to your children? What's your legacy to us? When there's nothing left to strip from the wreck, when there's nothing left to power your batteries and heat the greenhouse, what will be left? How long do you have left? Five years, ten?"

"We will find a way. We always have before."

"You'll die."

"Not before you, if you continue with this plan of yours."

"There's more for us on this world, I know there is. Do you know we take nourishment from the lichens? No? Well we know there is more water at the equator. And that means more complex life, and that means life for us. We have to try."

Mikey sighed and his face appeared to crumble. A great breath escaped from his chest. He appeared to come to a decision. "Go then." He seemed about to say more but then he just stood aside. Edith groaned again and moved on the

ground. Albert went to her and spoke in hushed whispers. He slowly helped her to her feet and they made to leave.

"Albert!"

They turned. Mikey held out the still-struggling sack that held the rooster. Albert returned and took it. "And have this." Albert looked at the smooth wood of the baseball bat in his father's hands. "It was your grandfather's."

Mikey watched them go, arm still cradling the gun. Shouts and light came from the direction of the greenhouse.



Lempton lay pinned beneath the dead weight of Edward's body. He struggled to shift the burden, his outstretched arm still clutching the shotgun. George and Solomon rushed forward.

George put his boot down hard on Lempton's wrist, forcing his hand to open. He reached down and picked up the gun. Its barrel was warm. Lempton began to say something but George quickly upended the weapon and brought the stock down viciously into the mocking face. He heard the splinter of bone and blood bubbled from Lempton's smashed nose, but still the eyes smiled up. George brought the stock down again and then again, breaking socket and jaw in a series of sickening impacts until Solomon leaned across to still his anger.

They rolled Edward off the still form of Lempton and turned him face up. Blood covered the front of Edward's jerkin, spreading from a ragged black hole above the sternum. There was no sound of breathing, no movement.

George looked at Solomon, said: "We have to take him back."

Solomon shook his head. "There's no time." The sound of running feet and angry voices came from beyond the greenhouse. George looked at Edward a last time, agony on his face. Then he turned and ran.

There would be no understanding now. People had died, on both sides. If there had been any doubt before, now they had to leave the settlement where they had been born. They had to leave their families behind them, sheltering in their huts. They would follow Albert south. TOF

WHO PICKED THE POPE'S NOSE?

DAN
KOPCOW



Sammy Jabinsky, Hollywood agent, sat in the compartment car of the Öresund train staring blankly out the window. The passing Danish countryside eluded his focus. Even the shrinking vision of Copenhagen in the fleeting distance took no purchase on his otherwise engaged and addled brain. From the time they landed by air in Paris to riding the Orient Express into Copenhagen to boarding their current rail, Jabinsky had felt his sense of dread growing exponentially. Word had reached him that his client, Matthew Cramp, had put out a mob hit on him after rumours surfaced that Jabinsky had failed to adequately renew his contract. Jabinsky, a tall, burly fellow, had previously never known true fear. But then, he never had a client like the unpredictable and vindictive Cramp before.

Jabinsky shared his compartment car with a small film crew, Manjiro (Cramp's personal manservant for the past three years), and Manjiro's caged falcon. They were on their way to Stockholm to make amends with the Swedish government. During a North American museum tour of rare European treasures, Cramp, ever the prankster, had abused his privileged status by stealing the famed Pope's Nose diamond, replacing it with an offensively crude double. However, even someone of Cramp's status could not escape the demands of his government to return the Pope's Nose to its rightful Swedish owners.

Circus tightrope-walkers often refuse to work with a net, claiming the lack of safety apparatus concentrates the mind beautifully. Jabinsky, finding himself in a similar situation, had had the inspired idea of bringing along the film crew to create some positive publicity. Anything that distracted Cramp from contacting his underworld associates was a Mount Sinai miracle of Moses-like proportions to the beleaguered Jabinsky.

Manjiro was a quiet Japanese fellow with impeccable manners and an absolute mastery of the English language. No one knew nor asked why Manjiro insisted on travelling everywhere with his falcon. It was simply understood that to retain the services of an excellent gentleman's gentleman, concessions had to be made.

Manjiro opened up his well-worn appointment book and tapped his pocket watch. Jabinsky took a deep breath and stood up. He and Manjiro exited the safety of their compartment, leaving the sleeping film crew behind, and knocked on the door of the adjacent and vastly more spacious compartment suite.

"Mr Cramp," said Jabinsky through the locked door, "it's me, Sammy. Two more hours before we pull into Stockholm. Manjiro is here for your elocution lessons."

"Electro-cution? Jimmy-Jam ain't taking no electrocution lessons from noooooobody," came the voice from the other side of the door.

Jabinsky guffawed loudly, making sure his client heard, and turned to Manjiro, who was holding his placid facial features in check.

"Dynamite stuff. A laugh riot every goddamn day. You can't teach that kind of shit at Harvard," said Jabinsky.

The door unlocked and slowly opened.

"Do you have to be such a Jew?" asked Cramp, holding the door. "Oh, and I see you've delivered my Chinese take-out."

There was the usual awkward pause. It could even be claimed that a certain coolness descended upon the immediate vicinity.

"Nah, I'm just fuckin' with ya," said Cramp.

Matthew Cramp was nine years old. To the world, he was the lovable "Jimmy-Jam" in the wildly popular "L'il Kids" shorts. He was the most popular child-actor in the world. Mothers adored him. Children wanted to be just like him. Jimmy-Jam fan clubs dedicated to the undying worship of the playful moppet were spreading throughout the country at a rate that would have made the bubonic plague envious. Cramp was famous for his bald head, atop which rested an oversized bowler hat, and his sharp tongue. The bald head was the studio's invention; the sharp tongue was his own.

"Ya didn't bring the bird, did ya?" Manjiro's bird was the only thing on this earth that seemed to frighten Cramp.

Jabinsky and Manjiro entered the luxurious train car. Manjiro sat down on the floor and immediately began shuffling a deck of language index cards. Jabinsky stood by the door, having

learned to keep an escape route open in these situations.

"What the hell you still doin' here, Sammy?" asked Cramp, flopping down in his chair.

"It's about this telegram I received from Sweden," said Jabinsky. "This guy, Otto Brussen, he's the one who's meeting us at the train station. The Pope's Nose belongs to his family."

"I don't care who the guy is. Just as long as the guys capture my good deed for the news reel," said Cramp.

"Well, this guy, Brussen, he's some famous mathematician. You know how the studio's been on you to get a decent math tutor. I thought it'd be a helluva story..."

"Clam it, Sammo," said Cramp. "I'm thinkin' here. What about if I could convince this Otto guy to be my math tutor? Make a helluva story."

"Brilliant," said Jabinsky with all the enthusiasm of Zeppo at a Marx Brothers autograph signing. He turned to leave.

"And Sammy," said Cramp, "don't Jew this up."

"You little rascal," said Jabinsky as he left, closing the door behind him.

Cramp turned to Manjiro who was unusually still. "What's eatin' you today, Manny?"

Manjiro looked Cramp in the eye and, with a calm voice, said, "There is much that you do not know of my past, Master Cramp. It is of no significance in your world but my past cannot be avoided any longer. Sooner or later, we must all face our demons."

"Yeah, yeah, how much more do you want? How much am I payin' you now?"

"Master Cramp, it has been my honour to serve you but after our visit to Sweden I will no longer be in service to you. I have booked passage from Stockholm to return to Japan after years of disgraced exile."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Cramp. "No one leaves me. Dammit, I need you Manny. You're the only one who ain't scared shitless of me."

"An honourable observation but..."

"No buts. You ain't goin'," said Cramp.

"I have already decided. I leave tomorrow."

Cramp removed his bowler hat, revealing the Pope's Nose diamond glued to his head. The dia-

mond resembled a small, yellow mouse to the hurried eye.

"Safe keepin'. Look, I'm goin' to Japan with you, Manny. We'll straighten out whatever the hell is botherin' you there and then get back to Hollywood. Besides, the publicity will be double-great. Two good deeds with one trip!"

★★★

Otto Brussen waited unaccompanied in the Stockholm train station for Cramp's arrival, the aura of enigmatic sadness, prevalent among those possessed of similar mathematical genius, weighing especially heavy upon him this day. At seventy-three years of age, he did not regularly attend the cinema and was therefore unacquainted with Jimmy-Jam and his "L'il Kids" ilk. Nor did he possess any appreciation for the magnitude of Cramp's visit. All he knew was that he wanted the Pope's Nose diamond returned so he could place it back into his family's estate museum and then carry on with his mathematical research on integral curves in first order differential equations. He had worked on his theorem for months but was no closer to solving it.

The train pulled into the station with the fanfare of visiting royalty. The Swedish press clamoured for an advantageous view of the Prince of Hollywood. Brussen stayed behind, working out the probability moments earlier that the American entourage would seek him out of the crowd.

After the press had had their fill of the incorrigible waif, they departed. Cramp, accompanied by Jabinsky, Manjiro, and their own film crew, approached Brussen.

"How's the action, Jackson?" said Cramp to Brussen.

Brussen replied in Swedish.

"What the hell he just say?" asked Cramp, turning to Jabinsky as if this was all his fault.

"If you will allow me," said Manjiro, who proceeded to speak with Brussen in Swedish. Cramp, unaccustomed to waiting, tapped his foot on the railway station floor defiantly, finally kicking Jabinsky in the shin.

"Well?" said Cramp.

Manjiro smiled. "Master Brussen is honoured by your visit to his humble country."

"Of course," said Cramp.

"Master Brussen is even more honoured that you would consider retaining him as a math tutor," continued Manjiro. "But, he has to respectfully decline."

"Are we rollin'?" asked Cramp, glancing nervously at the film crew.

"Yup," answered Jabinsky.

"Tell you what, Otto," said Cramp confidently, "we're headin' to Japan after stoppin' off at this two-bit tomato stand. How's about you come with us and think things over?"

Manjiro translated this for Brussen who, at first, seemed displeased by these developments. He was on the brink of a new mathematical discovery and wanted to get this business over with. But as Manjiro explained things to the Swede, Brussen began nodding his head, occasionally pointing at Manjiro's falcon with great interest.

"What the hell did you tell him?" asked Cramp.

"Brussen will consider going to Japan with you if I agree to provide a *Takagari* demonstration. I have agreed."

★★★

"One mo' time?" demanded Cramp.

"In Japan, I studied the ancient Japanese art of falconry, *Takagari*. This art form was practiced exclusively by the noble class, to which I belonged, but it slowly fell out of favour. I had risen in my *ryuu*, or falcon style, to the level of *Takagari* Master but had to leave my country in disgrace when my falcon killed a visiting nobleman's dog. Most egregious."

The film crew set up in the *takaba*, or open field, next to the station while local villagers gathered with the visiting Hollywood celebrity in a great circle. Jabinsky stood next to Brussen, who seemed fascinated by all this. Manjiro stood majestically in the centre of the circle, his mighty falcon perched on his forearm.

Manjiro unhooded the falcon and released it. The bird began to make large swooping dives, gathering greater speed with each new approach.

"Matthew," called out Jabinsky from behind the cameraman, "could you move into the circle so you stand out from the crowd? It'll make for a better picture for the folks back home."

Cramp was transfixed by the soaring bird, terrified to move. Slowly, he shuffled forward.

"And take off your hat?" asked Jabinsky.

Cramp hypnotically removed his bowler hat, revealing the Pope's Nose glued to the top of his bald head.

Manjiro waved his right arm in an authoritative semi-circle. The great predatory bird swooped down on Cramp's head thinking the Pope's Nose was some type of vermin he could have for lunch. Cramp, unaccustomed to carnivorous aviary aerial attacks, screamed like a nine-year-old girl before wetting himself and curling up on the ground in the foetal position. This behaviour was captured on film.

Jabinsky, never one to look a gift-raptor in the beak, immediately approached the huddled Cramp and kicked him in the ribs.

"You little bastard, here's the thing. You're fired. There's no more Jimmy-Jam. Character named Scapple is takin' your place. You're through. You want to fuck with me, America gets to see you wet yourself."

Meanwhile, Brussen was furiously making notes as he observed the falcon in flight. "But this is magnificent," he reported to Manjiro, "the curves of the falcon's flight path are equivalent to the integral curve set I have been missing in my calculation. The math is beautiful! I will study your bird and complete my theorem!"

★★★

In the months that followed, Manjiro co-authored Brussen's math paper which won much acclaim from those impressed with such things. Because of this momentous achievement, Manjiro was accepted back into Japan's nobility.

Many years later, Cramp still retained the Pope's Nose diamond, frequently showing it to the other middle-aged homeless heroin addicts as proof of his once-shining star. The other homeless people would usually point out a pigeon which would make Cramp run away and they would all have a jaunty laugh. TQF

After All

An Old Trick... a
Brief, Derisive Snort

MICHAEL

WYNDHAM THOMAS

Previously...

*I was sitting in a car when it melted away.
I awoke... somewhere. In a house. With people. But everything was vague.
And then the same people began to arrive again.
Their younger selves. But where was mine? Where was I?*

Next morning I got up early, before the rest. There: straight into a lie I don't mean. Yes, I was up first. But how did I know if it was morning, or early? I still hadn't a clue what kind of time or non-time we were living in. And nothing – not the fog, not the wind, not the biscuit-girl – felt obliged to explain. Come to that, was “living” the word I needed? I cuffed those thoughts away as I rummaged in the wardrobe for an eighties outfit that was halfway wearable. I found one, too: denim jeans and

jacket, darkish shirt. You can't go too wrong with that. But I also awoke another, darker thought among the narrow ties and goofily-patterned sweaters. Since this was eighties gear, how long had I been expected? Should I have melted away from some other earthly spot, eighteen, twenty, twenty-five years ago? It took a while to wrestle that idea to the ground. My hands were shaking as I tried to do up the unnecessarily bendy buttons on the shirt. Of course, I didn't really help myself. I fell to imagining all

sorts. Standing flanked by friend and enemy alike in my last school assembly; hearing my name called in our headmaster's clerical tones, an official wish expressed that I should forge ever onward; then wobbling and almost blacking out before – how had Rob described his “melt”? – pouring like sand through the toes of my shoes. Or propping up my Student's Union bar, one of many siren-rocks in my voyage of life; shaking an empty glass, demanding a refill from a barman who was doing a fair bit of melting himself, at least on the evidence of my liquored-up eyes; feeling the glass turn to liquid and race down my arm as though I were throttling a sponge; turning to liquid myself and perhaps hearing some gruff voice – “hey, pal, not all over my shoes, do you mind?” – as I became a heap of clothes, sodden, malodorous. Or on my stag do, crucified upside-down on railings somewhere in Amsterdam, my posse returning next day to discover nothing but orphaned shirt-cuffs flapping equidistant from a spangly codpiece: a touch of Houdini in the city of sin. Or just during some barney with mom on a visit home. Had I vanished then, I could imagine her carry-on afterwards: “Didn't have a single answer. Couldn't say why we never saw him, why he didn't have a better job, why he was still going out with that Karen. No – just went up in a mist. That's university for you – that's the clever-dick stuff they waste our money on.”

Luckily, having run its course, this torment went phht! in its own mist. I descended the stairs in a mood of vaguely aggressive relief. “But you didn't get me back then, did you?” I whispered to the tasteful walls. “See? See?” I crowed, backheeling a stair-rod.

I thought I was back at university when I went into the kitchen – or at least in some hall of residence I remembered from a works' training weekend. Clingfilm again, like the sandwiches last night, this time around little mounds of continental stuff on the counter: croissant, roll, square of butter, smatter of jam, all bound snugly together. Alongside them, a coffee machine bubbled away. There was a jug of milk, one of those plastic Travelodge efforts with a sliding lid. Teabags were arranged like wafer

mints along a narrow dish. That was it, I thought, unwrapping a little mound, pouring a mug of coffee, remembering my feeling last night when I saw the sandwiches. I was a transient in a motel. I'd been flicked up like a penny out of my time, my life, and now I was waiting to... go on. Those last words felt and sounded so tiny, so obviously unequal to describing what lay ahead. But something did. A meet-up with one or more of my selves, presumably. If not – what? Suddenly I didn't care if I were thrown together with the most feckless, irritating, bone-idle me I'd ever been. I just wanted it all to happen.

For a moment, munching and drinking away at the kitchen table, I wondered who'd provided all the food this morning. But that was really to get the speculation out of the way. I assumed it was the biscuit-girl or some other little helper I'd probably never meet. I found myself wishing I'd never met her. If she was who I thought she was, surely she knew it. If she did, then letting me know that she knew was surely part of... whatever the larger plan was. Unless she wasn't my biscuit-girl, in which case she'd probably know that too, being a... well, she had to be a superhuman soul, didn't she? And you'd think a superhuman soul would have a superhuman dollop of compassion. So why didn't she tell me she hadn't lived on a tin-lid in a cold, provincial school – if she hadn't? Mouth full of the last bite of my roll, I stood up, swigged the dregs of my coffee and went out, letting my little inquisition blow away on the draft from the front door.

This bit, at least, was simple. There was little to choose between either direction. I was hardly lost amid the changeful beauties of Rome. The Fens out of season, more like. I mimed tossing a coin – and letting it fall – then turned right, retracing the bewildering walk I'd taken alone yesterday (however far off that was, now – the nano-est of nano-seconds? a fistful of aeons? oh... both... neither... I hardly cared). Here was the generous fog. Here was the occasional glimpse or sharp feel of hedge and twig. But the fog's colour: that was different – at least it seemed so, to the very edge of my vision. When I stopped and gawped at it, it looked just like the fogs that had so often magicked the streets of my



childhood away. But when I walked on, pretending not to notice it, I saw – no, felt – another shade running in and round it like veins pushing at thin skin. Now it was orange, now sand, now almost lemony. I imagined a sunrise about to burst through, then stalling, then unfurling its robes and trying again. Sunrise. Dawn. Clarity. Was that it? Was the fog losing? Would it shred and scatter for good, to reveal in all its detail the landscape that had ambushed us so beautifully yesterday? Would clarity present the self that was meant for me, so that he and I could link arms with the Robs and the Marjories and the six of us, blinking in the sun, could walk on to salvation, certain that we were bound, at last, for a definite somewhere?

My thoughts were far ahead of me. I was convinced that, if I walked back now, I'd find my special self sitting in the lounge, chatting away to... the double-set of twins. For that was how the Rods and Marjories suddenly struck me. For both of them, different strands of time had entwined in fertility: youth and age had burst forth together, one becoming two. And wasn't the same about to happen to me?

Up ahead, the lane seemed to be veering left. That old curiosity, staple of mortal bones, possessed me. I'll just get to that turn, I thought, so I can say I got there. Then I'll run back and meet... here my thoughts yielded to pure anticipation. I felt like people do when they're on the edge of reunion with a long-lost brother – which I was, really. Surely. Which me will I find? I wondered, prepared to love whoever it was, however unloveable he might have been in the hours and months he'd used up. Like the head of a regiment, I strode past the turn in the lane, head up and shoulders back, a manner unknown to me. I wish I hadn't.

She was standing at the left-hand verge, as if the fog were masking a request stop. He was a little way behind her, sitting on something, a mound or tree-stump, maybe. She looked me up and down: an old trick, usually rounded off with a brief, derisive snort. Like now.

"Well, well," she said. "The wanderer comes a-wandering."

"Yes," I said, my voice small, hollow. Some-

how I managed to apply a frown and leave a deliberate gap before adding, “mom” – hoping to convey, I suppose, that I’d all but forgotten her, so little had she meant. My theatrics were lost on her.

She sniffed. “Surprises, surprises. I’d have thought you’d go straight down.” An arthritic finger stabbed towards the fog-laden earth. “Or up, of course,” she added, her tone implying that anything “up” was beyond me but, fair’s fair, she had to include it. “What was it, then? Drunk-driving? Did you get nostalgic for all your uni drugs? Karen kill you? I always thought there was a slate missing there.”

Three bits of spliff, one disgustingly soggy – that was the sum of my university intake. She knew it, just as she knew (but hated) that Karen was nice and I always left the car alone when I wanted to get bladdered. No, no and no, I didn’t reply. Instead I stared past her:

“Heya, dad.”

He was sitting with his jacket round his shoulders, rubbing his chin as he regarded the ground. A brief separation of hand from chin was all I got by way of greeting. I didn’t mind. He looked cowed, doleful. My heart went out to him. I was just about to comment on the touch with the loose jacket: something like, “getting a bit suave, aren’t we, dad?” – joshing, kindly. Then I remembered I’d seen him exactly like that before, after one of their many Sunday afternoon rows, in that dead time between pub opening-hours. How old was I? It couldn’t have been that long after Miss Collins and Junior One and the paint-lid. Hiding away in another part of the house, I’d looked up the garden path and seen him at the very end, sitting on an upturned something – bucket, super-party beer-tin – jacket askew round his shoulders, hand worrying his chin. A thought struck me, so hard that my hand went to my stomach. Mom enforced it, clearly thinking she’d been ignored for long enough.

“We saw you arrive.”

I couldn’t muster enough of anything to be surprised or ask why they hadn’t been to call: “Feels longer than yesterday,” I mumbled.

“Yester–!” Mom choked the word off with a yip that, had it not been for the fog, would have

echoed long and ugly in this unknown, unknowable place. “You’ve been here years.” Her voice changed to a quiet crowing: “That Karen’ll have kids by now. Courtesy of different blokes, no doubt. They’ll be grown, too.” She took a step back, as if literally clearing space for another pounding by that thought. And what she’d just said ensured that it hit twice as deep. I couldn’t duck the vision. Me, back at the house up the lane, imprisoned with the selves chosen for me. Her and him. Rows and atmospheres from everlasting to everlasting. An eternity of her pursed lips, her carefully constructed expressions of pain. Of his bulk departing through every slam-mable door, his desperate tramp from one lane to another, his wordless conviction that there must be a booze-store tucked away somewhere in this land of ceaseless fog.

And they weren’t even me, this pair. Well, alright, they were in a way – but not in the Rob and Marjory way. I pictured Rob and Marjory and hundreds like them, all in houses along a lattice-work of foggy lanes, all meeting or about to meet their gathered selves, pooling lives and memories, preparing to rove on to a good place where fog was banned – “*where the lemonade springs*”, my mind sang mockingly, “*and the bluebirds sing, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain.*” While I was left high and dry, strung up on – what? Some dreadful glitch? Some technicality? But surely it could be sorted out – couldn’t it? Never mind biscuit-girls – where was the gaffer for this place? Retired? On gardening leave?

“Suits him down to the ground, here,” my mother was saying. “Nicely betwixt and between for him. He can stay just like he always was – scared stiff of change. New car? New house? Better pension plan? ‘Ooh, I don’t know about that, girl’” – she mimicked his chin-rub – “‘ooh, I’ll have to give that a think.’ His fault. His fault we’re here. I could’ve managed very nicely with harps and ambrosia, right from the off. But no... we have to stay stuck, don’t we – for who knows how long?” She turned to him, her eyes twin sparks of venom. “He infected my forever. My after all.”

A crack opened in my brain. Words from some

forgotten sermon, some tatty missal, whispered from across the sands of the long-ago.

"Limbo," I said. "This is limbo."

Mom looked as though she'd just bitten on garlic: "Course it's limbo, you godless little whelp. Where did you think it was? Here," she wheezed, turning to dad again; clearly he was good enough to enlist as a partner in malice. "This one thinks he's in Ilfracombe." Dad, though, wasn't having any of it. He hunched down. Silently, I thanked him. At least he was there for me this once. But, as a sort of twisted pay-off, the merciless thought returned. Godless little whelp: I could hear her repeating it over and over in the fog-smothered house; almost see the words echoing off the walls, hanging like smoke from the cigs she fatally never quit – on the stairs, around the clingfilmed food – now and always.

"But you never know," she said, "we might get the nod any time now – whatever he hopes." She pulled on a familiar face: brave little woman, muddling through. Her voice became an over-the-garden-fence mutter. "Haven't a clue how I'll manage him, mind. A clear decision, a definite move." She winked. "It'll be the heart-attack all over again."

Dad might or might not have heard this. At any rate, something made him stand up, pull his jacket on properly and turn to walk deep into the fog. Mom regarded his weary shuffle: "Ooh, action stations." Without any suggestion that it had been interesting to see me, or at least something different, she moved off. Gaining on him, she suddenly stopped and wheeled round: "Poor you," she said in fake-diddums tones, "thinking you only just got here."

I said nothing. I had wondered how long it was – wondered, too, if it could ever be measured. But I wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she'd slid another anxiety onto my pile.

"Still, the food changes every day," she added, topping off the words with a cackle. "Then it changes back. You'll be ditching it and eating the clingfilm soon."

Karen was a lovely woman. You're vile. Dad could have done a million times better than you.

All of these dried up in my mouth. What came out instead was, "What's your house like?" In reply, her finger went up to the side of her nose. I had my own beeswax, it said. I should mind it. But the gesture didn't anger me. I saw how it all really was. Dad wanted to be off, so she had to. He went, she followed. For all her twin-set bravado, she needed him – always had done, probably – hating herself for it, then needing him all the more, hating herself all the more... As she caught up with him, I hailed the unlikely winner as I had before:

"Heya, dad."

The arm she couldn't see flapped away from his body. Like a shadow-puppeteer, he did something with his hand. Made something. A thumbs-up.

I imagined them back in the house whose appearance I was forbidden to know – or rather, I imagined him outside, at the end of the garden, on an upturned doofer again, jacket slung loose, hand wearing his chin away. I saw her standing at the kitchen window, staring daggers at him, her mouth full of words she'd let fly, believe you me, honest to God, if only he'd... be a man... and get up... and walk back in. A single moment of hatred, playing out endlessly at their place in the fog. A moment straight out of those lifeless Sunday hours when we were all awkwardly together, while he waited for the pub and she prayed for something decent on the evening telly. Dad sitting there in the garden on his rusty throne, rooted to his spot – keeping her rooted to hers. Yes. The unlikely winner. I watched his back fade into the fog, heard the trot-trot of her shoes as she took two steps to his one. I closed my eyes, counted to three, opened them. Fog, verge, the place where dad had been slumped – a bit of rock it looked like. Nothing else.

I smiled – no, grinned hugely. I wasn't to be saddled with them after all. But might there be some risk in staying there, at the scene of such strange goodbyes? Might there be second thoughts, their spectral reappearance through the gloom? My grin broadened. Come on, I told myself. You're not rooted to anything, are you? Spinning round, I showed the turn in the lane a clean pair of heels.

Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown

A Detour

John Greenwood

Previously...

A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the Tanjong Pagar encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.



I have never, as a general rule, suffered from homesickness. Indeed it would appear incompatible for one in the profession of space pioneer. Nevertheless, as we hurtled across the increasingly bare desert, towards the inhabited zones of the Punggol, something like homesickness began to gnaw at the edges of my consciousness.

Perhaps Marsiling's ceaseless carping helped contribute to my growing sense of isolation. Mine is not by nature a depressive personality, but Marsiling's clearly was, and the companionship I had looked forward to with such eagerness was marred by this discrepancy in our characters. He was a lead weight on the collective spir-

its of the party, weighing us down with his self-accusations and laments over his failed literary career.

But it is ungracious and probably unfair to place the blame entirely at Marsiling's feet. Weeks of idleness had eaten away at my sense of purpose. Yes, we were closing the gap between us and the Red Hill Clementi with every passing minute, but the matter was entirely out of our hands. After my collision with Thanggam, Eunus had persuaded me not to pilot the hover car. I now performed no useful function aboard our little craft. There was nothing for me to do but sit and watch the unchanging, dusty horizon, and mull over my own problems, and there is

nothing that swells problems quite as effectively as mulling.

To combat this tendency, I resolved to discover all I could about the human cultures that had once survived on Kadaloor from my companion Marsiling. Truth be told, this had been one of my principle reasons for inviting him along. It did not take long for me to conclude that Marsiling had been born into a civilisation hemmed in on every side by superstition, myth and ignorance, ravaged by diseases that were misunderstood, constrained by religious dogmas and isolating his people from their fellow men. Had I suspected that this was the pinnacle of Man's achievement on Kadaloor, I might have despaired indeed. But the very existence of Eunos, my robot servant, was proof that other humans had scaled the dizzy heights of progress, dwarfing the technological feats of Earthmen. How these two cultures, so different in outlook and in accomplishments, could co-exist was the real mystery.

My first hypothesis ran thus: that Marsiling was the exemplar of an atypical culture, a hidden tribe lost to the general mass of humanity, and whom I had run across by a peculiar accident. His penchant for hunting his own meals was evidence to support this theory, and on one awkward occasion I surprised him in the act of wringing Raffles' neck, presumably with an eye to cooking the poor creature. I tried to explain Raffles' status as a pet to my new guest, but his grasp of this concept was no better than Eunos's, and several times I caught him eyeing the albino snake-mouse with a hungry glint in his eye. From then on, I took to keeping Raffles tucked safely in my pocket, or locked away in his cage.

Marsiling was, evidently, a man of coarse habits, despite his professed love of poesy. Where, then, were his more advanced neighbours? Were they in fact, as Eunos had darkly hinted, extinct, leaving only these primitive stragglers behind, tiny bands of peaceable savages who had eschewed the apocalyptic battle against the Punggol?

I questioned Marsiling relentlessly, with meagre results. When I could wrest him from the subject of his literary deficiencies, he spoke of

his home village and family vaguely and inarticulately. It was no great mystery to me why his career as a poet had faltered so frequently. He returned again and again to a scene from his childhood: the day an itinerant writer had visited the village. Barely old enough to write himself, Marsiling had been entranced by the word spinner's performance, his grandiose gestures, his outlandish clothes, even the dubious reputation enjoyed by those of his trade. There and then, claimed the old man, the boy had made up his mind, unalterably as it happened, to become a poet.

"I can no longer even remember the name of that ragged old poet," said Marsiling. "It was over seventy years ago. Even his face is a little hazy now."

Something occurred to me. "But how could you have heard this poet's words?" I asked him, perhaps a little insensitively. "You were deaf from birth, were you not?"

Marsiling reddened slightly, but answered quickly. "My brother translated the poems for me, using sign language."

"And you yourself, how did you manage to perform, without the ability to speak?"

"That was an obstacle, yes, and larger than I had imagined. My brother again came to my aid there. He interpreted for me, turned my facial expressions into words the audience could hear."

I tried to imagine one of Marsiling's performances: he standing there before the crowd, silently gurning, while his brother translated his extraordinary facial expressions into verse. The effort strained the imagination. Marsiling's performances must have been a novelty, if nothing else.

"How could you trust that your brother was rendering your poetry correctly?" was my next question.

"I had no choice," replied Marsiling. "We discussed these things at great length. We were very close."

I noted the cadence of this last remark, and judged it inappropriate to ask about the whereabouts of this collaborative brother now.

Our discussion was broken off by Eunos, contacting us on the intercom from his claustropho-

bic, horizontal wardrobe, located at the base of the craft. His face appeared on the screen in front of me, impassive as ever.

"I am altering our course," he said without explanation.

"But why?"

"Thanggam has respawned several kilometres ahead of us. Three of the organisms have appeared on my radar. There may be several more in the area."

Marsiling shrank at the words, as they were translated by my Dover and Somerset into the on-screen facial contortions he understood. Then he closed his eyes, and I gathered that he was inwardly repeating his hypnotic mantra to ward off Thanggam's thoughts. A little self-consciously, given that Eunos was watching and listening to us via the intercom, I followed his lead and began to speak the spell aloud.

"Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Ris Pasir Potong Pasir Ris Potong Pasir Pasir," I murmured, closing my eyes too, and feeling a knot of fear tying itself inextricably around my heart. Our experiences at the hands of Thanggam had been too terrible to contemplate calmly. Predictably, Eunos betrayed nothing but bemusement on his synthetic features.

"What are you babbling about?" he said sharply, breaking my concentration.

"The Thanggam!" I blurted, and hastily explained Marsiling's technique.

"Balderdash," remarked Eunos, displaying his surprisingly extensive knowledge of the more baroque expletives in the English language. "This medieval claptrap will no more defend you against telepathic attacks than would an economy size bottle of snake oil."

"But it worked last time!" I objected.

"A mere trick of concentration. Your mantra might as well be a shopping list, for all the mystical power it embodies. As long as you are concentrating your thoughts on one object alone, the psychological assaults of the fungi will find no chink in your mental armour. The real problem is that you humans have such difficulty concentrating on any particular thing for more than a few seconds. It never ceases to amaze me how your species reached the cultural heights it did,

considering the fragility of the average human mind."

Under the circumstances, I had no stomach for a philosophical spat.

"How far are the mushrooms now?" I demanded of the uppity android.

"No more than two kilometres," replied Eunos coolly. "I should be surprised if we did not run into some more seismological phenomena before the day is out."

I looked at Marsiling with concern, but his eyes were screwed shut and he was paying our conversation no mind.

"Listen, Eunos," I pleaded to the robot. "If, by some dreadful misfortune, I was to fall once more under the influence of Thanggam, I wish you to disregard any instructions I might make for the duration of my insanity. Under no circumstances are you to assist me in collecting animal dung for the mushroom's delectation, no matter how sternly I command it. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," replied the android, as the hover car made a stomach-churning change of direction, and began to climb up an uneven slope. "But your precautions are futile. No matter what provisos you make now, should Thanggam once again enslave your mind, you will almost certainly instruct me to ignore these stipulations, and invest all my energies in feeding the mushroom. I am programmed to all your instructions, and will have no choice but to obey, no matter how foolish your orders appear."

I felt that Eunos was splitting philosophical hairs at this point, and at a time when such pedantry was inexcusable. We would come within range of the Thanggam at any moment, and I could see no route out of the logical maze within which Eunos had walled me up.

"Then what is to be done?" I asked the android in desperation.

"The only way to avoid Thanggam's call is to remain unconscious until we are out of his range," said Eunos.

I considered his answer rational enough. "I concur," I told him, through the intercom. "But how are we to achieve the desired result in such a short time, without the aid of sleeping tablets?"

Eunos's face had disappeared from the intercom screen, although the hover car was still dipping and winding its way through green foothills on autopilot. I wondered for a second what he was playing at, before I turned to see him standing in the entrance to my quarters. He came forward with menace. I flinched instinctively, then a black curtain fell, and a great tiredness and forgetting washed over me.

I dreamed of a giant comb, blue and made of plastic, that an unseen, god-like being was scraping over the surface of Kadaloor as though it were passing over a scalp. Mountains and forests were squeezed between the comb's teeth, and they emerged on the other side still vibrating from the ordeal. Towns and villages, human and alien alike, were uprooted by the comb, and none could escape. Every sentient being on the planet was swept away, left clinging on to the vast blue pillars of the comb's teeth, like headlice. The world was being brushed clean of all intelligent life, and the comb left a lifeless quiet in its wake.

I was just ahead of this moving line of destruction, running from the relentless delousing, but the comb was gaining. Marsiling was there alongside me, and Eunos too, and a whole gang of other humans my dream self knew intimately, but whom I could not name on waking. My companions were leaving me behind. I called to them, but they heard me not. Even Eunos had deserted me. They disappeared into the ground through a sliver of darkness in the rock, and I put on a final burst of speed to reach the same refuge, but my feet could not keep up, and I was falling. I could hear the comb roaring towards me, ready to sweep me up into its grasp.

I awoke with a small shriek and found myself lying flat on my back in my quarters on the hover car. The vehicle had come to a standstill. My head was thick with pain. I sat up slowly. Focusing was difficult, but a shape at the far end of the room resolved itself into Eunos.

"I had to render you unconscious," he said.

"You knocked me out?"

"That's one way of putting it," he said.

"And Marsiling?"

The android nodded. "The same thing. He's

fine. He struggled a little at first, but the desired result was achieved eventually."

"I suppose you saved us from Thanggam," I muttered.

"Yes," said Eunos. "I saved your lives. We encountered six of the fungi. It is virtually impossible that you would have survived the trauma of a telepathic assault by all six at once. Your mind would have been torn to rags like a piece of tissue paper."

"A very vivid simile," I commented. "I didn't think you androids went in for poetry much."

Eunos shrugged. "I fail to see why not," he replied. "Poetry can be reduced to a series of algorithms just like any other aspect of human activity."

I didn't feel capable of arguing the case for the ineffable genius of human creativity, so I chose not to rise to his bait.

"Where is Marsiling?" I asked.

"He's outside. I had to restrain him," said Eunos ominously. "He was in danger of hurting himself."

I would have to explain all this to Marsiling later. No doubt Eunos had not extended that courtesy to our travelling companion.

"Right," I said, feeling a wave of fatigue threatening to engulf me. "So where are we?"

"We've had to seek high ground," Eunos told me. "We're on the lower slopes of a chain of mountains. To the East and West, in the valleys, the fungi are proliferating rapidly. Our only option was to climb the spine of this mountain range between them, taking ourselves above their telepathic range. If we can traverse the mountains, passing from one ridge to another in a Northerly direction, we should be able to avoid Thanggam altogether."

"Is there something the matter with the hover car?" was my next question. "Why have we stopped?"

Eunos explained that our vehicle was never designed for such terrain as this. The hovering mechanism itself, he warned, was in danger of being irretrievably damaged by rocky outcrops which sprang up unpredictably, like ragged blades from the ground. I noted ruefully that Eunos found no difficulties sympathising with

the distress caused to other machines, but not with we human beings. Gingerly, I felt the bruise swelling on the back of my head where he had dealt the knock-out blow.

Marsiling had fared worse than I. When I disembarked, I found him trussed up on a makeshift stretcher, his arms and legs tightly bound like those of a dangerous lunatic in an asylum. He was unconscious for now, but the cuts and bruises on his arms and face told the story of a protracted struggle. I felt selfishly glad that I had not had been involved in that contre-temps.

"I have injected him with a sedative," said Eunos casually. "He should remain asleep for the next five or six hours."

"Is that absolutely necessary?" I asked, feeling to a certain degree responsible for Marsiling's suffering at the hands of my servant.

"He was most un-cooperative," replied Eunos. "We should make very little progress if he was conscious, at least in his current frame of mind. I made every attempt to persuade him that the procedure was for his own protection, but he refused to listen to reason, and fought me with considerable persistence. I think that your friend is afraid of me."

"Can you blame him?" I asked.

Eunos looked at me askance. "I mean, he fails to understand my status as an android, and consequently distrusts me. He made several remarks during our confrontation that betrayed his ignorance. He suspects me of being either simply another human being, albeit one with supernatural powers, or else a kind of demon."

I snorted. "Come now, Eunos! Marsiling may not have been blessed with an advanced scientific education like myself, but he is smarter than you give him credit for!"

Eunos declined to comment. "In any case," he said, changing the subject, "we shall have to carry him until the drug has worn off and he wakes. We will have to leave the hover car."

My hackles rose. I was not used to being given instructions by a mechanical butler, and looking at the precipitous inclines that surrounded me on all sides, I was greatly apprehensive about the task he had proposed.

"Carry him!" I objected. "Don't be absurd!

We'd be hamstrung with that kind of burden! He may be an old man, but he's still a serious weight. I see no reason why we shouldn't just wait here until he comes round. Then we can all use our legs. And what about the hover car?" I added, slyly appealing to Eunos's solicitude towards the soulless machine. "What if it is stolen or damaged by some wild animal in our absence?"

Eunos waved away my protests. "The hover car can be sent back to Woodland Heights using the automatic homing device I have fitted," he said. "It may take a circuitous route, but it will get there in the end without incident. And as for waiting for Marsiling, that is out of the question. You may not have noticed, but dusk is approaching. It will be dark in under an hour. These mountains are home to several large predators, and they will not flinch from taking humans, nor has your species any form of defence against these hunters. They will outrun you and outwit you. Our only chance is to build a series of large encircling fires, and to that end we must reach the tree line, a few miles further down this ridge. You will be relatively safe then."

I could not argue with his reasoning, but something in his remarks still irked me. "I notice you speak of the danger to myself and Marsiling," I commented. "Are you yourself immune to these creatures, whatever they are?"

"Yes," was the robot's reply. "For two reasons: firstly, unlike a human, I can shut down my artificial scent glands, masking my presence from any predators in the area. Secondly, I am able to defend myself against most species native to this planet. I was deliberately designed with that purpose in mind. But I may not be able to save you both from an attack, unless we strike out immediately and find fuel for a campfire."

I needed no more persuasion. After taking all the provisions we could comfortably carry on our backs, Eunos sent the hover car hurtling back the way we had come in the direction of its home. With the sky plunging headlong through shades of royal blue towards indigo, we lifted Marsiling on his stretcher, and began our night march.

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Zencore!

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A problem comes up whenever I try to review a “rival” fiction magazine (“rival” is in quotes because (a) in my very short experience small press editors seem to be very nice to each other and (b) TQF has no rival – boom, boom). By far the greatest part of the work involved in publishing TQF is sitting down and reading every word of it very carefully – the same work involved in reviewing a magazine! And so when reviewing I often wonder if I wouldn’t be better off working on my own stuff. If I was still reading a book a day while commuting to the far-off land of Sutton Coldfield it wouldn’t be an issue, but nowadays I tend to read my books in ten minute chunks before falling asleep at bedtime – not great for careful reviewing!

Another issue is that I tend to be as intrigued by the practicalities of how the magazine is put together as I am in the stories contained within it. *Zencore!* provides much to think about in that regard. Though there is nothing to say as much, other than a website address and a list of attributions for the previous issue, this is issue seven of *Nemonymous*, a magazine that has been going for a number of years, though last year’s number six was a special non-existent issue.

Nemonymous is notable for the interesting concept behind it – the authors are not credited, and their stories are selected anonymously, on merit alone. The reader is forced to read them in the same way, which has the fascinating effect of pushing the stories together, creating the impression of a gestalt literary entity of much greater cohesion than a normal magazine or anthology. However, *Zencore!* could do more to sell the impressive premise. The cover bears the subtitle “Scriptus Innominatus” and the first page says “This book is the next anthology of Nemony-

mous Magic Fiction and Magic Realism”, and that is pretty much your lot as far as setting the publication in context goes. With previous issues being so stylishly put together, that wasn’t such a problem – readers would take it on trust that the editor knew what he was about and was just being mysterious – whereas in this format (with somewhat skewiffy typesetting in places) the package just feels slightly unfinished.

With this issue a couple of things have changed. The quality of the stories remains constant. However, as mentioned above, production values have fallen somewhat. Surprisingly, I welcome that. The astonishing print quality of previous issues, the reputed 500 copies of each that the editor printed up, and the fact that he pays the authors quite generously (unthinkable, I know!), made me worry whether the editor would ultimately be forced to abandon this remarkable project in the face of financial ruin. That worry still remains (do Biddles, the new printers, still do short runs?), but *Nemonymous* is now a straightforward paperback book, and if the editor runs into money troubles he could easily transfer future publication over to our friends at Lulu without compromising on quality.

Another change: instead of selecting stories anonymously, this time the editor selected only a shortlist that way before asking for the names of the authors. I’m forced to wonder whether he regretted missing out on a big name or two for previous issues. If that did motivate the change, it’s a shame the principle was compromised.

Now, left with little else to talk about other than the book’s contents, I am forced to admit that I have lost it (probably in the pub), and only got about a third of the way through reading it. What a shameful admission for a reviewer! I remember enjoying a curious and disturbing story about snails, reminiscent of the similarly-themed film *Uzumaki*. Another told of God’s gift to advertising, and I remember that as being suitably creepy. There was also a story about relationships and a bathroom, which I believe involved some crying. Anyway, be assured that despite my shortcomings as a reviewer, everything I read was of excellent quality, and held my interest effortlessly. – *SWT*