

# CONSUMING TALES

Volume 4 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies.

A collection of Stories by [Helen Alexander](#), [John L. D. Barnett](#), [Peter L. Bernfeld](#),  
[Janice Clark](#), [Mark R. Conte](#), [T. W. Embry](#), [Anthony J. Gerst](#), [Esma Race](#), [Patrick  
Shanahan](#), [Travis I. Sivart](#), [Sean Tate](#),  
[Wesley Tallant](#), [Barbara Weitzner](#) and [Gary Winstead](#).

With Foreword by Cynthia MacGregor

Foreword illustration by [John L. D. Barnett](#)

*A Trio of Friends* illustrated by [Veronica Castle](#)

CONSUMING TALES

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Published by Crimson Cloak Publishing at Smashwords

Isbn

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*Dedicated to author Doug Rains. Sadly missed. Forever loved. Now you are healthy and whole, and we know you are looking down on us and smiling. Here's a drink to you, my friend.*

~o~

Where a charge is made for this book, all profit will go to

[World Child Cancer](#)



~o~

*A note on spelling: you will find either UK or US spellings employed according to usage in the country of origin of the author concerned.*

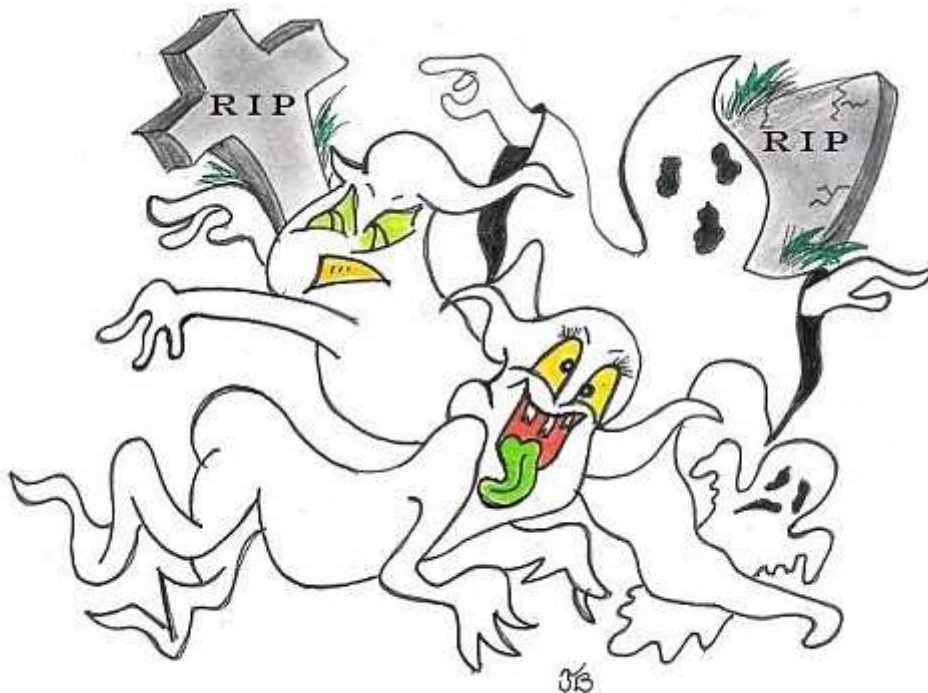
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## **FOREWORD**

by Cynthia MacGregor

What's the scariest word in the world?  
For most of us, that word is "cancer."

Cancer is the real boogeyman, and it is not hiding under the bed or in the closet, not a creation of our imaginations and nightmares. It is right out in the middle of our lives—almost all of our lives—as there are few of us indeed who have not had our lives touched in some way or another by this disease. Whether we have had it ourselves, have lost a family member to it, or merely have a neighbor who is in treatment for it, it seems that everyone has had some kind of encounter, however peripheral, with cancer.

Speaking for myself, I lost my daughter to brain cancer just half a year ago as I write this, lost my mother to breast cancer eleven years ago, and my ex-husband lost his fight with prostate cancer just in the last few weeks.

And me? I'm a cancer survivor.

My cancer story goes back to 1975-1976, when I started “spotting” between monthly cycles. I knew something was wrong but never dreamed it was cancer. Although the diagnosis, when I got it, scared me, as an extreme claustrophobe I was actually more terrified at the thought of being confined to a hospital than I was by the word “cancer.”

Initially I was scheduled for surgery in early fall of '75, but when the hospital's doctors staged me, pre-op, they found the cancer was a bit more advanced than they had thought—stage 2 rather than stage 1—and they opted to put me through five weeks of external cobalt teletherapy followed by two intracavitary radium insertions before at last performing the surgery. After they finally operated, in February of '76, they biopsied selected segments of material from my removed organs—they had done a total hysterectomy on me—and found no live cancer cells anywhere. The radiation therapy had done its job.

Now, it is 2015—fully forty years post-operative—and I remain cancer-free. I am a survivor. But then, in so many aspects of my life I am a survivor; is it any wonder my body also fought off the cancer?

The spectre of cancer, nonetheless, will always continue to scare me. Every year when I go for my mammogram, I worry what will show up. Every time I see my GYN—and he follows me up more frequently than he does the average woman—I worry as well. My mother had quite a few good years between her first bout with breast cancer, which she thought she had conquered, and its fatal recurrence. My ex-husband went more than the forty years I have been cancer free between his bout with testicular cancer not too long after we were divorced and his recent fatal bout with prostate cancer.

It is my hope and prayer that I never have to hear a diagnosis of cancer again and can continue to claim being a survivor till I ultimately die of old age—and I hope that won't be for several decades yet. My granddaughter is another survivor—she had leukemia as a young child but is now in her early twenties and cancer-free.

If—God forbid—I ever do have to face a cancer diagnosis again, it is my hope and prayer that I will once again triumph over it.

Cancer—it's a scare, it's a scourge, but it's *not* an automatic death sentence. It can be beaten. I'm living proof—and so is my granddaughter. We're survivors. We're alive. And I'm grateful.

*Cynthia MacGregor is the author of over 100 published books. You can learn more about Cynthia and her books at [www.cynthiamacgregor.com](http://www.cynthiamacgregor.com). Her latest book, a Crimson Cloak release, is **Don't Quit While You're Ahead**, a motivational/inspirational book.*

Would you please take a few moments of your time and send healing thoughts and prayers to everyone affected by Cancer?

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## [Nigel](#)

By [Helen Alexander](#)

### ***Foreword***

*"Nigel" is part of a series about an ex-vampire named Zsa Zsa, who works for the Bureau as a vampire catcher. The story takes place in the future and features Zsa Zsa, the director of the Enforcement Bureau, Boo Boo, and the suicidal civil engineer, Nigel.*

Boo Boo had a proverbially bad reputation among the Bureau's agents: he was short tempered and easily pissed. Not a day went by when he wasn't heard shouting at someone, or something, in his office (on the second floor, just up the stairs and to your left). In personal interactions, Boo Boo usually started off by recounting everything he'd eaten that day, and also the quality of his sleep the previous night.

In his early days at the Bureau, Zsa Zsa knew that he had reached a new level of intimacy when the reluctant administrator stopped calling him by only his last name, and when the first order of business for the day was an introduction to Boo Boo's plans for lunch.

This Tuesday was no exception.

Zsa Zsa was seated in the utilitarian blue plastic chair just across from him. He didn't say much, but he was secretly waiting for it to end. Boo Boo, whose real name was Mark Barney, had just finished his unofficial speech regarding Halcyon theft. This incident left him somewhat confused as to what to do with Zsa Zsa. On the one hand, his former protégé had clearly committed a crime. On the other, more ambiguous hand, he had kept a valuable agent from losing her mind after she bit. The identity of Mona's victim was revealed only to Zsa Zsa, incidentally: it was a middle aged man, unaffiliated with the Bureau, who, by the looks of things, and according to Mona herself, got a little too fresh. (Biting him was not her original intent, but it somehow got out of hand.)

Finally, after much grunting and snorting, Boo Boo drearily declared that it was the first, and last, warning Zsa Zsa was going to get. Then he cleared his throat and brought out his Magic-Glo screen: a new assignment, which looked deceptively simple, but Zsa Zsa had some idea of what it really entailed: one of the finer points, printed in obvious bold, black letters, stipulated that he was to bite somebody. Zsa Zsa shrank back in his seat.

"Is this a test?" he said.

Boo Boo shook his head.

"And what if I get loony after this? What then?"

Boo Boo's shoulders underwent a small shrug. "Then you'll get loony, and we'll incubate you all over again."

Zsa Zsa got up. "Listen, Barney, I respect you and all, but this is just nuts. Why do you want me to bite this ... what's his name?"

"Nigel Kreutzer. He'll make a good agent."

"No. Send someone else."

"No can do."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me, Zsa Zsa. I can't help."

"What makes you think he'll make a good agent?"

"Because he's ready. We've been following him for a while now. He drives across the bridge every day. Sometimes, he pulls off in the middle to look at the water."

"So? What if he's just enjoying the view?"

"On Baltimore Bridge?"

Zsa Zsa fell silent: Barney had a point.

*From Zsa Zsa's memory reveal [Department of Corrections, Session D]*

Chances are, you've been told a lot of things about our kind, but I have to warn you, not all of them are true. Some are kind of true, while others, not so much. The two most basic misconceptions are: 1) that vampires are dead, and 2) that we live forever. Both are dead wrong, and, if you stop to think about it for a minute, kinda contradictory.

I'm just as alive as anyone is, with one difference: I have an extra ingredient in my blood, courtesy of the one who bit me. The Bureau fights it with drugs, first with the Halcyon vaccine, and then some other meds to keep down the cravings. I remembered the hell quitting it was, and since then I haven't bit anybody, although I thought about it. Often. So when Boo Boo gave me the old runaround, you can understand why I wasn't exactly joking when I asked if this was a test of some sort.

So, I did a little research. Nigel Kreutzer was a civil engineer, working for Amyx, some big name construction company. Slightly bald, ordinary looking guy with a Glo screen installed in his wristwatchy thing and no idea that he was about to become a vampire exterminator. Information courtesy of the Enforcement Bureau. Well, here's where we split.

See, I always have my doubts when someone - especially someone from the Bureau - asks me to do something like this. I figured I'd play along if this was some kind of set up, and not do anything, just follow this Nigel around as I was supposed to. But bite him? No thanks. First of all, he had a skinny, boring old turkey neck, although he was only 37. And, well, I just couldn't believe it, that's all. Either Boo Boo had gone nuts, bit someone himself, or this was a test, pure and simple, of my loyalty to the agent's basic principles of conduct. (Our principles are pretty simple. We sign off on a form promising to never, under any circumstances, bite anyone, even if the situation warrants it.)

And the situation definitely warranted it. I started thinking, which I don't do very often. Was this like the old Bible thing? Would someone appear all of a sudden out of thin air, flapping his wings, or, more down to earth, arms, and bellow, in Boo Boo's voice, for example, "You dumb motherfucker, this was just a test!" And would it be too late? Yeah, I signed a contract before doing it, but contracts are worth nothing around this place. The Bureau has the right to alter them at any moment, even *after* the assignment is done, just as well.

Before I went out, I stared at Boo Boo for a good full minute, trying to fish out anything suspicious. He noticed me eyeballing him from the doorway: he had just started on his morning meal, some kind of menacing looking sandwich with a lot of lettuce and cheese. Get out already, he said, and so I went. Damn that civil engineer. He'd better make a good agent, I thought, heading out of Boo Boo's door into the hallway. On my way out, I ran into Becky, who was carrying hot coffee, and it spilled and scalded my leg. She apologized. A lot. Like I was going to make a big deal out of

it or something. I said it was okay and then I pulled my coat up to my ears and went out the last door to the left. I went down the stairs and out the back, hoping not to meet anyone.

The next day was dumpy and grey, just the kind of weather I can't stand, especially around this place. The moment I stepped out the door, I remembered that I'd left my key card in my room, so I had to explain it to the clerk, and go back for it. Then I almost got run over by a pickup truck once I was out on the street. The driver yelled something, but I wasn't really paying attention. While I was busy putting my calm brains back together, I stepped into some dog shit, and that finally did it. I decided I was gonna bite that civil engineer, bite him good, once and for all, if the rest of my assignment was gonna go the same way.

But when I got to the point, later that evening in the Amyx parking lot, I just couldn't do it. I guess I'm just not a bloodthirsty sort.

I followed Nigel as he left the building. It was already kind of dark, and the rain, or fog, or whatever the crap fell out of the sky over this town, was getting pretty strong, going *drip, drip, drip, drip*. This Nigel turned out to be a heavy smoker: he went about fifty times during the day behind the building and stood there, rain or shine, glued to his cigarette next to the garbage cans.

Come end of day, he did the same, going for one last smoke before the drive home. I waited, watched as he lit up, as a thin white stream began to ooze from his head.

But I couldn't do it.

He must have felt me standing there, because he suddenly raised his head. He couldn't see me, but he shivered. Then he tossed away his cigarette and almost ran to his car. On the way, he dropped his keys, yelped, picked them up. I heard the engine starting, a low, weak noise. It stopped for a second, then started up again. A squeal, and Nigel was out of my sight.

I was trying to muster it up, but it wasn't coming easy to me. I followed Nigel's car, flying close behind its beat up rear bumper with a Florida license plate. From time to time, I saw him checking his rear view mirror. I could feel that he was afraid.

He didn't drive home, though. Halfway across the Baltimore Bridge, he suddenly pulled off to the shoulder and stopped. He killed the engine and stepped out of the car. For a few minutes, he just stood there with both hands on the railing, looking down at the water below. Below the bridge was a black river, nasty and fast and cold. I hung around while he lit up another one of his endless cigarettes. He was shivering in the night wind, the cars kept going by, and it was starting to rain. I spaced out for a second and when I turned, I saw my beloved civil engineer standing on the metal railing, ready to jump, so I thought, quick. He had already let go of the railing and was about to do it, when I grabbed him by his coat. He gave a short yelp and fell, fell off straight off the railing and onto his back on the side of the road. He lay still, looking up at me, as if frozen, and I stood still, looking down at him. I gave him my hand and he took it. His was trembling, clammy and cold.

\* \* \*

"Who...who are you?"

Zsa Zsa contemplated what would make a good answer, but he couldn't find anything to say.

"My name's Zsa Zsa," he said simply, and pulled Nigel to his feet.

"Why'd you come after me?" Nigel inquired, pulling his coat tighter around him.

The wind was picking up, ruffling through Zsa Zsa's hair, which made him look all the stranger. Nigel crossed himself once, and Zsa Zsa laughed.

"I asked you, why did you do it?" he demanded. "I want to die, and I'll do it again."

*This definitely pissed him off, Zsa Zsa thought with glee.*

"Listen, I have a better idea," he said calmly. "Just listen to me for a minute. You got a minute, Nigel, don't you?"

Nigel blinked, uncomprehending, too stunned to even ask how the strange one knew his name.

"Now, I don't know why you were going to do what you were going to do, and frankly, I don't care. But I have a proposition for you. Interested?"

Nigel blew out his nose into his sleeve, in a half cough, half sneeze.

"Okay, I'll take that as a yes. Let's go inside the car for a minute, it's getting cold."

\* \* \*

How the hell do you explain something like that to somebody, just out of the blue? This Nigel was as hard headed as they make 'em. He kept asking all these questions as we drove. Too many questions, if you ask me. Like how long does it take for the Halcyon to wear off, and what's it like to bite somebody and to get bitten and all that. I couldn't wait to shut him up, but I needed a yes or a no first. By this point I was going to do it either way, but I like things to be done cleanly. And Nigel was a suicidal chatterbox. We were standing at a red light, and a long one at that. There was some kind of traffic jam ahead because of the rain, and I could see a police hover coming at us from a distance.

He kept talking. Finally, I asked him in plain English, would he do it or not? He thought about it for a while, dragging on about ten smokes, so I told him he could still smoke after he turned into a vampire. He glanced at me. He was tense. Even though it was cold, sweat was beading up on his boring square forehead. He wiped it off with his hand and looked at me: I could see him thinking, yes, no, yes, no. Yes. Maybe.

\*\*\*

"How are you going to do it?" he asked, looking straight ahead into the red traffic light. "Will you need to bite me?" He loosened his shirt collar.

"Hell no. There's another way. Just come with me to the Bureau in the morning."

"The Bureau? What's that?"

"Listen, you coming or not? I got no time to explain everything."

Then he thought some more.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "You can take me to the Bureau, or whatever it is you call it."

Zsa Zsa gave a sigh of relief: finally, things were going his way. *So far*, his brains quickly added.

"So how about tomorrow at ten in the evening?"

Wow, Zsa Zsa thought. *This guy even sets his own time.* He shook his head. "Ten in the morning."

Nigel gave a brief, affirmative nod. "You need a lift?" he asked, drumming on the steering wheel, although the traffic wasn't moving anywhere.

"No," Zsa Zsa replied, getting out of the car.

"See you tomorrow."

Zsa Zsa grunted something unintelligible and shut the door.

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True to Boo Boo's predictions, Nigel became one of the best agents the Bureau's ever had. He genuinely loved the thrill of the chase, and especially hover-flying. You couldn't keep him down. Later, he personally thanked me for "pointing him in the right direction." Life is funny. Sometimes.



*[End session]*

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## [A Haunting War](#)

A true story by Author and Illustrator

[John L D Barnett](#)



It was now the beginning of March 1940, and the Second World War was raging in Europe. During long weekend leaves, Petty Officer Bill Barnett DSM RN, had travelled by train from Gosport to London to see his girlfriend Peggy and ask for her hand in marriage.

They were both very much in love and she agreed without hesitation. Before Bill could commit to the marriage he had to request permission from his commanding officer, and he applied to see him immediately on his return to his naval submarine base HMS Dolphin in Gosport Hants.

His request was granted and Bill and Peggy were married at the registry office in Poplar, London, on 10th March 1940. Unfortunately, due to the war with Germany, Bill had only been granted a couple of days' leave before he had to return to his submarine, so a honeymoon at this time was out of the question. Peggy returned to her job, working at a local factory making two way radios for the military war effort, a few days later.





### *HMS Snapper (39S)*

Bill went back out on war patrols in *HMS Snapper* at the end of March 1940. On the 12th April 1940, the submarine was submerged just off the coast of Norway in the Skagerrak area outside Larvik, when she came across the German 320 ton tanker (*Moonsund*) which was transporting a full cargo of fuel oil to the German Kriegsmarine support groups for the invasion of Norway.

The Snapper attacked, firing two torpedoes, but missed, so the submarine chased her on the surface and fired several shots with her deck cannon. The tanker caught fire and sank with a tremendous explosion, which was felt by the whole crew inside the submarine *Snapper*. Of the crew of *Moonsund*, eight men perished, while six men were taken prisoner of war.

The skipper, Lt. Commander King, took the decision to stay in the area for a few more days, and on 14th April 1940 torpedoed and sank the German merchantman *Florida*. On the 15th April 1940 she sank the minesweepers 525 ton *Behrens* and the 472 ton *C Jansen*, in the Kattegat, (a sea area bounded by the Jutland Peninsula and the Straits islands of Denmark), and possibly damaged a merchant vessel of 7500 tons in the Skagerrak (a Strait running between Norway and the south-west coast of Sweden.)

On 6th May 1940, the skipper Lt. King took the decision to attack the armed merchant cruiser *Schiff 21/ Widder* with two torpedoes in a position east of Denmark; however both torpedoes missed their target. Hoping for better luck, Lt. King attacked a German armed trawler *V1107/Portland*, sinking her south of Stavanger Norway. On the 3rd July 1940, whilst on patrol in South West Norway, she sank the 1333 ton merchant vessel *Cygnus*.

*Snapper* proudly flew her skull and cross bones flag from the submarine's bridge, as the crew lined up on the deck, and she sailed up the Solent to her home base at *HMS Dolphin*, known to all the sailors as *Fort Blockhouse*. The crew were

commended and Lt. Commander King received the Distinguished Service Order for his bravery.

Bill's wife Peggy had now left her hometown of Poplar in London, and was staying with Bill's brother Arthur, and his wife Bessie, at 85 Fircroft Avenue in Sheffield. Bill had felt that it was a safer option for Peggy due to the regular air raids over London by the Luftwaffe, and Peggy was now seven months pregnant.



Bill had arranged with his pal leading Stoker Alan Bell, to rent a private house when they arrived back from patrol for the weekend in Portsmouth, so they could spend a couple of days with both their wives, who were travelling down together by train from Sheffield to Portsmouth, and Bill wanted to take the opportunity to show Peggy around the docks.

Alan was due to return for duty to their submarine *HMS Snapper* on the following Monday morning, and this was a chance for him to see his new baby son. Bill had been granted extra leave over the Christmas and New Year period, and offered to escort Alan's wife and new baby back to his home town of Sheffield after the weekend was over.

Bill and Peggy decided to stay in and look after Alan and his wife's new baby the first night at the rented house, so Alan and his wife could go out on the town dancing and have a drink together, and after the baby was settled down for the night Bill and Peggy took the chance to chat, and catch up on all the news over the previous months.

*Hanging on the wall of the living room above the old fireplace, was a religious painting, and Peggy mentioned to Bill that the eyes of the subject in the picture seemed to follow her whenever she walked around the room, which made her feel quite uneasy. Bill commented that he also had the same feeling, so without any hesitation he turned the picture around to face the wall so they didn't have to look at it again.*

*The following night Alan and his wife stayed in with their baby, and Bill and Peggy took the opportunity to go out for a drink and a meal together. On their return, however, Alan stated that he too had the same feeling with regard to the painting and believed that the painting's eyes were following them both around the room.*

*There was a locked room directly behind the fireplace wall where the painting hung, and before leaving the house, the landlady had given them strict instructions not to open this door. However, the key to the door had been left in the lock: so Bill decided to investigate anyway.*

*The room was full of old religious paintings. Whilst Alan was searching through a pile of the paintings which were leaning against the wall, he accidentally broke a pane of glass in one of the picture frames and cut his hand on it. He shouted out, "Bugger, that's seven years' bad luck, Bill!" Luckily the injury was not too serious.*

The following day Alan reported back to his submarine base at Gosport, and Bill, Peggy, and Alan's wife caught the train to London, changing at Victoria station for Sheffield.

Bill and Peggy had a wonderful time staying together with his brother Arthur and his wife Bessie, and took time out to look at a house which had been promised to

them by the Sheffield City Council, as Peggy was due to give birth to their first son Fredrick on 15th February 1941.

At the end of Bill's leave, he was presented with a radio by the Sheffield newspaper (War Relief Fund), to be given to all the crew members of *HMS Snapper* on his return to his submarine. All the regulars at Bill's favourite public house, the Horseshoe Inn situated in Shiregreen, Sheffield, had clubbed together and presented him with a chiming clock, which he proudly accepted on the last night of his leave.

It was now the middle of January 1941 and Bill had been given orders to report to the Second submarine flotilla base at Holy Lock, Rosyth, in Scotland, to wait and then rejoin *HMS Snapper* on her return from sea patrols. Bill thanked his brother Arthur for taking care of his wife, and after a final emotional farewell with his wife Peggy, caught the train for Scotland, to his new naval base at Holy Lock, on the Friday morning.

Unknown to Bill at the time, his submarine *HMS Snapper*, had sailed up to the naval base at Holy lock for a refit, along with the original crew. At the end of January 1941 *Snapper* was ready to resume patrols. Lt. Commander King had been taken ill and was in the hospital at the time suffering from 'flu, and so command was given to Lt. Jeffrey Prowes. On the morning of 29th January 1941, *Snapper* sailed down the River Clyde on her 13th patrol and Lieutenant Prowes' first as a Commanding officer.

*Snapper*, in company with the submarine *HMS Tuna*, was escorted by *La Capricieuse*, a French Élan class minesweeping sloop, which had been captured by the British on 3rd July 1940 and was now serving with the Royal Navy. Both submarines were escorted as far as Bishop's rock, and when they arrived on the 31st January, *Snapper* proceeded unescorted to her patrol area.



#### **La Capricieuse, French Elan Class Minesweeper 1940**

It was evening by the time she arrived north of the Bay of Biscay. She was to remain on patrol in the area until 10th February; she was then routed to pass within 30 miles of Ushant to rendezvous with the Royal naval yacht, *Cutty Sark*. On the night of the 10th and 11th of February the German minesweepers, M2, M13, and M25, were conducting a sweep south-west of Ushant, the group was attacked by a submarine which fired three or more torpedoes.

*The minesweepers attempted to ram the submarine, which failed, although the gear of one of the minesweepers caught the submarine. The three enemy minesweepers then carried out depth charge attacks. 56 depth charges were released*



*but no surface evidence emerged to indicate whether or not the submarine had been sunk or damaged, though it was felt that the submarine had not escaped unharmed.*

*A strong sonar contact had been tracked, but this had suddenly faded and then ceased. No other Allied submarines other than the Snapper were in the area at the time, and no further signals were received from HMS Snapper.*

*Therefore there is a strong possibility that she was mortally damaged by the minesweepers. She did not return to base, and no signals were acknowledged after this date. **There were no survivors, and Bill's best pal, leading Stoker Alan Bell, unfortunately was among the crew.***

*Bill was given the devastating news when he arrived at his submarine base whilst waiting for the Snapper's return, but he never forgot his lost pals when the Snapper sank. Although he managed to survive he was always haunted by the memory of that long weekend leave he spent with his pal Alan Bell and his wife and their baby.*

My father, CPO Bill Barnett DSM RN Submarines, was later to mention the incident in his speech to the people of Sheffield when he received a gold watch from the Lord Mayor of Sheffield for bravery, and the Distinguished Service Medal from the King at Buckingham Palace.



Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I wish to thank you, one and all, from the bottom of my heart, for the wonderful welcome you have given me on my homecoming.

You may not think so, but this occasion is as great a thrill to me, as having to go to sea on a three weeks War-patrol in the Mediterranean, during those dark days, when I first went out there and when we were really having a tough time.

This homecoming I shall never forget. When our Submarine, the "Unison" arrived in England, my Captain was the first person to congratulate me and inform me, that H. M. the King has been graciously pleased to award you the Distinguished Service Medal, and I would like to add Ladies and Gentlemen, that you here at home knew of this award before I did, as it was published in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph a day before I was told the good news. And now Mr. President Ladies and Gentlemen on top of all this good news, I receive this wonderful gift from our Club, a presentation the memory of which will remain with me and my family always.

It is indeed a very great pleasure for me to be in the company of our future Lord Mayor of Sheffield, Councilor Marshall, who, ~~I am informed from reliable sources,~~ will take over his duties as Lord Mayor, the same day as I attend Buckingham Palace for my Investiture on Tuesday, Nov. 9<sup>th</sup> at 11. AM.



DADs, SPEECH  
Nov 1943

Some of my friends here tonight know that, I am in the Royal Navy for 22 years. 16 years of which I have already served, 12 years of those 16, have been served in H.M. Submarines.

Since the outbreak of this war I have served in one or two submarines, including that famous little submarine "Snapper" which caused much havoc amongst enemy shipping during the invasion of Norway.

As you all know Ladies and Gentlemen, this fine little boat was announced long overdue and presumed lost.

By the help of God I left the "Snapper" just previous to her being lost and for almost two years I have been with the submarine "Unison", which took part in the invasion of North Africa, Sicily and finally Italy, and although I say this myself, she has caused much havoc amongst enemy warships and merchant shipping, but not without some very narrow escapes and tumbles, but we thank the good Lord for granting us a safe return home to our dear loved ones.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to thank you all once again for this wonderful welcome you have given me since I returned home. So keep smiling, Chins up

All the very best.

Thank You.





PRESENTED TO  
WILLIAM GEORGE BARNETT  
DSM  
BY THE LORD MAYOR OF  
SHEFFIELD  
FOR BRAVERY





*Memorabilia of his father, William G. Barnett, DSM shown by kind permission of John L. D. Barnett*

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## **The Kids of Granger's Bottom**

By **Peter N. Bernfeld**

September. The last days of the summer holidays, perhaps the last days of their childhood. Some would leave the small village of Granger's Bottom and go to university, some would go on vocational training courses and others would seek employment—or seek unemployment and a life on state benefits. Perhaps it would be the last time they hung around together, or perhaps they would remain in touch. However life panned out, they had goofed-off all summer and a new life insistently beckoned, demanding they go their separate ways, pursue their separate dreams. Time for one last collective thumbing of noses at responsibility, at respectability, at parental authority.

Julie came up with the idea of a wilderness BBQ. Well, perhaps not a full-on wilderness experience, but somewhere they could gather together, have a good, noisy, totally irresponsible time and not be answerable to anybody, at least until the following day. What they should do, she told boyfriend Ben, was to find somewhere in Granger's Wood where they could make as much noise as they wanted and camp out for the night. Parents, initially not very receptive to the idea, came round after a set of rules was agreed, although all knew they would mostly be ignored. The landowner—the father of one of the revellers—insisted they could not build a fire in the woods because of the risk, but would have to find a clearing, and they would have to take three or four good sized fire extinguishers with them. The revellers would

clear-up the site the day after the BBQ, and as human waste was not acceptable—but inevitable—a porta-loo would have to be hired, and removed, at the party-goers' expense.

Maps were consulted, scouting expeditions undertaken, and a likely spot was identified. Almost exactly in the centre of the wood, at the place where two tracks crossed. This would make it easy to find, easy to site the porta-loo, and would cause no damage to the woods. A fire pit would have to be dug, and the landowner agreed to a small amount of cut-wood being used for the fire, meaning that charcoal briquettes needed to be purchased. Julie and Ben volunteered to prepare the fire pit. On no account, the landowner warned them, were they to mess around in the remains of the old village. It had been abandoned sometime in the Seventeenth Century—nobody knew why for sure, but records hinted at a sudden en-masse departure of the villagers and the place had simply fallen into disrepair then had gradually become part of the wood.

On the morning of the BBQ, Ben parked in the car-park at the edge of the wood, and he and Julie carried in a pair of shovels, plus a chain saw that they had neglected to mention. The track was well-defined—arrow straight, it was possibly an old Neolithic track, adapted and straightened by long dead Roman soldiers. After a mile or so, they came to the crossroads. Where to dig the fire-pit? Where the two tracks crossed, a stick somebody had rammed into the ground stood like a silent sentinel.

'There,' Julie said—and Ben agreed.

They tugged at the stick, and eventually it came loose. The ground was quite soft—surprising as the summer had been a dry one—and the fire pit was dug. As they had been told, there was an ample supply of cut wood, which Ben soon reduced to suitably sized logs for the fire. These they placed in the fire pit, and found a level spot for the porta-loo. They were all set.

Simon, a budding DJ, scrounged a portable generator, and during the afternoon he and Ben drove all the equipment right to the site, and got it set up. Naturally, it needed testing—and naturally they had to consume a couple of beers, just to make sure that the system sounded right after a couple of beers. Whilst this was going on, various people—OK, the girls—prepared the food. Steaks, sausages and salads of various descriptions seemed to be in order. Slightly worried mothers also made quiches and made sure there was enough bread, hoping that much of the alcohol would be soaked up. One thing that everybody agreed, there would be no drugs. Well, OK, not everybody agreed, but the local police officer, Constable Glenister, insisted and let it be known that he might drop by at some stage in the proceedings just to check. Granger's Bottom was a small village, one of several that Constable Glenister patrolled, and the local bobby could say that sort of thing—and mean it. Just to prove the point, he dropped in on Ben and Simon as they were about to start on their second beers.

"I thought the idea was one of you two would go back to the village and ferry the others up here?"

"S'right."

"Yeah, that's the plan, Stan."

"So, which one of you is going to lose their licence, then? And the name is Constable Glenister, not Stan."

"Hey, this is just the second beer, y'know."

"Is that right? You know, I think it would be best if you took that car home, and let your parents ferry everything up here. Just this once I think it'll be OK to drive the

cars along the track and I'd feel a lot happier if there were no cars here to tempt anybody into proving how well they could drive when they can't actually stand. You never know, if there were no cars here, I might not feel that I had to stop by and see what was going on."

With that, he left.

Simon volunteered to drive the car back, mainly because he could swing by some of the town pubs where he knew how to find somebody who could sell him something to smoke. They agreed nothing stronger, and decided not to tell the others—some of them could be quite old fashioned when it came to drugs.

In the flames of the roaring fire, the meat was being cremated. Much beer and vodka was being consumed, and the sound system provided the soundtrack to the last BBQ.

Julie and Ben sat on a groundsheet and watched the fire. Julie noticed a figure, standing on the opposite side of the fire, back from the noisy crowd.

"Who's that?" she said.

"No idea. I'd better go and find out," Ben replied.

"I'll come with you."

"OK."

They made their way to the other side of the fire. The figure proved to be a man, shabbily dressed and a little unkempt, but Julie thought that he had a certain something about him.

"Hi," said Ben.

"Good evening, young man." The man was well spoken, and had a slight foreign accent.

"Can we help you?" said Julie.

The man laughed.

"Thank you, but you already have."

"Oh, how?"

"You are all so happy and having a good time. That makes me happy."

"I hope we haven't disturbed you—we thought there was nobody up here to disturb. Do you live near here? I didn't think that anybody did live close by."

"Let's just say that yes, you have disturbed me, but I am happy that you did. Do I live here? I live where I choose to live."

"I guess you're a Traveller, then. Are there more of you?" said Julie.

"A Traveller? I suppose I am, in my own way. At present there are no more of me, there is just me, but who knows, perhaps some may join me later. Anything is possible. You are celebrating?"

"Kind of. This is the last week that we'll all be together. We went to the same school, and now school is finished and the summer holiday is about over. We'll all be going our separate ways—it's sad."

"You're sad, so you celebrate. I like that, young lady. May I join your celebration?—I've not celebrated anything for many years now."

"Yeah, sure. The only thing is—well, if your other friends show up, we wouldn't want there to be any trouble," said Ben.

"My other friends? Ah, I think you misunderstood me. I was meaning that perhaps I might make some new friends. I am alone, I assure you."

"Oh I see. Hey, grab a beer and I'll introduce you. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Vladi."

“Vladi, is that short for something?” said Julie.

“Yes, but this is a night for short names. They’re friendlier, don’t you think. And your names?”

“I’m Julie, and this is Ben.”

“I am pleased to meet you both. Please don’t bother to introduce me, I’ll wander round and say hello. I’ll say that I am a friend of yours, that will make everybody pleased to meet me, no?”

“Sure—I suppose so,” said Ben.

“You go on now, you both have a wonderful time.”

“Would you like something to eat?” said Julie.

“Sure—I’ll help myself. Let me go and look at the food and make my choice—there is so much here—I’m so glad that you disturbed me.”

Vladi slipped away. One moment he was with them, the next he was on the other side of the fire, talking with Susan and Lizzie.

“Strange bloke,” said Ben.

“Creepy,” said Julie.

“That’s his accent. I think he’s OK.”

“I wonder what he meant when he said he was glad we’d disturbed him?”

“Who knows. Should we slip off into the woods for a while?”

“You’re going to pester me until I say yes, aren’t you?”

“You’re off to uni next week and who knows when I’ll see you again?”

“We’ve been through all that, Ben. Let’s see what happens, I’m not going to make any promises. Oh, that was quick work!”

“What was quick work?”

“That Vladi, he’s off into the woods with Lizzie. Do you think we should make sure she’s OK?”

“I think she’s old enough to make up her own mind if she wants to go into the woods with him.”

“Well perhaps, but don’t you think he’s a little old for her?”

“She’s not a child, Julie. I tell you what, how about we wander off in the same direction and that way, if she yells for help we’ll hear her?”

“You don’t give up, do you? All right then. Did you bring something?”

“Of course.”

“Sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“A man of experience and *je ne sais quoi*, that’s me.”

“Sounds like Lizzie is enjoying herself.”

“Yeah, it certainly does. I reckon her parents could hear her, the noise she’s making—you OK?”

“I’m fine—come on, let’s go back to the fire.”

“Don’t you want to, you know?”

“Cuddle for a bit? Later when we crash out—come on, I want to enjoy the rest of the party.”

“I see, and what we just did wasn’t enjoyable?”

“Don’t be so insecure, Ben. I really hate that, you know.”

“I didn’t, as it happens.”

“Not such a man of experience, then. Come on, let’s grab some food before it’s all gone.”

Julie and Ben went back and found the party in full swing. Lizzie and Vladi emerged from the woods, and Julie was a little surprised to see them go their separate

ways. She hadn't thought that Lizzie was so casual about sex—and she was sure she hadn't been drinking that much.

“Ben, I'm just going to have a chat with Lizzie, just to make sure that everything is OK. Back in a minute.”

“OK—want me to get a couple of burgers?”

“Yeah, that would be good. I won't be a minute.”

Julie went over to Lizzie.

“Everything OK?”

“Yeah, sure. Hey, you want to know a secret?”

“Who doesn't?”

“Let's get away from everybody, and I'll tell you something that will blow your mind.”

Constable Glenister got a call at five-thirty the next morning. A complaint about the noise of the party, which was still going strong, if the complaint about the music was correct.

“I'd better go and take a look,” he said to Jess, his wife.

“Do you want a cuppa before you go?”

“No—I'll come back for a proper breakfast. Be about thirty minutes or so. The kids have probably all crashed out and left the music on. If anybody else calls to complain, tell them I've already gone up there.”

The drive to the nearest car park took about ten minutes, and the music was certainly still going full blast. Glenister decided to drive along the track—he was regretting not having had the cup of tea Jess had offered, and wanted to get this over and done with.

*Bloody kids—oh well, you're only young once,* he thought.

The fire was still smouldering, the music was going full blast, but of the revellers, there was no sign. He got out of his car and walked around. There was a number of footprints, going off into the woods. He switched off the sound system by the simple expedient of switching off the generator, and followed the trail with a growing sense of unease. The individual footprints became a trampled track, and led to the old abandoned village. He thought that perhaps, despite being explicitly told not to, the kids had sheltered in one or other of the old cottages.

They had not. And despite an intensive search, using both dogs and a helicopter, no trace of the kids of Granger's Bottom was ever found. The village began to slowly die. People moved away, marriages ended. There was talk of alien abduction, or some sort of supernatural event. Eventually, inevitably, the Media found something else to report. Everybody lost interest, except the parents, of course. Them, Constable Glenister, and the Church.

One morning, the Bishop had a call from Canterbury.

“I've decided that you should appoint a new vicar to Lower Wonston. After she's settled in, you should expand her pastoral care to include Granger's Bottom, and the Chute parishes.”

“With respect, one believes that one has the final say in the appointment of local vicars—and what their responsibilities may or may not include. She, did you say?”

“I did. Reverend Bahati Barnikel, from Barbados.”

“Bahati?”



“An Afro-Caribbean name.”

“Then she is ...?”

“She is. More to the point, she has experience in dealing with—unusual occurrences.”

“The parishioners might have a little difficulty with a female vicar, not to say one of, er ...”

“Afro-Caribbean origin? I’m sure Reverend Barnikel will win them over. In any event, she is uniquely qualified to deal with what has already occurred, and what I fear may occur.”

“One has no choice, then?”

“One does not. She will be available to take up her new position at the beginning of next month. I leave the necessary arrangements to you.”

*The End.*

*To find out how Reverend Bahati Barnikel settled into her new position, and what challenges she faced from the forces of Evil, read **Afterdeath**, the first novella in the Barnikel and Fearnought Occult Detectives series*

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## **THE BOOK OF LIFE**

By **Mark Conte**

Albert awoke in a large charcoal easy chair and rubbed his eyes. He was wearing a brown chalk-striped Hickey-Freeman suit with a lavender shirt by J. Dillon Simpson and a tie and pocket square by Antonio Fusco. There was a three-button cashmere coat across his lap and a chocolate silk scarf on top of the coat. He looked down at his Rolex and checked the time. It was five-fifteen. He didn’t seem to have that stiffness in his hands, and he was feeling rather well for a 62 year old after a night on the town. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up quickly. There was a tall, broad-shouldered man standing in the middle of the room, about 50, Albert guessed. When he saw Albert was awake he walked over to a white marble desk and sat down. The room resembled a hospital. The walls were white. The pictures on the wall were white with gray strokes. A statue in the corner resembling the man was white stone and the desk accessories were a pale gray. Everything in the room was either white or gray, except for the man’s shirt and tie, which were matching pale blue, under a white jacket, which seemed to go well with his white hair. The man took a large burgundy book and opened it, letting it cover most of the desk. Albert watched him closely. He seemed to be some sort of official, turning pages and clearing his throat. Albert stood up rather uneasily and said, “My name is Albert Botham.”

The tall official man sat behind the marble desk turning the pages of the large burgundy book. He waved his hand in Albert’s direction. “Yes, yes, I know that,” he said.

Albert sat back down and folded his hands.

The tall official man came to a page in the book and put a bookmark in it, reading from the page. After a few minutes, he looked up and said, “Do you know who I am?”

“No,” Albert said. “Though I am sure I should.”

“I am the recorder of time,” he said. “And you Mr. Botham are ...” he sighed and shrugged his shoulders, “are here.”

Albert fell silent. He looked down at his hands and feet. “Have I died?” he said.

The Recorder of Time nodded.

“That’s strange,” Albert said. “I don’t recall anything happening.”

“Under the circumstances,” The Recorder said, “I should think you wouldn’t forget.” He put his thumb and forefinger to his eyes and rubbed them wearily. “I’m sorry,” he said, “of course you don’t remember. Yes, Mr. Botham, you are quite dead.”

“Odd. I never thought it would be like this.” Albert said.

“What did you expect,” the Recorder said. “Angels with white feathered wings, playing golden harps as you strolled through large pearly gates?”

“Not quite,” Albert said.

“A nice long, blissful sleep in eternal darkness then? Yes, I suppose you would have wanted that.”

“Well, surely not this. I thought I was all through with that ... Oh God!”

“Ah, it’s coming back.”

“Yes, I ...”

The Recorder clasped his hands together and simulated a dive. “I believe they called it a swan dive, off the Wharton-White bridge.” He leaned across the desk.

“Killed yourself, Mr.Botham.”

“So, all of that for nothing.”

“Exactly.”

“What do we do now, talk?”

The Recorder of Time sighed. “Only if you want to. It’s one of my less enviable duties, believe me.”

“Well I have no intention of telling all or part of anything, period.”

“As you wish,” the Recorder said.

“What a terrible thing. A rotten trick indeed.”

“Oh come, come, Mr. Botham. Surely you must have known there would be something like this.”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“No,” the Recorder of Time chuckled. “They never are.” His eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you thought the universe revolved around you. End of you. Poff! End of the world.” He leaned closer to him. “Tell me, Mr. Botham, did you wise men find out when time began? What of the end of time? Time as you know it with your minutes, days, and years, can be counted forward and backward, so it must have a beginning, but where does it begin at if there is nothing to begin with? Where did all those wonderful little atoms come from?” He smiled like a man thoroughly enjoying himself. “How did you patch that up with your good common sense?”

“You wouldn’t believe how stupid we can be.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

“What are you called?” Albert said.

“Certainly not Father Time. I am not your father or anyone else’s. You would think these fools would think of a more appropriate name, something with more dignity.” He turned to Albert. “Where do you people get all those absurd theories?”

“Heaven only knows ... oh, sorry.”

“Indeed!”

The recorder rested his arms on the desk. “You may call me Recorder,” he said.

“Well, Recorder, what happens now?” Albert said.

“Don’t be so hasty,” the Recorder replied. “You have an eternity before you now. We don’t hurry here. This isn’t one of your board meetings, you know.”

“Oh, you know about that. I was quite successful.”

“Yes, I recall noting some wealth in your book.”

“Some wealth? Why, I am the richest man east of the Mississippi,” Albert said proudly.

“Was, Mr. Botham, was, and anyway, here you’ll be lucky if you rank in the first thousand.”

The Recorder leaned back in his chair. “It takes quite a bit of doing to gather in all that wealth, doesn’t it, Mr. Botham?”

“I worked hard for my money, good honest work.”

“Really? Well that’s not the Albert Botham I read about.”

“You read about me?” Albert said.

“Yes,” the Recorder said.

“You have books on people here?”

“Just one, with many volumes, called fittingly enough, The Book of Life.

Each person has a chapter in it. It’s really quite a book.”

“And you’ve read it?”

“Of course,” the Recorder said.

“But that’s terrible. I mean those things are sacred, aren’t they? These are private, confidential matters. I should think something like that would be locked up.”

“Locked up?” the Recorder laughed. “What an absurd little man you are, Mr. Botham. There are no secrets here.”

Albert looked away and toyed with his glasses. “I have only done what I had to,” he said.

“You would be surprised what a great multitude of sins that one statement has covered.”

Albert nodded silently.

The Recorder leaned forward. “What about your Mr. Otis? Now there was a brilliant piece of strategy. Squeezed him out of his own company, and then bought him out. How much was that one time offer, good for only ten minutes? Oh that was brilliant.” He smiled. “Killed himself, didn’t he? The old gun in the mouth.”

“Yes, poor man. I never realized he would take it so hard,” Albert said.

“You tycoons amaze me. The things you will do for those little green pieces of paper. And oh! How tragic if you lose them.” He looked at Albert incredulously, “Take a life, Mr. Botham? Kill a living thing for them? Let me tell you, Mr. Botham, you people are a breed apart.”

“Why, I killed no one, nothing at all.”

“Is your own life nothing?” the Recorder said.

“I don’t know how to explain that. It was ... I’m not quite sure.”

“What made you go to church after all those years?”

“I don’t understand that either. I had been drinking rather heavily. We had held our Christmas party at an elegant club in town, and I was in good spirits because of the fine year we had had at Botham. I had given my driver time off so he could be with his family, and thought I would take a taxi home, but when I left, there were absolutely no taxis on the street, so I decided to walk to my town apartment at the Bellevue Stratford. After all, it was only nine blocks, and the exercise would be good for me. Actually, I was feeling very good. I even stopped at a small bar and grill on 21<sup>st</sup> Street, something I hadn’t done in ages, and drank some martinis with some

people I met there. Later, we all went to a quaint little lounge on the Ben Franklin Parkway and toasted in the holidays and even more people joined the celebration. After a while, they started talking about their children and grandchildren. That's when the pictures started going around. It was really a wonderful night.

"About ten O'clock, everyone shook hands and we said goodbye to each other, because it was Christmas Eve, and they had families waiting for them. I started down the Ben Franklin Parkway with a smile on my face. As I walked down the street, it began to snow. I could hear church bells ringing. I came to an old church, Saint Peter and Paul's Cathedral, built like the fine Roman cathedrals of old, all stone and brown-grained marble. People were going in by twos and threes, smiling and chatting, and before I knew it, I was walking in also, looking about at all the statues like a little boy.

"After a while, the priest came and the mass began. I had been drinking quite a bit, so I began to doze, my head bobbing down slowly, when suddenly I felt someone nudge my arm. I looked up and saw a little girl about nine years old sitting in front of me. She looked at me as if to scold, and then turned back to the mass. I tried to keep my head up, but after a few minutes I began to doze again, and I felt her tiny hands nudge me.

"'You mustn't sleep in church,' she said.

"I smiled meekly. 'Yes, yes!' I agreed, rubbing my eyes and straightening up a little, but immediately after, I could feel my eyelids starting to close, and she turned again and handed me her rosary.

"'Here,' she said, 'would you like to say my rosary?'

"It had been quite some time since I had a rosary in my hands, and I'm afraid that I had forgotten how to say it. She watched me a moment, then smiled and said, 'Here, we will say it together.' She leaned toward me and we began to say the rosary ever so softly.

"She was a sweet child, so serious and solemn. How wonderful it must be to have children like that.

"When the mass was over, she held on to my arm like a little lady, taking care to walk slowly, for she thought I was very old. We walked out of church together and I accompanied her to her home to make sure she reached there safely. She invited me in to meet her mother and father, and I accepted, mainly because she was so sincere.

"When I walked into the house, well, you can't imagine how poor these people were. It was so depressing. They invited me to share Christmas cookies and eggnog with them. The children, there were two others, boys aged four and five, sang carols. Then, they opened their gifts. They did not give new gifts bought from the store, but something of their own, something they held as special or precious. A favorite sweater, a ring, their very own special toy. It was quite touching.

"At the end of the night they gave me a large bag filled with food and cakes. I knew it was a part of their Christmas meal, yet I could not refuse it because it made them so happy. They thought I was a lonely old man, and they were so kind.

"We said goodbye and I walked down the quiet streets until three or four O'clock in the morning. I did not even know where I was. All the streets were deserted and there was no traffic due to the snow that was falling heavily now. Suddenly I saw a small one-lane bridge. The barrier was down and a sign was posted indicating the bridge was closed. There was a walkway on the side of the bridge, so I decided to walk on the bridge and look out over the water. When I was less than halfway across I stopped and looked down at the water. It was indeed a silent night. Then as I stood there watching the ripples in the water, I began to remember things. Little things, at first. Things I had thought were long forgotten. I saw the faces of the people I knew

as a child. I saw my parents also, but in a way I hadn't experienced since early childhood. I remembered the hunger and the bitterness also, and how determined I was to climb above the filth and squalor of poverty, to build a fortress of wealth, even if I had to crush and destroy every living thing in my way. Well, I built my fortress. There I was alone on a tiny bridge at Christmas Eve, the richest man in the East Coast. I had everything but the things I wanted most, a precious little girl like that marvelous child. A family. A house full of laughter, and the love that they shared. I raised my fist in anger at the heavens. 'You,' I shouted. 'You did this to me. You have cheated me. You have blinded my eyes with hate. Why?' I shouted. But there was only silence. 'Was it not enough that my life was empty? Did you have to show me how much I lost? Did you have to rub my face in it? Damn you. Damn you to hell.' There was no crashing of thunder. No lightning struck me down. There was only the snow, falling softly on the water. I watched for a very long time. It looked so peaceful there ..."

"Yes," the Recorder said, "I know."

"You?" Albert said. "How could you know?"

"I have lived with you many times," the Recorder said.

"Well, then you know why I had to take this path."

"You chose your own way," the Recorder said.

"Yes, but I had quite a bit of help. The world was cold, and so my heart turned cold also," Albert said.

"Pride defeated you."

"Yes, there was that," Albert said. He looked down at his feet again then turned to the Recorder. "You must be every man's conscience."

"Better," the Recorder said. "You can lie to your conscience."

"I guess we lie better to ourselves than to anyone else," Albert said.

He took off his glasses and stared at them a moment. "Well," he said. "What else do you need to know?"

"I?" the Recorder said. "I do not need any information about you. It is of no value to me."

He looked closely at Albert. "Are you under the impression that I am to judge you?"

"Why yes," Albert said.

"No, no, Mr. Botham. Every man is his own judge. Frankly, they do it so much better than we can."

"But how are you to determine where I am to go?"

The Recorder arched his left eyebrow, "I know where you are going."

"It's settled then?"

"Yes."

"Then why have I gone through all this?"

"It was you who did the talking."

"Yes, I suppose so," Albert said. "Have I bored you?"

"No," said the Recorder. "Everyone who comes here feels a need for what you call confession. I have heard many things. I will hear many more."

"Then I am not the most wicked man to come?"

The Recorder smiled. "No, I would say not."

Albert clasped his hands together. "Tell me, Recorder, there was a girl, a long time ago. Is she? That is ..."

"Well, you've finally come around to that? A bit late, isn't it?"

“Yes,” Albert said. “I suppose she married a good man and lived a happy life. Well, she deserved it.”

“As a matter of fact, no, she never married. That affair you two had created quite a scandal in that small New Jersey town. They never forgot it, the old people, and they made sure she never did. Forty-two years ago it was quite a scandal for a teenage girl to get pregnant, and then of course the illegal abortion her father made her do with that mid-wife.”

“It was a terrible thing to happen, I know,” Albert said. “but I had to get out, moved to Philadelphia which turned out to be a very good move for me.”

“I think you need to know this. She started hemorrhaging after the abortion and they had to perform a hysterectomy to stop the bleeding,” the Recorder said.

“My God, what a terrible thing,” Albert said.

“They kept it a secret for years,” the Recorder said. “She became a teacher, taught second and third grades all her life. She was wonderful with those children. They always went back to see her.”

“I was a stupid jerk then,” Albert said.

“Yes, most men that age are. Sometimes they never grow up. You know,” the Recorder said. “I have always thought it odd that women always think that they are somewhat less than what they are, and men are always sure that they are more than what they are. Why is that, Mr. Botham?”

“We have such damn big egos,” Albert said. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. “I never married either, well, you know that. There never seemed to be anyone quite like her.” He removed his tie. “I suppose she hated me.”

“No, on the contrary, when we spoke ...”

“She was here?” Albert cut in.

“Yes.”

“How was it for her? I mean her death.”

“Very gentle. She was asleep when it happened. Her heart just stopped.”

“I’m glad,” Albert said. He hunched forward. “She spoke of me?”

“Yes. She made a very dear confession of your affair. She said she wasn’t sorry. She was explicit about that. She had loved you then and she still did.”

“Oh God! What a fool I am,” Albert said.

“Yes, quite,” the Recorder said.

Albert rose and put on his glasses. “Well Recorder, I’m ready.”

The Recorder rose. “Yes,” he said. “I believe you are.” He walked around the desk and placed his hand on Albert’s shoulder. “Life is not perfect,” he said. “It is not meant to be perfect, not for you, not for anyone. It is almost like a series of trials, and it is not important how you survive these trials, but that you do survive. There are enough carrots; sex, money, power, and love to get you through, one of which you can actually take with you.” He motioned for Albert to rise and he led him to a large gray door. “In the end,” he said. “You are all going to go through this door.” He opened the door. A short chubby man in a striking black suit was sitting at an outer desk. He jumped up and went over to the Recorder.

“Evens is not here yet!” he said.

“He’ll be here soon,” the Recorder said, then to Albert, “This is Mr. Santucci, from The Renaissance.”

“Fifteenth century,” Santucci said, “Milano.”

A thin elderly man in a red blazer and pink striped tie came sprinting up to the three of them.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “It’s been a busy day. Busy, busy. Sorry.”



“Evens,” said The Recorder, “this is Albert Botham.”  
Evens smiled. “Sorry,” he said again. The Recorder turned to Albert.  
“Evens will take you now. He will show you the way.”  
Albert looked up at the Recorder. “Should I be afraid?”  
“No, no, Mr. Botham. There is no anger here.”  
“I don’t suppose she will be where I am going,” Albert said.  
“Yes, Mr. Botham, she is there, but of course, there are no guarantees.”  
“I’d like to have a second chance.”  
“Well then, you have it.”  
“You mean ...? Oh thank you, Recorder,” Albert said.  
“Why,” the Recorder said. “I have done nothing. That is where you are all to go.”  
“Well, thank you anyway, for everything,” Albert said as he walked out the door. Evens stepped beside him and they began to walk down the huge hall. Albert was so excited Evens had to slow him down. Suddenly Albert turned back to the Recorder and called out, “Merry Christmas, Recorder!”  
The Recorder was taken aback for a moment, then he smiled and said, “Merry Christmas, Mr. Botham,” in as gentle a voice as he could muster.  
“How do you do that?” Santucci said.  
“Practice, Mr. Santucci. Practice.”  
The Recorder turned and walked back inside his office with Santucci almost at his heels.  
“You should have told him he doesn’t have a chance,” Santucci said.  
“Why would I tell him that?”  
“Because she died at 41. He’s now 21 years older than her.”  
“I doubt that she will even notice,” the Recorder said.  
“Why?”  
“Haven’t you noticed, Santucci? Love is blind. It comes in all shapes, sizes, colors, and ages.”  
“Blind?” Santucci said.  
“Completely, Mr. Santucci. Completely.” He walked around his desk and sat down.  
“Who’s next?” he said.  
Santucci took out his notebook and flipped through the pages, then he raised both of his arms, making a V for victory with each hand and said, “I am not a crook!”  
The Recorder leaned back in his chair and let out a laugh so hard it bellowed down the hall and echoed around the corners of the building.  
“Well, send Mr. Nixon in, Santucci. Send him in.”

*The End*

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## [The Apple Witch](#)

by [Janice Clark](#)

I can hear them even before they enter my territory. Their speech is punctuated by nervous giggles, teasing and daring each other to follow the overgrown trail.

Although I can't leave the house, I'm fully aware of what takes place in the surrounding area.

It's Halloween night and the moon is full. Such an occurrence is rare enough, happening perhaps a half-dozen times in a century, but in conjunction with a relatively clear sky it's rarer still. I feel a tingle of magic; this will be the night that my waiting comes to an end.

Their conversation tells me much. The three girls are students from Miss Higgins' Academy for Young Ladies just down the road. I place their age at fourteen or thereabouts: old enough to feel independent; young enough to take foolish chances. The expedition is unauthorized, of course, which adds the thrill of the forbidden to whatever vestigial fear of the supernatural they may harbor in their overly-educated minds. So few believe, these days. It's all in fun, an enlightened and sanitized make-believe version of the terror their more sensible grandmothers would have felt.

Cilla is the ringleader, having recently found her great-grandmother's account of coming here, decades ago. I remember Rose. She had come to my call, and I almost had her, but she turned and fled just as I reached for her. I hope Cilla is a bit bolder. She looks like her ancestor: pink complexion dusted with freckles, sparkling green eyes, ginger hair, a healthy, active body that exudes vitality. She laughs at her more timid companions.

"Don't be silly, Katy. It's just for fun. In my Great-grandma Rose's day, lots of girls came here to ask the Apple Witch for their fortunes. Nothing bad happened to them. We should be almost there."

Katy appears to be a timid little thing, dark straight hair in an unbecoming bob, wire-rimmed glasses half-concealing hazel eyes. It's plain she hero-worships Cilla, and is more afraid of disappointing her leader than she is of visiting a decaying, possibly haunted house. They don't intend to enter, of course, being sensible that it might harbor rats or other unpleasant creatures. They've only come for the ancient apple tree that grows by the pond in the dooryard. The Apple Witch's tree.

Sandy is the other, blue-eyed, her name fitting her dark blond curls. "Oh!" she exclaims in a half-shriek. "I see the house. And the tree. I've never seen such a huge apple tree."

"See," says Cilla. "I told you we'd find it. Now we each have to pick an apple, eat it, throw the core in the pond, and say the words. I'll go first."

Katy appears dubious. "Our gardener says apple trees need a lot of tending. I hope the apples aren't wormy."

Cilla laughs again as she plucks an apple. "Old trees like this aren't as delicate as your modern, grafted trees." She takes a bite. "It's good, sweet and crisp."

After eating the apple, she tosses it into the little spring-fed pond where I used to fill my watering can. She strikes a dramatic pose. "Apple witch, apple witch, show me a sign. Make me a picture. Show me what's mine."

The girls are very still for a moment. Then Sandy whispers, "Do you see anything?"

A few wispy clouds have drifted across the moon, making shadows dance on the pond. Cilla peers intently. I slide a suggestion into her mind. She gasps. "I see it. A big sailing ship, and a man at the railing. He's turning this way. I can almost ... oh." She sighs. "It's gone. I didn't get to see his face, but he must be my true love. I'm certain of it." Her eyes are wide, her expression dazed.

I feel a surge of triumph. The game has become real.

"Me next," says Sandy, a bit breathlessly. She performs the ritual, as does Katy. Their attention is focused on the water, waiting for their visions of the future to appear. I nudge their minds a little; they won't notice the time passing.

Cilla is still bedazed. I call to her, very softly. She's still wanting to see more. "Come in," I say. "Just a little way. Maybe there's more magic inside, here in the Apple Witch's house. It's safe. You have your light. Come."

Like a sleepwalker, she drifts toward the house, ascends the stairs to the porch, opens the door. She sends a pencil of light probing into the empty hallway, takes a tentative step, then another. "Here," I say. "Through that door. Into the parlor."

Little remains of the furnishings, except for a large standing mirror. "Look," I whisper. "Maybe it's a magic mirror. Maybe it will show his face."

She slowly approaches the mirror, putting out a hand to touch the glass. She screams. But it's too late.

I run from the house. The scream has aroused her companions. "Cilla!" they exclaim. "What happened? Are you all right?"

I laugh with Cilla's voice. "I'm fine," I say. "It was nothing - just a mouse. It startled me." I laugh again. I'm giddy with the simple joy of breathing, with the scents of the pond and green growing things. I can still taste the apple. "What an adventure! But we'd better be getting back before someone notices we're missing. Did you see anything in the pond?"

"I did," says Katy with a sigh. "A library full of books, and I was reading to a little boy. He looked a lot like my cousin's friend Ryan."

"Me, too," says Sandy. "I was dancing in this huge ballroom. It was beautiful, full of candles and flowers. What about you, Cilla? Did you get to see the rest of your vision?"

"Oh yes," I say. "A long and happy life." As the others start down the trail, I pause and glance back. A pale face gleams at a window. I smile and wave, then turn to follow the others. "Yes, a long and happy life."

*The End*

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## [The Legend of Center tree](#)

By [T. W. Embry](#)

There was a square exactly in the middle Centerville. In this square grew an ancient oak tree. Every generation of children in Centerville played many days in the massive arms of Center tree. Many an enamored young boy had carved a statement of his love in its gnarled trunk. Many a young man had proposed under Center tree. Many a jilted lover had Center tree comforted with its silence and solitude.

Unknown to the children who played this day under Center tree, big changes were coming, and coming quickly. The old square's property surrounding Center tree had become very valuable and had recently passed out of the founding family's possession and sold at auction. Bought by a greedy man who cared nothing for Centerville or Center tree: he only cared about money. His name was Jake Johansson, The few friends he could buy called him Mr. JJ or sir. His many enemies feared him. Even his family hated him.

He planned to bulldoze the old square down and build modern condominiums. After he had Center tree cut down and its massive stump removed, ripped out of the ground. Jake hated Center tree for all those times the other kids had made fun of his

limp. Jake the gimp they used to taunt from the safety of Center tree's upper branches. At last, he would have his revenge. *I will cut down and then burn Center tree in front of all of them*, Jake thought with a viciousness created by years of perceived torment.

It had taken much money to grease palms on the city council and hiring a contractor from out of state to get his building plan approved and finally start his revenge. He was going to build his condominiums just as the plan read, with one small detail missing, Center tree.

The only way the council would approve Jake's building plan was if Center tree was the main part of the garden required by the zoning laws for a building of that size. Jake Johansson did not intend to spare Center tree. That was why he had to use a contractor from out of state, no one local could be trusted to keep his secret.

Calvin and his friends were playing tag under Center tree. It was the first day of summer vacation. Kids of all ages were swarming up and down Center tree, running circles around its massive trunk as their proud mothers looked on, smiling, remembering their childhood days under Center tree.

There was Calvin in his favorite place, high in the branches of Center tree, overlooking his make-believe kingdom, the fair town of Centerville. Here he did not have to tag along with the bigger boys; here he was the bigger boy. Calvin was looking forward to spending many hours in his favorite place in the long summer days ahead.

With a loud growl, Calvin's stomach reminded him that it had been quite some time since breakfast. Settling his imagination back into his physical reality, and with a mental good-bye to Center tree, Calvin began the long climb down. Calvin was almost all the way down when he noticed who was waiting for him, his arch enemy, the neighborhood bully, Shorty.

Shorty noticing Calvin's pause; grinning he jeered, "Hey Calvin I hope you have my lunch money in your pocket." This caused laughter from the motley crew of young teenage boys all who were trying to look tough by hanging out with the much older Shorty.

Calvin quietly gathered his courage; this was only the first day of what would likely be daily torment and thievery from Shorty and his friends. They knew he came here often, they knew that his mom always gave him lunch money, and they thought he was an easy target. Even the smallest boy in Shorty's gang outweighed him by 20 pounds or more. The problem was that he had forgotten to ask his mom for his daily contribution to Shorty's welfare fund. He knew a fight was coming with Shorty and his friends.

What Shorty did not know is that Calvin's dad was a black belt judo master and he had been teaching Calvin judo ever since Calvin could remember. Dad said judo was to be used in self-defense only. It is primarily a defensive discipline. Calvin knew his dad would be mad if he came home with bruises again for he very much disapproved of fighting. Calvin thought his dad just did not understand how much Shorty and his friends bullied him. Calvin was wrong and he did not know it.

Calvin dropped to the ground from the lowest branch of Center tree, directly in front of Shorty. Dad might discipline him when he got home, but Calvin had decided on the climb down not to take being bullied by Shorty and his friends anymore. No matter how hard his dad exercised him when he got home.

Just so he could say Shorty started it, Calvin moved to go around Shorty, avoiding a fight if possible. Shorty immediately blocked his way, "Where's my lunch money, runt?" sneered Shorty. Calvin tensed, waiting for the inevitable shove. When it finally came, Calvin pivoted and flipped Shorty over his shoulder, letting go of his

arm, sending him tumbling in front of his friends. "You're dead, runt," Shorty sputtered in a rage as he got back on his feet.

Calvin calmly waited for Shorty's oncoming rush, he knew Shorty would try and bowl over his smaller opponent. Again, Calvin pivoted and using Shorty's own weight against him, threw him over his shoulder. Shorty landed with a thud, still and out of breath from his fall.

Shorty got up slowly, warily circling Calvin. Shorty knew that if he let this little runt beat him he would lose his pack of friends. Knowing he had to do something fast, Shorty chose to sic his friends on Calvin.

As he turned red faced from the giggles and gaffs from his friends Shorty started his rant, pacing back and forth catching his breath and planning his attack. "I said," he screamed at Calvin, "give me my lunch money." Calvin only said one word "NO" but it was loud and clear. "Well, well, look at what we have here boys, a rude little runt who needs to be taught a lesson," sneered Shorty.

Having gathered up what little courage Shorty had he moved to shove Calvin into his friends behind him. To his surprise, he ended up landing on top of his friends rather than Calvin. Now in a rage Shorty screamed, "Get up! Get that little runt!!!"

"Hold it right there!!!" someone shouted, then a police whistle shrilled stopping Shorty and his friends in their tracks. It was Officer Richard of the Centerville town police. "What is going on here, Calvin?" he asked as he stepped between Calvin and the still tangled heap of boys. "Do you have Shorty's lunch money?" he asked.

"No sir," Calvin answered sullenly.

"Then why was Shorty yelling at you and why did you flip him over your shoulder like that?"

"Because he tried to push me so he could steal my lunch money," Calvin answered quietly.

"That's a lie," sputtered Shorty to the affirming mutterings of his gang.

"I'll deal with you in a minute Robert," said Officer Richard, turning his attention away from Calvin for the moment.

*No one called Shorty by his real name Robert unless they were an adult, anyone else got a punch in the face,* thought Calvin to himself, basking in Shorty's discomfort.

"Are you trying to tell me that Calvin took your lunch money, Robert, big strong kid like you and you with all your friends to help?" asked Officer Richard.

"No sir," said a sullen Shorty.

"That's a good thing", said Officer Richard, "because if someone stole your lunch money then I would have to put them in jail. Just like if someone stole poor Calvin here's lunch money. Now you boys go home. If I catch any of you fighting under Center tree again I will arrest you next time. Am I clear?" asked Officer Richard.

"Yes sir," a few of them mumbled.

"That includes you too Calvin," ordered Captain Rick as he turned to face Calvin, "Now go home all of you, before I change my mind"

Officer Richard stood watching as the boys scampered for home until he was alone, standing under Center tree just as he had when he was a boy. He reached out and touched the spot where he had carved his and his true love's initials in Center tree's gnarled trunk. The bark had not yet regrown enough to obliterate his handiwork.

Officer Richard felt the gentle mental touch of an old friend once his hand touched the old wound, one who held no grudge. For Center tree knew all about children and the things they do. For generations Center tree had watched over the

children of Centerville, talking to those few who could feel its gentle touch, hear its whisperings.

*It has been a long time, old friend,* thought Officer Richard; he felt the corresponding feelings of trust and love wash over his mind.

*It is good to see you too young one,* he heard Center tree answer. *The one who climbs high in my branches can hear me,* thought Center tree, *the others, they started the fight.*

*I know they did, but I cannot shelter one from the others, they will torment him even worse if I do, maybe even hurt him when I am not around,* answered Officer Richard.

*You are very wise for one so young,* thought Center tree. *Something evil is coming and it wants to destroy me,* suddenly and unexpectedly said Center tree.

*No one is going to harm you while I am a police officer; you know that,* thought Officer Richard.

*This is much worse than childish carvings,* retorted Center tree, chastising Officer Richard again for the indignity of being a signpost for young lovers to proclaim their love on, in a very painful way. *You must stop the child who limped,* warned Center tree. *He never once climbed up my branches yet his hate for me is a living thing. It is he who seeks to destroy me,* thought Center tree sadly.

*How do you know this? What is his name?* thought Officer Richard.

*You know who, young one. Think back to the boy with the limp you used to taunt from high in my branches not so long ago,* thought Center tree.

*Jake the gimp? He disappeared years ago, what makes you think he will try to destroy you?* thought Officer Richard.

*He is here, It will be so, unless you help me stop him,* answered Center tree, *I have foreseen it.*

*You know I will do my best to find and stop him, old friend,* thought Officer Richard.

*Take care young one, his hate runs deep in the city, soon he will act,* thought Center tree; *you must be ready when he does.* Officer Richard withdrew his hand from the rough bark surrounding his carving; his hand had that familiar tingling. Slowly he walked toward the police station house, his mind spinning with what Center tree had told him.

When Calvin got home, he was just in time for supper so he hurried upstairs to wash up. All through the meal, Calvin expected his dad to bring up what happened under Center tree today. He never did, Officer Richard's threats to the other boys had thankfully sealed their tongues. No phone call from mother to mother had given Calvin a nightly reprieve. Until tomorrow that is, when Shorty and his friends caught him alone. Then Shorty would take his shaming in front of his friends out on Calvin. Calvin had decided next time he would not hold back, regardless of what his dad said or did.

After dinner, Calvin retreated to his room to read his favorite book to escape the stress of his earlier encounter with Shorty and his gang.

"Calvin, put the book away, it's time for bed," his mother called up to him, "come and say goodnight." As Calvin trudged down the stairway he heard hushed worried voices in the living room, then he noticed another adult's voice, once in the living room he put a face to the voice.

That man worked for the city of Centerville, Calvin had seen him riding by in his city work truck from time to time. *What is he doing here, and why are they whispering?* Calvin thought to himself. "Oh Calvin, this is Mr. Smith, he works for

the city,” Calvin’s dad said, “He just came by to tell us about the new plans for Centerville Square.”

“You are not going to cut down Center tree!” Calvin exclaimed, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Easy son, nothing is going to happen to Center tree. The property around Center tree was bought at auction a while back and the city council is going to unveil the plans for the redevelopment of Center Square tomorrow. Center tree is going to be the crown jewel in a huge garden and the new condominiums will be built with that as part of the plan. So don’t you worry, Center tree is going to be around for a long time. Besides, everyone loves Center tree, the city council would never approve any plan to cut down Center tree,” he said with a huge smile as he patted Calvin on the head.

Calvin instinctively knew something was wrong with what Mr. Smith just told him. Calvin was old enough to know when adults did not want kids around so they could talk, just like now. If Calvin wanted to know what was going on, he would have to eavesdrop from the top of the stairs.

“Good night, Mr. Smith,” Calvin said, then he turned and hugged his dad and then kissed his mom, saying ‘good night’ to each in turn. “See you in the morning,” he said as he headed up the stairs, apparently to his bedroom.

Calvin paused at the head of the staircase, tilted his head so he could hear better and waited for the adults to resume their conversation.

It was Mr. Smith who spoke first, “I am telling you that rat bastard Johansson is going to destroy Center tree.”

“You are crazy, Jonny, no one would ever harm Center tree, it is just unthinkable”, his dad said a little too loud, causing the rest of the conversation to be in hushed whispers, too late to keep the cat in the bag.

Calvin started trembling, with tears welling up in his eyes; *NO it can’t be true* his mind screamed. He knew instantly that he had to save Center tree, no matter what.

Calvin dried his eyes and wiped his nose. Now was not the time for crying, now was the time for action; he had to save his friend Center tree.

After his parents went to bed, Calvin tried to open his bedroom window as quietly as he could. It was very hard for such a small boy, especially on his first time. Calvin had never snuck out of the house before. Nevertheless, he had to save Center tree and extraordinary measures were required. Calvin held his breath and lifted up the window; it slid noiselessly open, much to his delight and great relief.

On trembling legs, Calvin climbed out the window. As Calvin turned to shut the window he realized his first mistake, once he was on the ground he could not reach the window to close it. With a second thought, Calvin realized that his mistake had in fact saved him from the embarrassment of locking himself out of the house, defeating the whole purpose of sneaking out. Then Calvin climbed down the trellis by the front porch. With a great relief, he finally felt the ground with his bare feet.

Resolute in his purpose Calvin headed for Center tree. He intended to climb to the thin branches at the very top of Center tree and stay there as long as he had too. Whoever Johansson was, he could not cut Center tree down as long as Calvin was out of reach of the adults.

*Centerville sure is different at night* Calvin thought as he made his way down the dark streets lit only by a few feeble streetlights, heading toward Centerville Square. Twice dogs barked close by and a porch light came on, causing Calvin’s legs to start trembling again, his heart hammering in his chest from the fear of being discovered.

At last, Calvin was safe in the upper branches of Center tree. As the full moon slowly set below the horizon, Calvin was exhausted from his activities, his head

drooping as he tried gamely to fight off sleep. It wasn't long before he finally succumbed to his exhaustion. He was soon visiting his dream friend, TomOak, the giant tree man.

The ancient known as TomOak was glad his friend was back to see him. He was deeply troubled by the young one's turmoil of emotions, especially the darkness of the anger and the fear. He patiently waited for his friend to recognize him. *I have much to tell him*, thought TomOak, *I will have to be careful; he is so very young*.

Calvin was glad to find his friend waiting for him in the dream world.

"TomOak," he gushed with the excitement of his news.

"It is good to see you, Calvin," TomOak interrupted. "Greeting pleasantries must always be observed between friends," he gently chided Calvin.

"My apologies, TomOak," said Calvin, "It is indeed my pleasure to see you again," and he sent his best feelings of happiness to his friend TomOak. Calvin was rewarded by a reciprocal wave of happiness from his friend.

"Now young one, what has you so upset?" TomOak asked him.

"A man named Johansson is coming to cut you down", Calvin answered, his raw young emotion was almost painful for TomOak to feel but he endured it for his young friend.

"At least I now know his name," said TomOak after a long silence. Calvin's emotions slowly becoming less intense.

"You knew and you didn't tell me," exclaimed Calvin with another surge in emotion even more powerful than the last. "He is going to kill you unless I stay right here," Calvin declared to his friend.

"This is why I did not tell you, young one," said TomOak patiently explaining his reasoning, still reeling from the onslaught of Calvin's emotions. "I did not tell you because it was not yet time for you to know. Had I told you, you would have suffered much anxiety and that is a bad thing for one so young."

After the light went out downstairs and his parents went to bed, Shorty snuck out his bedroom window for a smoke. His parents would not let him smoke. His dad would hit him again if he found out. As he sat behind the back fence smoking, he realized he had lost his yo-yo. The last place he remembered having it was when he was waiting for that skinny runt Calvin to climb down from Center tree so he could take his lunch money for the day.

*Well I got nothing better to do*, Shorty thought to himself. *Besides some other kid might find it first and steal it back from me*. After he finished his smoke, he headed for the park in Center Square to find his yo-yo.

Imagine Shorty's surprise when he looked up and found the runt up in the tree, again. *Maybe this night might be fun after all* Shorty thought with a wicked grin. After he found his yo-yo, shoving it into his pocket he could not resist the urge to bully on that runt Calvin, especially now because there was no one to see him, or to stop him.

"Hey runt, what are you doing up there at this time of night?" he asked Calvin. He got no answer. Shorty felt a flush of anger; he hated to be ignored, even more than he hated being laughed at. A little louder this time he yelled: "HEY RUNT WHAT ARE YOU ASLEEP OR JUST STUPID?" Still Calvin did not answer for he was deep in the dream world.

This infuriated Shorty and he went over to the side of the nearby gravel road and picked up several large rocks. *I am going to teach that runt a lesson he will never forget*, thought the enraged Shorty.



TomOak suddenly became aware of the hate the approaching child had for his friend Calvin. TomOak realized a cusp in time had been reached. Did he save his young friend or let the other boy kill him? In the past TomOak had reached this cusp before. If he acted rightly then they both might survive this to live another season. He decided he would save his friend for the other child was all hate and darkness. Long had TomOak lived in the light of the love and happiness of the children who climbed his branches. TomOak knew he must end this evil before it grew and festered, infecting more of the young ones.

Once Shorty had returned to Center tree, he shouted up at Calvin at the top of his lungs. "You better answer me runt or I am gonna throw rocks at you until you come down, then I am gonna beat your ass," Shorty bragged. Still Calvin said nothing; he remained still and unmoving, so still in fact that Shorty thought the runt might actually be dead. Just to be sure, Shorty drew back his short muscular arm and threw the first rock at Calvin. It missed, striking the branch his back was leaning against. Calvin did not move. Shorty drew back his arm a second time and aimed more carefully, and then sudden blackness enveloped Shorty.

TomOak knew he could wait no longer, if the evil child hit his young friend he might fall and become part of the life force that created all living things before his life cycle was complete. That would deeply sadden TomOak, for such a senseless joining of the life force was a waste of joy and happiness.

The evil child was finally close enough and TomOak swung his mighty lower branch, hitting the evil child from behind. Gnarly roots then grabbed the corpse and dragged it under ground, leaving only one shoe and a yo-yo behind. *At least he did not suffer*, thought TomOak, deeply regretting the necessity of the action, but taking joy in having acted in the light. Calvin slept on, completely unaware of Shorty's silent and very sudden demise.

Shorty's shouting had been heard, as several nearby porch lights came on followed by the houses' occupants, bundled in their night clothes, coming to investigate the shouting so early in the morning.

Jake Johansson was one of those awakened by the shouting. *I had better go and see what the shouting is about*; it was coming from the direction of Center tree. *I do not want anything to get in the way of tomorrow's glorious destruction of Center tree*, he thought, viciously pleased with himself.

A small crowd had gathered by the time Jake arrived; quietly he moved to the edges, getting a better view of what was happening. There was a child asleep in the uppermost branches. The crowd spoke in murmurs to keep from waking the child unexpectedly. Everyone knew it was Calvin and someone had been sent to get his parents. Now they were waiting, hoping the boy did not fall, the siren of the approaching fire truck wailing in the distance giving hope that Calvin may survive his ordeal.

All Jake could do now was wait. He took out his pack of smokes and stuck one in his mouth as he felt for the lighter in his pocket. *Gonna be a long night*, he thought as he exhaled his first drag of unfiltered smoke, knowing he could not leave until this little drama was over. *I hope they get that little brat out quick and alive* Jake thought, chuckling at the thought. *My crew will be here at 6:00 am to cut Center tree down. If that kid falls, they will turn Center tree into a crime scene and I will have to pay my crew to stand around and do nothing for a couple of days until things cool down*, Jake reasoned, his unpleasant smile turning into an even more unpleasant grimace.

"Calvin," called TomOak softly. "Calvin," he whispered, finally rousing Calvin from his deep slumber. "It is time for you to go home, young one".

“No”, shouted Calvin, now fully awake in the dream world, his flood of emotions so strong that if TomOak had been human he would have winced.

“I have to save you, TomOak,” he pleaded; his feelings of anguish for fear of losing his friend flooded the space between them. Reeling from the intensity of young Calvin’s emotions TomOak sent feelings of love in return. When Calvin had a little better control of himself TomOak spoke, “You already have saved me young one. No harm will come to me now. Climb down and go home, your parents are here and they are worried. We will speak soon, young one, now go!”

“Good-bye, TomOak,” Calvin thought as he started down to see his now nearly frantic parents. *How am I going to explain this? I am going to be grounded forever* thought Calvin as his naked feet touched the cold ground then into the warm and gentle waiting arms of his mom and dad, both crying, thankful he was alive.

TomOak could see the coming cusp clearly and he was sure of how to act in the light. The evil man was near. He was here to make sure nothing interfered with his plans to destroy Center tree. TomOak knew the evil man would not pass up the opportunity to gloat over his coming demise. TomOak knew that evil was always overconfident in their knowledge of how the world is, never suspecting the existence of beings such as he. TomOak knew that Officer Richard would not be in time.

For ten thousand seasons had the ancient known as TomOak defended this spot from evil; TomOak would kill in its defense again gladly if it meant following the light. Once the other humans left, the evil man would come closer to gloat, thinking himself invincible, for that is what evil does. That will be the time to strike, when he least expects it.

TomOak prepared itself for doing what it knew must be done, bracing itself for the intense onslaught of emotion from when one of the humans passed into the life force because of an ancient’s action.

Later as Calvin snuggled beneath his favorite blanket, he still could not believe what his parents had said. They were not mad at all, in fact, they were overjoyed that he was not hurt and very proud that he had tried so hard and succeeded in stopping the death of Center tree. Once the other parents found out about the plan to cut Center tree down they all agreed to put a stop to it at once, meeting in front of the city council first thing Monday morning to demand a stop order for the Center Square project.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, Jake was worried, a stop order would really put his project behind. His investors were not the kind of men to postpone anything, especially repaying their money. Jake had some serious calls to make in the morning. Jake realized he may have to pull in all his political markers to keep his project on schedule and now even that might not be enough. *Damn that kid* Jake cursed silently, taking the last drag of his smoke, flicking the butt away. It made a glowing arch in the darkness before landing in the gutter.

*That stupid tree will cost me a fortune every day it stands. It is coming down even if I have to cut it down myself;* Jake fumed as he lit another smoke, still very buzzed from the first one. As he stood under Center tree for the first time in many years, Jake blew a contemptuous smoke ring up at Center tree’s branches. “I can’t wait until you are just a pile of ashes,” Jake muttered to himself. Jake never knew what hit him; everything just went black.

TomOak knew the cusp was upon him and now was the time to act, swinging his branch, hitting the evil man from behind, and then dragging the corpse under himself with his gnarly roots. *More food for life,* TomOak thought with the simple pleasure of a full stomach and the anticipation of the rising sun.

It was several days before Officer Richard Cranium found Short's yo-yo and shoe underneath Center tree. His family had finally noticed he was missing this morning when the school called informing them that Robert had not been in summer school for the last two days. With no sign of foul play, Robert's disappearance was ruled a runaway. The puzzle of where Robert's other shoe was and his whereabouts remain a mystery to this day.

No one reported Jake Johansson's disappearance until the lease renewal came due on his office in neighboring Sunnyville. Its contents were sold to cover the cost of his past rent. The deposits Jake paid to the construction companies went unclaimed; his collateral property went into foreclosure. Even his family was glad to finally be rid of him, wasting no time having poor Jake declared dead, then descending on dearly departed Jake's remaining assets like the school of social piranhas they were. In less than a year, it was as if Jake Johansson never even existed.

All the while Calvin was often perched in his favorite spot, high in Center tree, surveying his kingdom, the fair town of Centerville, weather permitting of course, oblivious to the evil around his glorious demesne.

All thanks to the ancient known as TomOak: for now, Centerville was safe, until the next crop of evil young men came of age. Until then, TomOak took pleasure in the children who played among its branches, always remaining ever watchful for any sign of evil's return to Centerville.

*The End*

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## **[The Haunted Attic:](#)**

By **[Anthony J. Gerst](#)**

Some people are just more sensitive to the paranormal than others; Anton had known this to be true ever since he was a child. The attic in the old house where he grew up had been haunted, or so he proclaimed. The nurse told my wife and me that very few people had heard his stories, at least very few people had heard all of his stories, as she led us into the sitting room. Anton agreed, with some reluctance, to pass on his story to us for such a noble cause.

We came together to interview him at a secluded farmstead on a stormy night. An old bed and breakfast, one of his properties, was now just an escape from the world where the eccentric investor and his nurse kept time. I suppose, in reflection, that Anton was really just waiting for a time when he himself would cross over to the spirit world.

The property was a throwback to an earlier era, that much was sure. It was nestled back off a secondary road on an old dirt lane. A small wooden bridge over a creek was the only ingress, and thick underbrushed woods lay behind the house. Nature herself was creeping in from the wooded area, taking back the dormant fields that surrounded the property. From the road, at least a quarter mile away, the old place looked deserted. The nurse informed us that a diesel-powered generator for pumping water and electricity was available; after sundown, however, the old man insisted on using candlelight, and always made sure one candle was kept lit in the eastern facing window of the attic from sundown to sunrise.

According to the nurse, who was a cross between a stately matriarch and a spinster librarian, while Anton had some quirks, he paid well and really was easy to take care of. She insisted that we not upset him and let Anton tell the story at his own pace. She assured us as well, if we did upset him, she would throw us out into the stormy night, and since the rainstorm had increased in strength she suspected the creek was running over the bridge and the dirt road would not be passable until the next afternoon. Therefore, unless we wanted to spend the night in the leaking barn out back or in our micro car, as she called it, we should be on our best behavior.

Anton sat in a high-backed, upholstered chair beside the fireplace on that chilly October evening. He was rather small in stature, slightly hunched over with gray hair down to his shoulders and a full comforter wrapped about his legs. He was sipping hot tea while telling us about the ghost from his youth. Sitting there petting a three legged fur ball called Miracle on his lap, his story came out in bits and pieces over the course of a few hours.

Storms came and went as the evening passed with the old man falling in and out of sleep. He would awaken with a clap of thunder and shake to life as lightning lit the background window behind his chair. The bare limbs of the oak tree in the yard were mimicking the motions of Anton's hands and arms as he spoke in a ponderous tone weighted with gravitas expression. It was a fitting atmosphere as his tale, although not scary, was at the same time hypnotic and somber. My wife and I were completely convinced this man believed every word he was saying.

He began, as older people often do, near the end of his story. He spoke of a time when his parents had moved out of the farmhouse of his childhood and purchased a home down the road near the cemetery. Anton claimed that after the farmhouse had sat empty for a year some holy-rollers had moved in. They had not lived there for two weeks when one day his mother had received a very frantic phone call. Almost with desperation, yelling into the phone, the churchwoman wanted to know if the house was haunted.

Anton, who had overheard both his mother and the woman's anguish on the phone that day, related what his mother said. She had proclaimed that only one person in the family had ever experienced anything, and that had been her youngest son. He had listened as his mom had told his story, that a ghostly presence had walked the center of the attic whenever he had been alone upstairs. She explained slowly and calmly that Anton had experienced this event during a major asthma attack but she simply believed a raccoon or the wind had been responsible. According to Anton, within a week of this phone call the very devoted religious family had moved out into their not completed newly constructed home, and a week later, the old farmhouse had been torn down. Taking a sip of his tea and gazing into the fire as the candlelight flickered on the table at his side, Anton's eyes took on the faraway glaze of remembrance as he continued. The gray-haired old man related to us, in a shaky voice, how he had begged his father to check the attic.

Anton's head slipped forward at this point and he started to snore. Looking out the windows and roaming around the room, we waited for him to awaken. The nurse just sat at a small desk reading one of the many books from the built-in library shelves. She appeared as much a fixture in the old place as the antique furnishings. Anton awoke after about twenty minutes, completely cognitive, as if only a second had passed, and asked if I had any questions.

My wife spoke up on the spot and asked him to tell us of his encounter with the ghosts in his childhood home. He quickly clarified that it had not been 'ghosts', but a single entity. Anton believed the entity had been the ghost of runaway slave. When

asked why, he responded that years later while studying the local history he had discovered the old farmstead had been part of the Underground Railroad. As to why specifically he thought the entity had been a slave, Anton could only respond that it had been a feeling, a soulful connection if you will.

Anton claimed to have first heard the apparition while sick with an asthma attack. He had been rocking back and forth on his bed breathing in and out with rhythmic motion when he had heard footfalls. A heel to toe thump-click, thump-click as they proceeded from the east end of the attic towards his location. The footfalls then had spun around and gone back. He had listened, rocking back and forth forcing air into his lungs, as the unmistakable sounds of boots walking in the attic, back and forth, had continued.

He was not sure when, but at one point the footfalls had proceeded to come down the attic steps and he swore the door to the attic had cracked open and bumped against the chest of drawers in front of it. A rush of air had brought the smell of mildew-incrusted dust into the room. With what little air he had had left in his lungs, he had screamed out in panic and his mother and sister had come flying up the stairs. After shakenly relating what had just happened, his mother had assured him that the wind must have forced the door open. Anton had refused to be left alone upstairs. His mother and sister had taken him downstairs while they had proceeded, then, to move his bedroom down the hall.

Anton claimed that night, after much pleading, his father had checked the attic and found nothing suspicious. About a week later, his father had checked the attic again with Anton right behind him looking on. There had been a settled layer of dust over everything. Anton looked at me with steely determination in his eyes and said there had been boards going down the middle of the attic, exactly where he had heard the footfalls. Then, with his eyes gazing off to the side and down, he described what looked like a pile of aged candle wax sitting on the windowsill of that long torn-down home.

Anton continued his story telling us that as time had passed the footfalls had returned whenever he had been alone upstairs. The ever present heel to toe thump-click, thump-click, like boots walking the boards in the attic was always there and could only be heard when he was alone. He had finally got tired of being scared and no one believing him so he had confronted the ghost. One evening while taking a bath the footfalls began again. When the steps were directly over him, he called out, with a tremor in his voice, "Mr. Ghost, please stop!" Anton claimed the steps had abruptly stopped as he was addressing the ghost through the ceiling. Anton had thanked him for listening, and pausing. He announced to the ceiling that he would no longer be scared since the ghost had not only heard him but he had respected his request. Then he told the ghost to keep walking; that it would be all right, and he would no longer be scared. Apparently, the ghostly footfalls had then walked to the end of the attic and Anton claimed he had then heard the stool shift positions.

Anton then gazed out the windows at the rising intensity of lightning flashes as he took a sip of tea and ordered the nurse to bring in some apple pie and coffee for dessert. Soon after, he fell asleep as the rain was pounding against the windowpanes rattling them in their frames. Before drifting off, he spoke of the gentle sound of raindrops at the old homestead. Apparently, his hearing was going, as the storm outside the house was enough to make my wife and me wonder if the whole place would fly off its foundation.

The nurse, coming back from the kitchen snorted out a laugh seeing what must have been pure fright on our faces. Putting down the tray with the apple pie, she told

us to help ourselves to coffee and dessert. She retrieved the teapot from over the fire and refilled Anton's cup. I was cutting the pie as my wife jumped at the next clap of thunder. The wind outside picked up sending a draft through the old place, causing the rafters in the attic and the floorboards in the cellar to creak out a rather eerie moan. Smiling at us, the nurse, sitting back down with her book and lighting another candle at her table, said not to worry. The old house was actually in better condition than most of the newer stick-built homes. The ole girl might groan and sputter in the wind but her foundation and the timbers were stronger than the little sticks used in modern construction. She invited us to go into the basement and attic to check things out for ourselves if we wanted to! At that precise moment, several peals of thunder echoed over our heads for what seemed an eternity, joined by a lightning display casting groping shadows, like elongated fingers stretching toward us on the walls, floors and ceiling. We respectfully told the nurse we believed her about the house, and I offered to cut her a piece of pie, while my wife filled her coffee cup.

Oddly enough, the old-timer and his cat slept right through this part of the storm. In fact, looking over at him, he appeared to have a very serene smile on his face. I would say for close to three-quarters of an hour the worst storm I was ever witness to raged and bellowed outside, the rain pelted the windows so hard I thought they would shatter. My wife called me over to a window and pointed to the bridge. The creek had risen and was running so fast that water was at least ten feet up the lane on both sides of our only escape route. Looking over at the nurse, she anticipated our question. Without even looking up from her book, she quipped off that the road actually was not a dirt lane but it was cobblestone covered by dust and dirt. Not to worry, it would be easy to get out after only a few hours of daylight. With a sense of relief, we tended the fire and sat down, waiting for Anton to awaken.

As a lull in between the storms succeeded, the downpour shut off as if closing a faucet tap. The old man woke up. Reaching for his cup, he glanced gruffly at his nurse and told her to get him a cup of coffee and a piece of pie. Looking at us, he proclaimed after a disgruntled *humph*, "You do not believe me, do you?" Before we could respond he bellowed for us to wait a moment, he would tell us the rest of his story after dessert. I could tell the old fossil was in a bit of a foul mood as he ordered the nurse to warm up his pie. The nurse asked him if she could turn on the generator, only to be scowled at. It was impressive, I must admit, to watch as she retrieved, from an old oak shaker cabinet, a flat iron piece of metal with a long wooden handle, placing the pie in the center. She slid it over the fireplace in two grooved pieces of metal we had not noticed before. The smell of apples, cinnamon and pie dough soon filled the room mixing with the vanilla scented wax from the candles. She removed the piece of pie using a spatula to place it on his plate, and sat the metal tool beside the fireplace to cool.

After eating and sipping on his coffee, Anton straightened himself in his chair and continued his story. He claimed that after he had spoken to the ghost he had never heard the footfalls again. However, it had not been the end of the ghost's presence. Anton reminisced about how he and several of the neighborhood children often had played kickball at the house next door. He speculated that it was roughly two-hundred yards away from his childhood home. Without fail, just after dark when the neighbor's yard light came on, they had seen a light in the attic window of the old farmhouse. The light would always shine from the lower left hand corner. He had asked everyone who had happened upon their games over the years what that light looked like to them. He claimed, without fail, they all responded the same way. They had all responded that it had looked like a candle burning behind the glass. At times,

people claimed they could see eye shine near the top of the attic window. He also told us that he and the regulars who played kickball had thought it might have been the neighbor's yard light. Over time, however, they had come to realize the yard light barely stretched into the orchard between the properties and had been hardly reflective in the windows of the house where they had played kickball, let alone capable of shining down the road. Anton explained his childhood home had had no yard light, and the light in the attic would flicker, just as a candle would flicker from a draft or breeze. Just then, simultaneous claps of thunder and bursts of lightning went off as the candles in the sitting room jumped in brightness and then resumed their semi-steady glow, as if in response to Anton's very words.

He went on to proclaim that, on several occasions he and the regular kids had jumped on their bikes and torn off down the road to investigate the ghostly flicker. It had not mattered whose bike was the first to enter the old driveway down by the old Johnathan apple tree, the light seemed to snuff out as soon as a tire had touched the property. He went on to proclaim that the mysterious light would appear on nights pitch black with full cloud cover. It used to appear on nights with a full moon, half-moon and quarter-moon. It even had appeared under the green infused sky of approaching thunderstorms, the type of green that suggested a tornado was approaching.

Despite all of this, no-one ever believed him that the old house was haunted. The neighborhood kids never believed him that a ghost had lived in the attic and burned that candle at night. Some had rejected the idea, Anton thought, because of their religious beliefs, and others because they lived down the road next to the cemetery already, and had been petrified at the thought of spirits walking among them. Smiling to himself, Anton told us that at least one family had believed: the holy rollers who had moved out of the house after talking to his mother. He claimed to have asked them why they had moved out a few months later, only to have the door of their new home shut in his face and be told never to return.

The old man fell asleep in his chair once again, as we spent a rather restless night in his sitting room parlor. Somewhere in the early morning hours, we all drifted off to sleep in the big high backed chairs as the thunder from the storms finally travelled off easterly into the distance. We awoke the next day around nine with the sun shining and birds singing. Around noon, we went out to check on the lane and sure enough, it was dry and passable.

Getting in the car and starting it up I happened to glance at the attic window. I could clearly see a huge candle, burnt about halfway down and could see the top of a footstool as well. I had to wonder, had the ghostly apparition traveled with Anton after his childhood home had been torn down? Did the old man create the current setting to give this spirit rest? What were the other stories the nurse had alluded to? On the other hand, perhaps, Anton was getting ready to stay behind and walk the attic of that old home after he too, shook loose the mortal coil of material existence.

One thing was for certain: Anton believed. Do you?

*The End*

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## **[A Trio of Friends](#)**

By **[Esma Race](#)**

Illustration by **[Veronica Castle](#)**





“Hazel! Hi, it’s only me,” Alison called out, as she pushed open the back door of her friend’s house.

“Up here,” Hazel called from upstairs, where she was changing from her business suit into her more usual jeans and casual top. Hazel was a probation officer who worked in the nearby town, and also a self-proclaimed witch.

“I’ll be right down,” she called out again. “Put the kettle on, please.”

“What’s the matter, Alison?” she asked, when a few minutes later they were both sitting at the kitchen table.

Hazel had striking good looks, naturally curly deep golden-coloured hair tumbling down to her shoulders and almond-shaped eyes that were a very light brown with speckles of gold. Alison in contrast was petite, with shiny black hair cut into a bob, and vivid blue eyes which gave her an elfin look. She was wearing a white clerical collar, giving away her position as the local minister.

Both women were in their late twenties and had known each other for as long as they could both remember.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong, Hazel,” Alison said. “Someone was in the churchyard last night, and vandalised five of the graves.”

“Oh, no: that’s dreadful,” Hazel answered. “Have you let Stefan know?”

“Of course, I rang him straight away; he is going to look into it.”

“And quite right too,” Hazel replied. “No good having a copper as a best mate if you can’t make some use of him.”

“Actually, he is on leave this week because Kevin is back from his tour.” Kevin was Stefan’s partner: he was a dancer and was away often, performing in musical theatre shows, the latest one being a production of *Evita*. He was smart and funny, and



both the girls adored him: not least because he made their best friend Stefan very happy. Not that they saw much of him, because when he wasn't away he was working at the local theatre, doing special effects, devising sets and generally helping with production work.

As they chatted, Hazel made coffee and opened a packet of Hobnobs.

"I've asked Richie to clean up the graves," Alison said; and Hazel smiled.

"I'm very fond of Richie," Hazel said.

"So I've noticed," laughed Alison. "Trust you to get off with the grave digger."

"He is only grave digging for you during the summer break from university; you know he is studying to become a dentist!"

"Okay," replied Alison "- from interring to extracting then!"

"Alison!" exclaimed Hazel, "don't be so awful, what would your parishioners think if they could hear you: anyway has your verger proposed yet?"

"No, and he isn't likely to either," Alison said. "He is too scared of me insisting that you be a bridesmaid: he thinks that the church roof will collapse on all our heads."

"How ridiculous," Hazel said. "I came to your Harvest Festival service, didn't I?"

"Yes," Alison said: "and he was convinced that you made those apples in Tommy Slade's basket go rotten."

"That's so typical of Malcolm the Verger: don't marry him, even if he does ask you." There was now no stopping Hazel as she continued, "- and he wouldn't come to the Handfasting in Durham that I invited you both to."

"I know, I know," Alison said, "but I came, didn't I?"

"And," said Hazel, "didn't you have a fantastic time?"

"Of course I did, you know I loved it: all those drums and the dancing, and couples jumping over the broomstick."

"Don't forget the hog roast as well. And the mulled wine," added Hazel.

"Anyway, what I came to ask you," Alison said to Hazel, "is, do you know of any people in the area practising Black Magic or similar? No use knowing a witch as a best friend if you can't make use of her ..."

"Blimey, Alison," Hazel replied, "that's a bit strong, isn't it? Whenever have you known me to have anything to do with the Dark side? Anyway, I'm sure you don't need to worry about Black Magic: it will just be some local lads messing about."

"Well, I hope you're right, Hazel," said Alison. "Don't forget that it is Halloween this weekend."

"All Hallows' Eve, you mean," Hazel answered automatically.

Just at that moment, the back door opened and a good-looking young man popped his head around it.

"Ha ha, caught you," he laughed, as he pointed to the biscuits.

Then he looked at Alison and asked: "Well: have you asked her yet?"

"Asked me what?" Hazel asked, suspiciously.

"No, I was just getting round to it," said Alison.

"Go on then, ask me." Hazel looked at the two of them expectantly.

"Well," said Alison, "Stefan and I have decided to stake out the churchyard at Halloween, when we think that there is a good chance the vandals will return, and we have made up our minds that you are coming with us."

"One for all and all for one," added Stefan: "You know we all promised."

"That," said Hazel, "was at least twenty years ago."

They all laughed. "Of course I'm coming," Hazel said. "Why not? Don't forget the Holy Water, Alison: and you, Stefan, fetch the handcuffs, we might need them."

“And you, Hazel, what are you fetching?” Alison asked.

“Bell, book and candle,” Hazel replied, and then added: “A flask of coffee and some chocolate. Oh, and I might fetch Richie.”

“No Richie!” Stefan said firmly. “You’ll just get distracted.”

“Only kidding,” replied Hazel with a laugh. “We can always ring him if we need reinforcements, and Kevin can be on standby as well.”

“Kevin won’t have anything to do with it,” Stefan said. “He thinks we are all crazy.”

“That’s just about right, then,” Alison said. “What was it they called us at school? ‘The Crazy Trio’. Yes, happy days,” replied Hazel. Then she added seriously: “Will you be informing your fellow police officers about our adventure?”

“No,” Stefan said, “because I’m on leave.”

So when Halloween arrived, the three friends made themselves comfortable behind the old grey gravestones to watch for intruders intent on causing damage.

They had a vantage point where they could see as much as possible, and kept well out of sight.

Just before midnight, three figures could be seen creeping forward towards the oldest part of the churchyard, keeping within the shadow of the West wall.

“Here we go,” whispered Alison.

“One each,” Hazel whispered back.

“Keep quiet,” Stefan ordered. “I’ll deal with them,” suddenly a police officer again.

Then, without any warning, the shape of a figure appeared in ghostly light on the wall of the church. It was at least seven feet tall, dressed in what looked like flowing robes, and it was surrounded by a golden glow. Even as they gasped with shock, a huge clap of thunder could be heard, and shrieking with terror the three boys ran from the graveyard.

Stefan recovered first. “Are you all right?” he said to the two girls.

The apparition was now fading away.

“That was an Angel,” said Alison in wonder.

“No,” said Hazel. “It was the Goddess, come to protect us.”

“What about the thunder?” asked Stefan.

“Not sure,” said Alison.

“Thor is the Thunder God,” said Hazel.

“Well, whatever it was, it has gone now,” Stefan said, a few minutes later, “and I’m sure that I recognised one of the vandals, even though it was so dark.”

“They were frightened to death,” said Alison. “I don’t think they will be back, so that’s one good thing.”

“Come on then, let’s get out of here and get warm,” Hazel said, getting to her feet and stretching her arms and legs.

“Back to my place, then, it is the nearest; and we can tell Kevin our adventures.”

This was from Stefan, as they made their way back to his car.

When they arrived at Stefan and Kevin’s house, Kevin opened the door with a flourish. “Come on in,” he said, cheerfully. “Have you caught the villains?”

“We would have,” Alison said, as she stepped through the door, “but an angel appeared and frightened them off.”

“It was not an angel,” Hazel said firmly, “it was the Goddess.”

Kevin looked from one to the other. “You lot never cease to amaze me,” he said. “How you all hold down responsible jobs and are pillars of the community is a mystery to me.”

Stefan smiled at him. "Never mind that: let's have a drink."

"Sure you haven't had one already?" Kevin joked.

Later, as they all sat in the comfortable lounge, they continued to discuss the events of the night.

Alison was convinced that an Angel had appeared to protect the church and churchyard, whilst Hazel was equally sure that the pagan Mother Goddess had intervened in response to Hazel's spells for the protection of her and her friends.

"After all," she told them, "the land on which the church is built was originally a pagan site."

"Maybe," retorted Alison, "but it has been a consecrated Christian site now for the last four hundred years."

Then, quite suddenly, just as Kevin left the room, there was a great roll of thunder which reverberated all around the building.

Stefan leaped to his feet and yelled out: "Oh my God!"

Alison was too shocked to reprimand him for his irreverent remark.

Hazel for once was unable to speak.

"It's all OK, everybody, nothing to worry about," Kevin told them in an authoritative voice. "Follow me."

The three friends followed him into the adjoining dining room in stunned silence.

On the table was an assortment of Kevin's equipment. As he moved over to it he said, "I'm sorry, guys," and pressed a button, projecting onto the white wall of the room the same image that they had seen earlier on the outside wall of the church.

"You mean that you set us up? I can't believe it," gasped an astonished Stefan.

"A trick without the treat," laughed Hazel, suddenly seeing the funny side of it.

"Well, at least the vandals won't be back any time soon, so that's one good thing," added Alison.

Kevin looked from one to the other. "Am I forgiven?" he asked.

"Of course you are," said Alison.

"She is a vicar after all; and," Hazel continued, looking across to where Stefan was sitting, "he will certainly forgive you. He'll just be keeping a closer eye on you in future."

"Talking about the future," Kevin said: "I have landed a major role in a West End musical."

"Wow, that's great!" shouted Stefan: "Which musical is it?"

Kevin laughed out loud.

"*Wicked*, of course," he told them. And they joined in with his laughter.

*The End*

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## **THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER**

By **Patrick M. Shanahan**

The story of the most famous ghost around Chicago and its suburbs, Resurrection Mary, has been especially intriguing to me since I lived much of my life only a few miles away from where most sightings occurred, in Justice, Illinois. Mary has been seen and encountered by more people than any other single ghost in Chicago's history

and even today, over seventy five years later, the folklore is handed down from generation to generation.

According to the legend, it was the late 1930s when Mary, a stunning blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty, and her boyfriend spent most of the evening dancing at the *O'Henry Ballroom* on Archer Avenue. Sometime during the evening they had a quarrel and Mary stomped out into the cold night, intending to hitchhike back to her Bridgeport (Chicago) home, a distance of nearly ten miles. She walked along Archer for two miles before being struck by a hit and run motorist and left to die alongside the road. Sadly, it was her grief-stricken parents who found her body. Several days later Mary was buried in nearby Resurrection Cemetery wearing a beautiful white dancing dress, and matching white shoes.

There has never been any confirmation of the true identity of Resurrection Mary but researchers have several theories. The most creditable one being, she is Anna Norkus, who died in a 1927 car accident on her way home from the *O'Henry Ballroom*.

The Jerry Palus encounter took place in 1939. According to Palus, a south side Chicagoan, he had seen Mary several times at the *Liberty Grove and Hall*, a Chicago dance club, only miles down Archer from the cemetery. He asked her to dance and they spent the evening together. He recalled, "Her hands were very cold, but I just laughed and told her, cold hands, warm heart. She didn't respond. We danced and even kissed, and she asked me to drive her home."

As Palus tells the story, Mary didn't want to go straight home and insisted they drive out of the city which took them adjacent to Resurrection Cemetery. Suddenly, she told him to stop the car and asked him not to follow. Next, she darted toward the cemetery entrance where she disappeared before entering through the gates. At that point he realized he had an encounter with a ghost. The following day he visited the address Mary had given him and was told by a woman that it couldn't have been her daughter since she died several years earlier. When she invited him in, he identified a picture of the dead girl as the same one he was with. This account was profiled by the television program *Unsolved Mysteries* and to his death in 1992, Jerry Palus never changed his story.

Bob Main tells of his experience with the ghost at *Harlow's Night Club* in 1973. "I saw her on two separate occasions. She was slender, around 5'8" and wore her curly blond hair shoulder length. She wore a wedding type dress that was yellowed and her complexion was extremely pale, like she powdered her face. She sat close to the dance floor and refused any invitation to dance, and danced by herself. When I spoke to her she would only nod and shake her head and her gaze seemed to go right through me. I was the night manager and knew everyone entering the club was carded, but neither I nor any of my staff remember her entering or leaving the club either time."

In 1979 a cab driver saw a young girl standing outside a strip mall late at night. "It was very cold and she wasn't wearing a coat. She was dressed in a fancy white dress with strapped disco-type shoes. She was around twenty one and a real looker. I figured she was coming from a wedding or something and may have been in trouble. The only thing she said was that the snow came early this year and to keep driving up Archer. Then she shouts 'Here, here, stop.' Then she points to my left and the only thing I see is this little shack and when I turn to ask her if this is where she wants to go, she's gone. Vanished, and she never opened the car door."

The cab driver made these comments to a reporter on the condition that his identity not be revealed. It was discovered that that night, *O'Henry*, now renamed

*Willowbrook*, had a special “singles night” and the following day a crippling snowstorm hit the area and the ballroom was closed for nearly two weeks.

Over the years there have been numerous sightings. Some of the more recent ones include an incident in 1978. A couple was driving past the cemetery when suddenly a young girl appeared in the roadway. Unable to stop in time they braced for the impact, but their right front fender went through the image and as they watched, it “melted” before their eyes. In 1976 a motorist reported on her CB that the body of a young girl was lying along the side of the road. She waited for police but when they appeared, the body had disappeared. What they found in the dew soaked grass was an impression of a body.

1980 proved to be a very active time for the spirit. The last weekend in August the Justice police had dozens of calls reporting sightings of Resurrection Mary. That same year, on Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> a man saw an attractive girl standing alongside the road and asked if she wanted a ride. She hopped in but when the man tried to engage her in conversation she would only say “Keep going down Archer.” She ignored his offer to buy her a drink and when he remarked, “I don’t believe in such things, but you look like Resurrection Mary,” she suddenly disappeared from the moving car, leaving the guy a true believer.

One couple picked up a girl standing at the side of the road early one evening. She was dressed in white and said she needed a ride to the prom. They drove her to the school where she thanked them and proceeded to vanish before their eyes. Mary has been seen dancing around the cemetery fence but most of her countless appearances have been walking along Archer Avenue. To this day she still appears and is always dressed in white.

On the memorable night of Halloween 1997 a couple explained their experience. “We were driving past the cemetery and noticed several street lights blinking at random, but in no particular order. Then we noticed a young girl dressed in white walking slowly on the grass between the cemetery fence and Archer. Other cars slowed for a better look and several, us included, passed and turned around for another peek, but she was gone.”

During an October night in 1979 there was a massive blackout along Archer Avenue, but confined to the town of Justice. Electric company officials and the police searched the cemetery shining their lights into the Resurrection Mausoleum because it was determined that the blackout was centered at that point. No reason was ever found for the power failure. (That sepulcher is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as having the largest stained glass windows of any mausoleum in the world.)

Resurrection Cemetery has over 160,000 burial sites and many believe it is haunted. At times the taped organ music, alarm system, and lights go on and off by themselves for no explainable reason. Also, there were reports by workers building the structure that the large religious statues would often be found in a different location when they arrived the next morning for work.

Every Halloween, a nearby tavern, *Chet’s Melody Lounge*, has a party in honor of the apparition. A drink is poured and set at the end of the bar and nobody sits on that stool in hopes that Mary will appear. Patrons wear T-shirt, sweatshirts, and buttons in honor of the occasion, while the jukebox blasts out several songs written and performed in Resurrection Mary’s honor. Many people scoff at the idea of the supernatural, but with so many credible witnesses to these phenomena, even the doubters have to wonder.

*The End*



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## [The Warm Glow of Companionship](#)

By Travis I. Sivart

And here I sit with you gentlemen. Thank you Wadsworth, the cognac and cigar is all I require. Please, see yourself out for a while.

I can tell you, my friends, I am happy to have returned to the fine city of St. Louis. Now, as I tell you this tale I must insist on absolutely no questions. Allow it to unfold before you in all its glory, mystery, and dark secrets. I shall reveal all to you by the end, as it was revealed to me. Lord Cross, you feel you shamed poor Henry Cabot with your tale of the vile religion in the Caribbean Islands of men brought back from the dead as slaves? Well, I mean no disrespect sir, but your tale could be told in a nursery by the au pair when held against the truth I am about to tell to you.

As you both know, I had journeyed to South America, the country of Peru. Many men do this for adventure of the wilds, the mountains, or hunting the exotic beasts, but most do it for the glittering siren call of the gold from the ancient Incas. I went in search of none of those. Rather I sought knowledge of a more ancient people, the Nazca. These people and their civilization were once as great as any in this world's history. They left great lines behind, only discovered last year when they flew a plane over the area for the first time.

I had flown over them myself, a week before the expedition. They were breath taking. Many said they could not have been made by primitive men. Some said that other technology had to be used to make these great lines. I would search for that, the source of these ancient mysteries. If I could prove that great civilizations had existed a millennium and a half before our time, it would change the world.

We began the excursion in early June with the usual contingent of scientists, soldiers, local guides and men to set up our camp and carry our expedition's supplies, about thirty in all. We traveled south from Lima on foot with llamas for pack animals. These beasts smell less than camels, but they spit just as their African cousins. There was boundless camaraderie. We all knew great things waited for discovery and we would be famous. At night we gathered around roaring fires and the porters sang their native songs. The scientists gathered in small groups with their notebooks, comparing their knowledge, the Indians joked with each other in their crude language and laughed, and the hunting men enjoyed the sport they could find as we traveled.

We had made it to the great lines, though we couldn't discern what they were from the ground. When we arrived, about half of us came down with a debilitating fever. We decided to press on, but it wasn't long before we had to stop. I also became afflicted, and I spent many days shivering in my tent. My fever was like none I had experienced before, and everything was a haze and fog for me. People's voices were swollen and almost undecipherable. My hands were red and puffy, making it difficult to hold a tin cup of water let alone a glass of whiskey.

A storm came upon us at this time. It was a horrible storm that came from the west. We thought it was a hurricane that broke on the Andes and the remainder drenched us for days. This was supposed to be the dry season. The winds tore at our tents, bringing them down upon us. Our chief guide, a stout Indian named Kenzet'tua told us we must head west for shelter in the mountains. The land ran in great valleys in a northeast to southwest direction. We were forced to follow these, as we could not scale them in the weather with half of our men sick and barely able to walk. We lost over a dozen men to accidents and sickness. The porters began to desert us, even though we had already paid them. They would just disappear, leaving behind their

gear and duty. These primitives had no sense of honor, and were terrified of the simplest things. I soon learned that their fears may be more real than I gave credit.

When we reached a sheltered area there was only a half dozen of us left; myself, the big game hunter Kyle Johnson, Kenzet'tua, a porter named Philip, and two archeologists; Marcus and Wendell Carrington (of the New York Carringtons). We only had four llamas remaining, and our guide recommended we sacrifice three of them to the Gods. I argued against it, but Mister Johnson sided with our guide, stating it would also give us food while we waited for the storm to subside as well as put our two locals at ease. The archeologists were no help in this, as they were in the grips of panic.

That night the sky cleared and we saw the stars for the first time in three days. I am no navigator, but I pride myself on knowing enough to find my way. We were very much off course. The mountains loomed to the west, but from what I could tell in my feverish haze we were days south of where we should be. We slept in puddles of mud under tattered canvas and a rocky overhang. It was that night that things changed forever.

I woke with a start. Everything was quiet, and nothing seemed amiss. My fever had broken and my head was clear, but I was ravenous. I stumbled to the dying fire to have some of the llama that was still on the spit. I cut at it with my bowie knife, devouring it as if I had not eaten in weeks. I could see the shadow of another, not too far away, also having a late night snack. He was hunched over his meal, his back to me, shoving it in his mouth with wet smacking noises.

As I began to feel sated, I looked around the camp. I could see the sleeping forms of Mister Johnson and one of the archeologists. Kenzet'tua was silhouetted on a hillock not far away, praying to whatever ancient powers he believed in, and I said a quick prayer to Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. Philip was huddled at the far back of the recess, staring past me with wide eyes. I followed his gaze to my meal companion. It was then I saw the drag marks in the mud leading to the man. Confused, I stood to see what the other archeologist had dragged out of our shelter. I thought perhaps a blanket to keep warm, or to spread on the ground to keep the mud from his meal. He had made a mess though, archeology tools scattered between me and him.

I froze in mid-step as the moon revealed his meal. I could see the mutilated limbs, contorted unnaturally, on the ground under him. It was not beast he was dining on, it was human. My fellow diner turned to gaze upon me. Its eyes shone with a faint greenish glow, and its mouth was an open gaping maw. I could not tell details in that dim light, but I could see squirming things inside that ravenous craw. A dozen or more of the hideous vibrissa swayed, like serpents' tongues, tasting the air. Its arms had extra joints and were a third again the length of a man's. And its legs were jacked backwards like a cricket's.

It was then that Philip's scream split the night. I spun to look at him, and saw two more of these creatures scaling downward from above him. Mister Johnson and the one remaining archeologist sat bolt upright. Behind me I heard a shriek, not unlike a fox's, but much louder and angrier. The monsters were upon our porter in a flash, their hands, which had no fingers but instead were three elongated jointed claws, tore out his throat in a moment. They fell upon their prey instantly.

Mister Johnson was up and had his long gun leveled at the creatures. The muzzle flashed and the sound deafened me for a few moments. One creature flew backwards and crashed against the rocky face of the cliff. Relief washed over me, feeling I was saved. But it rose into a crouch and eyed the hunter.

Allow me to take a moment now for a drink of my cognac. The memory of this makes my hands shake, as you can see. Ah, the drink will help me steady my nerves, and my cigar has gone out. One moment while I relight it, then I shall continue. I see you sit as quietly as I have asked you to do, and for that I offer my gratitude. I think if you asked questions, I would lose my nerve at these memories, and seek the sweet smoky streets outside. The noise and clatter of the throngs of people offer quite a comfort now. You see the heads of the great beasts on these walls; the lion, the rhinoceros, the crocodile, and even the massive elephant? The danger of hunting these in no way compares to what I saw and experienced that night, and the nights that followed. Very well, I see your anxiety, I shall continue with my tale.

Our big game hunter was well recommended, and his steel lent me courage at that moment. As the beast launched itself at the man, I dove for my bedroll for my own sidearm. I always carry a German luger. There is a reason that gun has become such a staple of certain armies. A shadow and breeze passed above me as I did this, and I realized that if I had not moved at the moment I did I would have been disemboweled from behind. The creature that had been quietly dining had chosen that moment to join the fray. It sailed over me, landing on its feet three full paces beyond. Thinking about it now, that would mean it had leapt at least twenty feet with ease.

The remaining archeologist sat frozen. I do not even know which of the two brothers it was, but he sat as still as a statue. I reached out and shook him, and he seemed to wake as if from a dream. He leapt up and ran out of our shelter. I could not track him at that moment though, because the beast that had been eyeing Mister Johnson sprang at him. That man was a rock, he did not flinch. He remained perfectly still except for the barrel of the gun that tracked his quarry with astounding skill. Another blast issued forth, this time catching the monster in its open maw. I insist its head melted when that shot, meant for taking down bull elephants, found its mark. It flipped backwards, and its bony legs fell inches short of the hunter. I will name my first son after that man, for without him that night I swear to God and all the Saints that I would surely not be here to tell this tale. I had always teased him for sleeping with his gun and fully dressed, but now I see the reason. Thankfully none of us had disrobed that night, in order to stay warm.

I heard three clicks and without me seeing it, the rifle was reloaded. He shouted at me to back up, but not run. I did as he said, my pistol held in front of me. Funny things happen to a man when faced with death and danger. When you do not have time to think, some freeze, some run, but others act. And that saved my life a dozen times that night. We backed out of our shelter and towards the fire. The archeologist was there, holding a flaming brand and a lantern. I think it was Marcus, but I am still not positive. That alone may allow you to guess his fate.

The next few moments became a blur. Our attackers bounded from our sleeping shelter, Mister Johnson snatched the lantern from the terrified scientist and threw it into the fire. The fire flared a dozen feet into the air. The creatures screamed again, that eerie sound like a fox, a barking scream that women often swear is more an evil spirit than an animal. In this case, I think they would be spot on. Pardon me here for my informality, but after what he and I went through I feel it is only acceptable for me to call Mister Johnson by his Christian name.

Kyle shouted for us to run, roughly shoving the stunned man in front of him. We ran. We went straight for Kenzet'tua. It was all very surreal, as if in a dream. We ran as if in molasses for the first score of steps. We could see the guide, and I am guessing he was also some sort of Shaman, for he was still on his knees praying. His arms were held wide, supplicating to the stars, and his voice had risen from a mumble to

shouting. We bolted past him, calling for him to come with us. We had no time to stop and drag him along. But it was not the last time we crossed paths with him.

We were the hunted then. I do not know how long it took these nightmare apparitions to recover from the flaring light of the fire, but soon we could hear their barking screams as they pursued us. We ran. The night had grown chill and our breath was short white puffs of air in front of us. We tried to run faster, to make those frozen wisps fall behind us, but they always stayed in front of us, as if we were standing still.

The scientist still led the way, though Kyle told him to follow rather than lead. I spotted the cave in the mountain side as I ran and realized that was where the man was heading. The hunter tried to shout at him, telling him we were being corralled like sheep, trying to get the man to keep running and that all we had to do was survive until sunrise. The scientist did not listen. He ran straight into the cave, and we began to run past it when we saw five of the creatures in front of us. We followed our companion into the cave.

Kyle went to the back of the cave, which was only about a dozen paces deep, and knelt down, dropping his ammunition on the ground in front of him. He said we could make a stand there. The beasts could not enter all at once, and perhaps he could hold them off. I stood beside him, my weapon at the ready. He told me not to waste bullets, only fire when I knew I could hit them in an eye or their mouth. We waited. We could see the shadowy forms outside, mere steps from the entrance of the cave opening. My hand began to shake as the cold set in and cooled the sweat on our bodies. I know this is how hypothermia can set in, and I stamped my feet to keep my circulation going.

A half an hour had passed, if it was a minute, and the beasts still had not approached our position. They would not enter. This emboldened our archeologist friend, who still carried his stick from the fire, though it was no longer lit. He began laughing like a madman. He taunted the creatures, and no amount of advice or threats from myself or Mister Johnson would quiet him. He began dancing closer to the mouth of our hiding place, shouting insults at our enemies. Two of them crouched just outside, watching him with their small heads tilted as if listening to his gibbering. They were mere silhouettes with pin point green spots that told us the location of their eyes.

It was inevitable I guess, but the man underestimated our foes. He stepped too close to the entrance, and apparently they had not come as close as they could. With lightning reflexes one snatched the man's charred club as he swung it towards them. It became a tug of war for the space of two heartbeats, but he refused to give up his weapon. Before we could react, they had dragged him outside. I saw the spray of his blood as they disemboweled him. Horrified, I stumbled backwards and hit the wall. I am ashamed to say it but I could only stare at what transpired. Kyle was made of sterner stuff though, and he stood and marched forward firing his weapon. Two shots were fired. One of the beasts flew backwards, its head missing. The other was rocked by a glancing blow to its shoulder.

The man was still alive, and tried to drag himself back into our shelter. But it was too late. Three more monsters came into view and one grabbed him by his foot and dragged him outside, screaming. The archeologist was lost. His screams slowly died away, much too slowly for my tastes. It seemed the beasts kept him alive as they did their ghastly deed.

We waited for the sun. I do not know how long it was, but to be honest I think we waited days before the sky finally began to show a hint of pink from sunrise. What happened next is not something from the year nineteen and thirty three. It is either technology from far beyond ours, or from legends of dark magic that we scoff at as

we tell tales around the fireplace. The silhouettes of the creatures filled the doorway and they placed their malformed hands on the edge of the cave. A deep vibration came from the mountain as if it were growling, though I don't know if it were in warning or aggression. The beasts began screeching in answer. High pitched, irregular, and discordant. It scraped at our nerves and I found myself crouching with my hands covering my ears. I was like some terrified animal, hardly in control of my own actions. Kyle was behaving the same, having backed himself all the way to the rear of the cave, his eyes were wide and showing bloodshot whites, his pupils dilated.

An odd sound came from the front of our shelter, as if pudding were dropped from a great height. When I first looked for the source of the sound I only saw the monsters crowding the doorway, but soon saw what caused this new noise. The cave was melting. It was not hot, or at least it did not put off heat or glow as lava does. But the mouth of the cave was closing by melting. I could see pointed spikes growing downward, like teeth in a mouth. The scientific part of my mind realized this must be what it is like if you were to watch stalactites grow over a thousand years. Stalagmites also rose from the ground as pieces of the upper cavern dripped down like black drool, building the lower teeth of this alien maw.

I still do not know if what I saw was real. I had a jungle fever for days and that may have touched my mind. I snapped. I turned and ran for the rear of the cave, clawing and slapping at the walls. I do not know how long I did this for, but I know it was dark when I came to my senses. Where light should now be streaming into the mouth of the cave, there was no longer an entrance. As I felt along the wall I discovered an opening. It was not large, but I thought we could fit through it. I could feel warm, moist air around me.

I called to Kyle, and heard a hoarse reply. In short order he had crafted a rough torch from his shirt wrapped around the barrel of his gun and doused in fine grain alcohol. The opening was larger than I had realized. It was almost to my shoulder in height, and wide enough that I barely had to turn to enter it. I had enough wits to recover my Luger before entering. We ducked around a smoothed stalactite we previously had not noticed hanging down and began our journey in the further unknown.

It was a horrible descent. If we had not been going down I would have thought we were going in circles, for the floor angled down the whole way. The walls were smooth and slightly curved and the ground was similar except for rounded bumps that crossed from wall to wall every couple of steps. The air was thick and smelled of foul and fetid things, and it became hard to breathe as we traveled. The air grew warmer and I would swear to God and all the Saints I could feel it moving around me. Our torch guttered and smoked. The fuel he used was pure and originally was a blue flame and should have continued to burn clean, but as we spiraled further into the bowels of the earth the light became a sickly yellow color and the torch spewed thick black clouds, like an outdated coal foundry.

I cannot say how long we traveled, though in my mind it seemed to be more hours than we would have traveled if we were above ground and in open air with a full retinue for safari. It was endless and our minds were as lost as we were. From the corner of our eyes we began to see things moving in the tight, enclosed spaces and shadows. Quick movements of small things and slow languid movements of much larger things. In the beginning when we stopped to look we only found rock but later we found crystal. The oddest crystals I have ever witnessed. Sharp, like broken glass, but black as oil. They were small when we first noticed them, but they became larger as we descended further into the depths. They jutted up like bamboo grass, but they

would not give when we stepped on them. Instead our feet slid on them, and they raked our calves and legs. They left some residue on our skin, and I daresay in our cuts. Soon enough the walls were these same black crystals, as round as a horse's trunk and as long as a tropical palm is tall.

I must confess, my mind was no longer stable. I had just recently recovered from the fever, hunted by monsters for miles at a run, breathed the tainted air of that cavern, saw things that were not there, and taken some foreign chemical into my wounds from the crystals. Kyle's eyes were rimmed with thick red and surrounded by dark circles. With his torn shirt and tattered pants he looked like a prize fighter that had seen the Devil himself. I can only imagine what he saw when he looked upon my face. I do not know if what I describe next is real or the fiction of my fatigued body and strained mind.

The world we knew had ended. We were in an utterly foreign realm. The crystal passages opened up into a huge cavern. The air was now hot and I could see red glowing rivers below the crystalline floor. A raised dais of polished obsidian dominated the open space. It had been carved with strange symbols and pictures that resembled the Nazca lines I had seen from the air just weeks before. Kneeling upon that unholy altar was Kenzet'tua. He was painted with a dark liquid that I knew to be blood. It coagulated on his skin in places, and ran free in others. I saw some was his, from freshly made cuts, and the rest were from the hideous sacrifices that lay around him. I could see several dismembered torsos, each glittering in the hazy red light with runes carved into their flesh. As I stared in horror, he began chanting and I caught sight of other movements. These things no longer hid when I looked directly at them, but I could not focus on them either. They slithered and crawled everywhere, covering what was the ground. My mind would not accept their very existence and I have woken every night since then, with dreams of these things in my room, coming closer to me.

Johnson screamed and lowered his weapon, firing it twice, slapping it open and shoving more shells into the barrel. Snapping it closed he fired again and again. He dropped shells around him and they rolled off from where we stood to the glowing streams below, popping in small explosions as they did. I raised my eyes to where Heaven should be and prayed. I prayed to God, to Jesus, to the Saints, to the Holy Mother, to my own mother (May God protect her and give her soul rest) and anyone else of which I could think. I was babbling. As I did, a moment of clarity struck me... the smoke was rising, swirling, and being taken away up a passage.

I grabbed Kyle by his shoulder and shook him, intending to point this out to him. His eyes were mad and his mind was gone. He did not see me. He looked through me. He loaded his rifle again with instinct and skill blending into a smooth action, and lowered his gun at me. I slipped and fell at his feet as he fired where I had stood a heartbeat before. Kenzet'tua screamed for me to sacrifice the man, to join him with these gods that crawled all about me. My hand drew my bowie knife without me realizing what I did, and I had cut the man's Achilles tendon before I could stop myself. The hunter fell.

His eyes cleared and the insanity melted away. I grabbed him and shouted about the smoke, and a way up and possibly out. He shook his head and tears rolled down his dirt streaked face. He mouthed one word, *run*. Run. And I did. Firing my pistol at anything close to me, I clambered towards the ridge nearest to me. I left the man that had saved my life countless times, thinking only of escape. I could hear the cavern thrumming with heartbeat of its own as I did. I followed the passage where the air currents led me. I was blinded from the toxic fumes and tears. I lashed out with my



knife, cutting into things I could not see. And I ran. I do not know how long I ran. I only know I climbed upward. As I did the air became thinner and cleaner. The sounds faded behind me, though I swore I could hear pursuit.

I finally emerged into daylight. I walked towards a setting sun. I walked through the night. It may have been days, I am unsure, but I finally reached the ocean, the mountains towering behind me. I continued to wander for days before I was found by a fishing boat. From there I made my way home. I later discovered I had traveled to the southernmost tip of the Andes. I was delirious for a week or more, and owe my life to those fishermen. And now here I sit, sharing my tale with you, and a warning. There are ancient, hidden things, long forgotten, that still lurk in dark places.

*The End*

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## **The Dead Man's Revenge**

By [Wesley Tallant](#)

The old gray swayback horse strained at the harness around its shoulders. Its hooves kicked up little clouds of dust each time they landed in the dusty dirt road. The wheels of the wagon squeaked along, leaving small ruts in the dirt. The driver, an old gray haired man in a black suit, leaned up against one side of the cab that enclosed the seat and dozed. In the back of the wagon, his daughter sewed on one of the many dresses that she made to be sold at the next town. Written on the side of the boxy wagon were the big bold words, "Dr. Strom's Miracle Cure." Under that was written in small letters, "Dresses by Megan."

Thaddeus Strom was not a doctor. His Miracle Cure was a mixture of whiskey and other juices that he found on his journeys across the west. There was no set recipe, just a thought in his mind that he was doing some good. He didn't even earn much money with it. It was his daughter's dresses that kept them fed and clothed.

Thaddeus was awakened from his slumber when the wagon suddenly stopped. He wiped the sleep from his eyes, reached into his coat pocket and removed a decanter full of his Miracle Cure, and took a drink.

"Why did we stop?" Megan called from the back of the wagon.

Thaddeus waited for his eyes to focus and looked at the road ahead. Something lay in the road. As his eyes became more focused, he could see that it was a man.

"Stay in the wagon, Meg," he said as he climbed from the driver's seat.

He walked up to the body in the road and knelt beside it. It was a young man dressed in blue jeans, brown cotton shirt, and tan leather vest. Upon further examination, he found the man to be gut shot but still alive. He felt a presence and turned to see Megan standing beside him.

"I told you to stay in the wagon, girl."

"Is he dead?"

"Gut shot. He's still alive but death isn't far off for him. We'll move him over to the side of the road. Ain't nothing we can do for him."

"Are you planning to go on and just leave him here?"

"He's as good as dead. We can't help him."

"I'll not go off and leave him here to die alone. It's almost dark, we'll camp here and at least take him to the nearest town after he's gone."

Thaddeus looked at the sun. He figured it was at least another two hours before sunset. Two hours of traveling. But he also knew his daughter. If she said they were

going to stay here and wait for death to take the man, then it wasn't worth his time to argue with her.

“Well, we still need to get him out of the road. I'll drag him over to that Mesquite tree yonder. We'll set up camp there.”

“I'll get some blankets and try to make him comfortable.”

Megan stood and went to the back of the wagon. Thaddeus grasped the man's arms and drug him to the sparse shade of the Mesquite tree. Megan spread a blanket out and Thaddeus rolled him over onto it.

“Give me your flask,” she said and held her hand out.

“That's my medicine. You can't have it.”

“Papa, you know it's nothing more than whiskey and cactus juice and a few berries thrown in for flavor. Give it to me.”

Thaddeus begrudgingly reached into his coat pocket and gave the flask to her.

“It's just a waste of good medicine to give him any. He's as good as dead.”

“And you've got more in the wagon. Just a little for him won't hurt none.”

Thaddeus again knew it was a waste of time to argue with his daughter. He turned and began walking to the wagon. “Just like her ma. Stubborn as a bow legged mule,” he muttered below his breath.

“You say something, Papa?”

“Just talking to myself is all.”

Megan spent the rest of the day tending to the man. She took some silk thread from her sewing box and sewed the bullet hole closed. She then cleaned his wound with the medicine and even poured a few small sips into his mouth. Day turned to evening and then to night. Megan slept on a blanket next to the man while Thaddeus slept on a blanket under the wagon.

When the sun rose, the next morning, Megan awoke and looked at the man. His eyes were slightly open and he smiled when he saw her. Then his eyes slowly closed again.

“Papa,” she called out.

Thaddeus stirred in his blanket and sat up. “I'll get a shovel.”

“No, Papa. He's still alive.”

“What?” Thaddeus almost ran to where Megan sat beside the man.

“He looked at me and smiled.”

“That stuff really is a miracle cure. What was in that last recipe?”

All through the morning, the man, from time to time, would open his eyes, smile at Megan, and then close them again. She would give him little sips of the medicine and again clean his wound.

When the sun was at the noon hour, the sound of pots and pans banging against each other reached their ears from atop a hill ahead of them. Thaddeus pulled his old Spencer rifle from the wagon and watched as an old prospector and his burro came into view.

The old prospector looked down at the two people that were looking up at him and waved. “Hello,” he called out. “I saw the smoke from your fire and thought I might get a cup of coffee.”

“Come on down,” Thaddeus called out. There weren't very many people he trusted, so he kept a firm grip on the rifle.

“The name's Dusty Jackson,” the old prospector said when he neared the camp.

The two men shook hands.

“Thaddeus Strom. This is my daughter Megan.”

“Ma'am,” Dusty said and removed his hat.

Dusty looked at the man under the tree. "I see one of your party may be bad off."

"We found him here yesterday," Megan said. "He's been gut shot. We thought he would be dead by now, but he made it through the night. Do you know where the nearest doctor is?"

Dusty walked over and knelt beside the man. When he saw the man's face, he turned white and almost fell over backwards.

"What is it?" Megan asked.

"That's Cord Lindsay," Dusty said. "He's supposed to be dead."

"We know that," Thaddeus said. "Gut shot usually makes a man that way."

"No, you don't understand. Max McDonald brought his horse into Van Horn four days ago and said he found the horse wandering in the desert twenty miles from here. By the amount of blood that was on the saddle, we thought him to be dead."

"Well he sure ain't dead," Thaddeus said.

"Didn't the sheriff send out a search party?" Megan asked.

"Yeah, out to where the horse was found. They didn't find anything there because there wasn't anything to find."

Dusty then looked at Cord's wound. "He's gut shot, all right. Did you get the bullet out before you sewed him up?"

"No. I didn't see any need in that since we thought he was going to die anyway," Megan replied.

"I hate to ruin your nice sewing job, ma'am. But that bullet needs to come out so he can have a better chance of surviving."

"Whatever you think is best. I have more thread."

"Do you have any whiskey?"

"We've got something better," Thaddeus said. He went to the wagon and came back with a full bottle of his Miracle Cure.

"Well, Doc, you gonna remove that bullet?"

Thaddeus stood tall and put his hands in his vest pockets. "Sir, I am a doctor of research, not a doctor of medicine."

*A doctor of hee haw if you ask me,* Dusty thought to himself.

Dusty uncorked the bottle and took a sniff. The sweet smell of the berries reached his nose but then the strong aroma of the whiskey hit his sinuses. "That ought to do the trick," he said as he blinked his eyes. He poured some of the elixir over a pocket knife he had removed from his vest pocket. He then took a swallow for himself, gasped, and began cutting the silken threads used to sew the wound closed.

Cord's body flinched with each thread that was cut. "Mister Lindsay," Dusty said, "This is going to hurt a little but it needs to be done. Doc, ma'am, you'll need to hold him down while I do this."

Thaddeus and Megan each took an arm and pressed it into the ground.

Dusty leaned over and sniffed at the now open wound. "I don't smell any bowel. Maybe the bullet didn't pierce any of his innards." He then poured a small sip of the liquid into Cord's mouth and then took a large gulp for himself. He poured some of the elixir into the wound and then some onto his hand. He took a deep breath and plunged his finger into the hole left by the bullet.

Cord's body bucked and almost came free from Megan's grasp. But Thaddeus held firm and Dusty found the bullet and managed to work it to the surface and finally out.

Megan immediately placed a rag over the wound to stop the blood flow. "Papa, hold this," she said.

Thaddeus replaced her hands with his and she began to get another silk thread ready.

Dusty held the bullet up and examined it. "Don't reckon I ever seen a bullet like this before," he said. "And I've seen a lot of bullets in my time."

The bullet was about a half inch long with six flat sides, rounded on one end and flat at the other end. He washed the blood off with water from his canteen and handed it to Thaddeus.

Thaddeus examined the bullet but said nothing. The alcohol clouds in his brain hid much of his memories. But he knew there was something familiar about the bullet. He handed it back to Dusty.

"He needs a doctor. How far is it to this Van Horn?" Megan asked.

"Oh no, he can't go to Van Horn," Dusty said. "He'd surely be killed there."

"Why's that?" Thaddeus asked.

"Range war. Albert Bracken owns most of the land around here. Cord owns a small spot north of town. But that small spot has the only water spring big enough to water a herd of cattle for miles."

"So this Bracken fellow wants it all for himself," Thaddeus said. It was more of a statement than a question.

"Right. And with Max finding Cord's horse wandering the desert, Bracken thinks he's won. But the local judge won't declare Cord dead for thirty days. Bracken is thoroughly pissed about that." Dusty grinned and chuckled. "Just imagine how he's gonna feel once he finds out that Cord's still alive."

"If we can't take him to Van Horn, where can we take him?" Megan asked.

"My place is just a few miles yonder way. We'll take him there. It's an old abandoned mine. Plenty of water for us and very few visitors. But you'll have to watch your step. I got booby traps set up all around it. Nothing fatal, just something to let me know when somebody comes snooping around."

Dusty's place was located in the side of a box canyon that was lined with mesquite trees and shrubbery. A bend in the canyon wall hid it from view of the entrance of the canyon. A doorway had been built over the entrance of the old mine and a small chimney for a pot belly stove was added to the side of that.

"Stay to the left," Dusty told Thaddeus. "There's trip wires under those mesquite trees that will send a thorny limb into you."

Thaddeus pulled the reins and the wagon rumbled to a stop next to the mine entrance. Megan opened the back door of the wagon and looked around. With the exception of the entrance of the mine, there was no sign that anybody had ever been here before.

"We'll get Cord inside," Dusty said, jumping from the wagon. "Then I've got a place on down yonder to hide your wagon and horse."

"Why would we need to hide the wagon?" Megan asked.

Dusty shrugged his shoulders. "Just like my privacy. Besides, in these parts, it's sometimes hard to tell who's your friend and who ain't."

The inside of the makeshift abode was much cooler than the outside had been. Megan spread one of her clean sheets over the dirty mattress that lay on Dusty's cot. Cord was then brought in and gently laid on the fresh linen.

"The mine caved in back there a ways," Dusty said, pointing to the back of the mine. "So be careful what you touch if you go back there. But that's where the water's at. There's a seep in the wall back there about fifty feet. I built a little catch basin under it. From there it runs on back to the caved in part and goes under it."

“We thank you for your hospitality,” Thaddeus said, “But, I think we'll be leaving now.”

“No, Papa,” Megan said, dipping a rag into a bucket of water and dabbing Cord's forehead with it.

“Megan, we have done our part in this ...”

“I'll not leave this man here in this condition.”

“But, Mister Jackson ...”

“I'm sure he is a fine man. But, Cord ... Mister Lindsay, is going to need looking after around the clock for some time to come. And Dust ... Mister Jackson ...”

“Just call me Dusty, ma'am.”

Megan nodded her head at Dusty and continued. “Dusty, will have to rest himself at some time or another. That is why we should stay, at least for a few days.”

Thaddeus looked at Megan. “Now see here girl ...”

“My mind is made up, Papa. And besides, that old nag horse of ours could use a rest also.”

“I got plenty of vitals,” Dusty said looking at Thaddeus.

Thaddeus rubbed his chin, reached into a pocket inside his vest, removed a flask, took a sip and replaced it back in his vest pocket. “Seven days,” he said. “And then we hit the road.” But he knew that if Megan got her way, they would be here for much longer.

Megan jumped up and hugged her father. “Thank you, Papa, you'll see, it'll be good for you to rest also.”

Cord didn't move for three days. Megan was at his side whenever she was awake and slept on a pallet of blankets that was on the floor beside the cot. Thaddeus spent much of his time tending to his horse and sampling his miracle cure.

Dusty left the morning of the second day, and returned with an antelope strapped across his burro's back. “Got us some fine eating for a while now,” he said.

Thaddeus, who had been sitting in a chair at the front on the mine, stood and watched as Dusty tossed a rope over a mesquite limb and hoisted the antelope up. “I don't believe I've ever tasted antelope before,” Thaddeus said.

“Makes a fine stew,” Dusty replied. “I got a patch yonder where some wild onions and taters grow. Mix in a few beans with prickly pears for desert and you got a meal fit for a king.”

Dusty skinned and gutted the animal while Thaddeus watched. “I'll take the hide over to a Indian woman I know named Cactus Blossom. She'll make it into clothes for me. I'll let her have the innards as trade for that. Indians sure love them antelope innards, at least she does.”

Dusty carried the skinned carcass to the back of the mine and placed it on a table. He then dipped a cotton cloth in the water basin and covered the meat with it. “That'll keep it fresh till I get back. I gotta get them innards over to Cactus Blossom. They won't keep very long. I'll be back before supper.” He stuffed the animal's internal organs into an animal-skin sack, tossed the carrying strap over his shoulder and headed out.

Upon returning, three hours later, Dusty went to work cutting the carcass into strips that he seasoned and hung out in the sun to dry. But some of the meat was cut into cubes and placed in a pot of boiling water on the pot belly stove. Some of the wild potatoes and onions were added along with some herbs, and before long the stew was ready to eat.

Megan and Thaddeus sat at the makeshift table of Dusty's and ate the stew he had prepared. Megan thought he was right, it was a meal fit for a king. But her mind was on Cord, and Dusty had noticed it. "Does he have a family?" she asked without removing her eyes from him.

"No. He had an uncle here once. That's how he got the land. Then Bracken came along and Cord's uncle disappeared. Bracken tried to claim the land but the judge ruled the land belonged to Cord. Cord had just turned twenty two and has been fighting Bracken to hold onto it since. That was two, maybe three years ago."

Nobody said anything else as they finished their meal. Megan managed to spoon some of the stew juice into Cord's mouth. He again opened his eyes and smiled at her.

After supper, Thaddeus and Dusty sat outside the mine, Thaddeus sipping his miracle cure, and Dusty smoked an old Indian peace pipe. "That daughter of yours," Dusty said. "How old is she?"

Thaddeus looked at Dusty. "Twenty two, I reckon. Time seems not to be one of my strong points. Why?"

"You haven't noticed the way she looks at Cord?"

Thaddeus sat his chair up straight. "What do you mean?"

"She has a twinkle in her eye when she looks at him. Kind of like a small child with a new puppy."

Thaddeus turned and looked at the mine door. He sat there in thought for a few moments. He had seen that look before. He had seen it in Megan's mother's eyes, Linda, at their wedding. He hadn't thought of it before, maybe he didn't want to think of it, but the realization that Megan was now a grown woman flooded his mind.

He thought back to how proud he had been the day she was born, back in Pittsburgh when he was happily married and working as a book keeper at one of the biggest stores in town. Then to the day when Megan was eight years old and he was conscripted into the Pennsylvania Militia and sent to fight in the Civil War. And then to the dark days of when he came home and found out that his dear wife had died of fever just days before he returned.

He took to the bottle then, and when Megan was twelve years old, he bought the old wagon and horse and the two of them left Pittsburgh. It was in Kentucky he learned how to make the drink he cherished so much.

Megan's mother had taught her how to be a seamstress and she took to the task with enthusiasm. Even at her earliest age, Megan had a talent for using needle and thread and she only got better with it as time passed.

But that all seemed like a lifetime ago. And now his little girl had grown up without him knowing it. She had blossomed into a young woman and it took a stranger to point it out to him.

"Papa ... Dusty," Megan called out from inside the mine turned home. "Come quick."

Dusty and Thaddeus both stood and stepped in through the door.

"He's awake," she said when they arrived next to her.

"What happened?" Cord asked drowsily.

"You been resurrected from the dead," Dusty said.

"What?"

"These fine folks found you aside the road over in Buzzard Gulch. I come along about then and we brought you here to my place."

"What happened? Why ..."

"You been gut shot, Cord. Almost died on us three, maybe four days ago."

"Do you remember what you were doing when you got shot?" Megan asked.



Cord tried to sit up but quickly lay back down when the pain of his still healing bullet wound forced him to rethink about sitting up. "Some of my cattle were missing," He finally said. "I was trailing them and ended up there in Buzzard Gulch. I don't remember much of anything after that. Just opening my eyes and seeing you ..."

Cord pointed his finger at Megan.

"Maybe you'll remember more after you've had some rest," Megan said.

"This is Megan Strom and her pa, Thaddeus," Dusty said. "She's been at your side almost every waking hour since they found you."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Cord said. Just barely audible.

"Okay, enough for now," Megan said. "You just lie there and go back to sleep. We'll talk some more tomorrow."

"Just one more thing," Cord said. "How long have I been here?"

"You been here three days and they found you the day before that," Dusty said.

"What day is today?"

"Monday," Megan said. "We found you on Friday just before sundown."

"Max McDonald brought your horse in to Van Horn a week ago today. Said he found it wandering around the desert. The saddle was covered with so much blood, folks thought you to be ..." Dusty stopped talking when he realized that Cord had fallen back to sleep.

"A week," Thaddeus said. "A man shouldn't be able to last that long losing as much blood as he did."

"Yeah," Dusty said as he rubbed his bearded chin. "Which makes a feller wonder if he really lost that much blood."

"What do you mean?" Megan asked as she stood up and turned to face Dusty.

"All we have to go by is McDonald's word. What if Cord didn't lose as much blood as he would have us believe?"

"I don't understand," Thaddeus said.

"McDonald works for Bracken. If he had shot Cord and left him to die but needed more proof when he got back to Bracken's place ..."

"Then the blood on the saddle could have been added by Bracken to make it look like Cord had bled to death and fallen from the saddle," Megan said.

"Bracken ain't one of my favorite people and that is just the thing he would do. He's had people killed before but the lack of a spine in the sheriff's back has prevented anything being done about it."

Megan turned and looked at the sleeping man she had tended to for the last few days. "And he almost succeeded again," she said in almost a whisper.

"I'll go back up to Buzzard Gulch tomorrow and have myself a look around," Dusty said.

"What will you be looking for?" Thaddeus asked.

"I don't know. Maybe if I trail back to where he was shot ... I don't know." Dusty shook his head and walked to the pallet of blankets and animal skins he had been using for a bed since Cord was using his cot. "I just don't know," he said once more before rolling over and closing his eyes for the night.

Dusty awoke well before dawn and packed a cotton bag with some of the jerked venison he made from the antelope. He filled a water bag made from a buffalo's stomach, picked up an already rolled up bed roll, and headed out the door. He slung a pack saddle over the burro's back and tied it down. He secured his few supplies to it

and then checked the loads in his well-worn Remington 44 revolver, picked up the burro's lead rope and headed for the mouth of the canyon.

It took him several hours to reach the place where Thaddeus and Megan had found Cord. He searched the area and found the trail that Cord had made as he crawled across the sandy bottom of Buzzard's Gulch. "Leads to the north, towards Bracken's place," he said aloud.

What little blood he found was at the site where Cord had lain for who knows how long. "Well, ain't no answers here," he said to the burro. "Might as well see where that trail leads to." He picked up the burro's lead rope and headed down the trail.

He followed the trail for some distance, only finding a few drops of dried blood from time to time. With the mid afternoon sun beating down on him, he stopped under a mesquite tree for a drink of water and some jerky. His burro munched on some blades of grass that struggled to survive in the sand.

After a thirty minute rest, he stood to continue his tracking when he spotted something in the distance. He couldn't see what it was that lay on the hot gleaming sand but he knew he had to find out what it was.

When he got closer to it, the stench of rotting meat filled the air. Then he saw it was a dead cow. Wrapping his kerchief around his face, to try and ward off the stench, he walked up to the carcass. The buzzards and other scavengers had all but picked the bones clean. But where the brand had been was a neat clean cut hole. "Ain't no buzzard done that," he said aloud. "That was done by a man with a sharp knife."

As he searched around the dead cow he found nothing but buzzard tracks. Then several yards away from the carcass, he found where Cord had fallen off his horse. There were no other tracks around. Someone had shot him from a distance. Cord's horse had bolted and run off, leaving Cord badly injured in the middle of nowhere.

*"If I were to take a pot shot at a body,"* he thought as he looked at the walls of the gulch, *"I'd do it from that ridge up there."* He picked up the burro's lead rope and headed up to the top of the ridge.

It was a long hard climb, but he and the burro made it safely. In the distance below he could see the carcass. He ground-reined the burro in the shade of a boulder, took a drink of water, and began searching the ridge. Only a hundred yards away, he found where a person had lain under a mesquite tree, facing the valley below and the carcass.

*"Whoever it was, lay right here and shot Cord,"* he thought.

Looking around some more, he found the wind-faded tracks of a horse leading further to the north, in the direction that Cord's horse had gone.

By now the sun had started to fall from the western sky. "Well," he said upon returning to the burro, "We might as well stay here for the night." He poured some water from the sack into his hat and placed it under the burro's nose. It only took the thirsty burro a few sips to empty the hat.

After removing the pack from the back of the burro, he rubbed the animal down with a rag he had poured water over. "I don't know why I never gave you a name," he said to the burro. "What good would it do? You're so stubborn you wouldn't answer to it anyway. But you are about the only thing I own that's worth anything. Maybe I'll ask Megan to come up with a name for you when we get back."

Dusty arrived at the mine and found Megan stirring a pot of beans on the pot belly stove. Thaddeus was tending to his sway-back nag.

“Where have you been? We were worried about you,” Megan asked when he entered the mine door.

“Over at Buzzard Gulch.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Plenty. He was pot shotted from the top of a ridge that lines the gulch about five miles from where you found him. I also found a dead cow that the brand had been removed from.”

“That was one of my cows,” Cord said from the bed. His memory was beginning to return.

Dusty turned to face the recovering man. “How you feeling, Cord?”

“Hungry. The smell of them beans and fatback are only making me hungrier.”

“Well, don't you go to eating too much just yet. You don't need to be popping those stitches out.”

Cord chuckled and grabbed at his wound. “It hurts when I laugh.”

Dusty then turned the subject to a more serious line of talk. “Was the brand missing from that cow when you found it?” he asked.

“No. I cut it out and put it in my saddle bags to use as evidence that Bracken had been rustling my cattle,” Cord replied. “You find my saddle bags, and you'll find that piece of hide.”

“Why didn't the shooter come to get you?”

“He did. I don't know how long I laid there, but when I came to, I could hear a horse approaching. I was too weak to move so I just lay real still. I heard the rider get off the horse and take a few steps towards me. And then he goes to retching. The smell of that dead cow must have been too much for him. He said he would just leave me to the buzzards, got on his horse and left, with mine in tow. I stayed by that stinky cow until after dark. I was too weak to walk, so I crawled.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“No.”

“Why didn't you use your gun?”

“I was too weak to get it out of my holster. And even if I did shoot at him and miss, he'd have come back and finished the job.”

“Yeah, I can see your point,” Dusty said as he rubbed his chin. “You go on and do like the lady says. Get some rest. We'll talk more later.”

Dusty turned away, took two steps and stopped. He reached into his pocket and turned around. “You ever see a bullet like this?” he asked and held it out for Cord to examine.

“Whitworth. My father had one years ago. I sold it after he died to get money to come out here and live with Uncle Caleb. Why?”

“That's the bullet we dug out of you.”

“Whitworth,” Thaddeus said. He had been standing in the doorway listening to Dusty and Cord. “Confederate snipers used them in the war. I remember now. They were deadly weapons at long range. Longer than our Union rifles.”

“Well, you find a Whitworth around here and you find the gun that was used on me,” Cord said.

Albert Bracken sat on the porch of his big ranch house and puffed on a cigar. In front of him was two thousand acres of ranch with over three thousand head of cattle, thirsting for water. The hot summer and thirsty cattle had almost dried up all the watering holes on the A/B Ranch.

"I've got to get my hands on that Lindsay water," he said to himself. He thought he merely thought it but had spoken it loud enough for his housekeeper to hear.

"You say something, Mister Bracken?" the elderly cleaning lady asked.

Startled at the fact that he had been overheard, he turned and said, "No, Miss Marlene. Just thinking aloud is all."

"Yes sir, Mister Bracken." She turned and went back to dusting the entry hall to the house.

He stood and puffed on the cigar, blowing out a big cloud of smoke. In the distance, he saw Max McDonald riding towards him.

"Miss Marlene," he called back over his shoulder.

"Yes sir."

"Go fix me and Max a glass of that special lemonade of yours. You know, the one with a shot of gin in it."

"Yes, sir, Mister Bracken."

He stepped down the few steps that led to the porch and met Max at the hitching rail in front of the house. "Well, what did the judge say?"

"He said to keep your cattle off of Lindsay's place until he either comes back or he gets ruled dead."

"Damn. How does he expect me to water three thousand head of cattle?"

"I asked him that. He said it's none of his concern. All he wants is for you to abide by the law."

"I still don't see how you could shoot a man dead and leave his body."

"I told you ..."

"I know, you and that weak stomach of yours. This would all be over by now if you had brought him back instead of the horse."

"So far, that saddle covered with calf blood has people convinced he's dead out in the desert miles from here."

Albert stepped away from Max and viewed the land before him. "This will all be mine some day. This whole valley, east to the Pecos River, south to the Rio Grande ..." Bracken said waving his arms across the expanse of land. "And that stubborn kid or crotchety judge in Van Horn are not going to stop me. I want a lookout at his place. No, make that two. If they see any sign of Cord Lindsay, kill him." Albert heard the screen door of the house open as Marlene brought out two glasses of the spiked lemonade. Climbing back up the steps, he took the two glasses from her, handed one to Max and said, "Drink up. Then do as you're told."

Dusty was busy packing supplies in his pack saddle when Thaddeus awoke and stepped outside the mine door. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Gonna do a little looking around. I like that boy, Cord. I aim to see what I can find out about what Bracken is up to. He has a house keeper, me and her is on friendly terms," he said with a wink. "She does the shopping for the ranch on every other Thursday. She should be in town tomorrow. I plan to be there when she arrives."

"You think she might have some information?"

"Never question what a woman knows. They're a lot smarter than a man gives them credit for. Don't go anywhere until I get back. I'll be gone three, maybe four days, a week at the most. There's plenty of vitals here. Just keep Cord out of sight. No telling who might be snooping around."

Dusty picked up the burro's lead rope and headed out towards the canyon entrance. Thaddeus pulled the small flask from his coat pocket and took a drink. He corked it and put it back in his pocket.

“Papa.”

Thaddeus turned to see Megan standing at the door.

“Where's Dusty going?”

“Just to town to do some shopping.”

“What do you mean? There is plenty of food and supplies here.”

“That's not the kind of shopping he's going to do. He says he'll be back in a few days.” Thaddeus then ushered Megan back inside and told her what Dusty was up to.

Cord had been listening to Thaddeus from the bed. “That old fool is going to get himself killed.”

Thaddeus, who didn't know that Cord had been listening, turned to look at the young man. “Why do you say that?”

“Albert Bracken is a hard and ruthless man. If he suspects I'm alive and in here, he'll kill Dusty and send his hired hands out here to find me.” Cord tried to stand up, but the pain was too great and he lay back down.

Megan rushed to his side. “You just lie still. There's nothing you can do to help him right now. You'll just rip open that wound and start bleeding again.”

“He said he'll be gone for no more than a week. If he isn't back by then, I'll go looking for him,” Thaddeus said. “You just lay there and heal.” Thaddeus then pulled the flask out of his pocket and looked at it. He handed it to Megan, “You hold on to this, girl. I'll need a clear mind if it comes to that.” He then turned and left the mine.

On Thursday afternoon, Dusty was looking over a new H&R .45 revolver in the dry goods store when Marlene walked in.

Dusty laid the pistol on the counter and held his arms out wide. “Marlene, you old she-devil. Come and give me a hug,” he said as he stepped towards her.

“Dusty Jackson,” she replied. Then she hugged him like a long lost lover. “How's things up at the mine?” she asked when they broke the hug.

“Couldn't be better.” Dusty looked at the store keeper and winked. The man nodded towards the back of the store. “Let's go talk where it's a little more private.”

“Here's my shopping list, Anson.” Marlene handed the man a piece of paper and followed Dusty into the living quarters of the store.

Dusty closed the door and turned to Marlene. “You look as lovely as ever,” he said. “But I need some information today.”

Marlene looked at Dusty questioningly. “What?”

Dusty looked out the window and then checked the door to see if anyone was listening. “I have a visitor at the mine.” He held his hands behind his back and paced to and fro in front of her.

“Well tell me, who is it?”

Dusty stopped pacing and looked at her. “Cord Lindsay.”

A look of shock came over Marlene's face. “He's supposed to be dead.”

Her response was a little loud for Dusty and he held his finger up to his mouth and shushed her. “Not so loud. We don't want anybody to know he's still alive, yet.”

“We? Who's we?”

He then went on to tell her of how Thaddeus and Megan had found him on the road in Buzzard Gulch.

“He's gonna make it but I need to know if Bracken had anything to do with his shooting.”

Marlene thought for a bit and said, “Max McDonald. He and Mister Bracken were talking about him just yesterday. Mister Bracken had Max send two men out to

watch over Cord's place and kill him if he showed up. He wants that water really bad."

"You mustn't tell anybody Cord is still alive. Especially that two bit sheriff."

"I won't. I like that boy. Almost broke my heart when I heard they thought he was dead."

"I got to go find the judge. We'll get together next time you're in town and have a little more fun," Dusty said and winked at her. "You go out first and I'll be out later."

Marlene leaned in and placed a kiss on the old prospector's cheek. "You owe me big next time, you old coot."

Dusty grinned and opened the door for her. He patted on the backside as she passed by.

"No, Cor ... Mister Lindsay," Megan said. "You can't go outside yet. You are still healing."

"I have to get some fresh air. I've been cooped up in this old mine for too long. I can feel the walls crowding in on me." Cord gently pushed her away and slowly stood. The bullet wound, while healing nicely, still hurt like hell.

"But Dusty said to keep you inside and out of sight."

"There ain't nobody around here for miles. And besides, what Dusty don't know won't matter." He patted her on the cheek and slowly walked to the door. He stepped outside into the bright sunlight and had to shield his eyes from the blinding brilliance of it.

"Okay, but just for a little bit," Megan said as she looked around. She nervously tugged at the apron she wore as she searched for her father. "Papa's been gone so long. I wonder where he is."

Thaddeus had left the mine at day light, minus his flask. He said nothing, but picked up his old Spencer rifle and headed out into the surrounding desert. He had also strapped on an old revolver he found in Dusty's cupboard. He didn't want Megan to know that he was recalling his days as a union soldier and was rekindling skills he had learned back then.

Unknown eyes were looking down from the canyon wall as Cord sat in the chair outside the mine entrance. Max had taken it upon himself to send a man to search the area where he had shot Cord. The man had stumbled upon the mine quite by accident. "I'll be damned," he mumbled to himself. "Mister Bracken will make me rich for this."

He pulled his Winchester up to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel at Cord. It would be a long shot so he elevated the barrel to a point above his intended target and squeezed the trigger. The rifle kicked back against his shoulder as it spat out its deadly projectile.

Cord sat basking in the sun when the peace and quiet was disturbed by a sudden clap of thunder and a cloud of dust that was kicked up in the dirt just a few steps short of where he sat. In seconds, and in great pain, he dashed back inside the mine and slammed the door.

Megan, standing by the window, was stunned into immobility.

"Get down," he yelled at her. He reached up and grabbed her arm and pulled her down as another shot shattered the glass. Two more shots then pierced the door.

"Where's my guns?"

Still stunned by what was going on, Megan pointed to a shelf by the bed. Cord retrieved the weapons and returned to Megan's side. "These Colts will never reach



that far,” he said, checking the loads in each of the two guns. He stood and fired two quick shots out the window to let whoever was out there know that they were in for a fight.

Thaddeus had been on his way back from his practice session when he heard the first shot ring out. He quickened his pace to a run, desperate to get back to his daughter. When he got to the canyon rim, he peered across and saw puffs of rifle smoke on the far wall. He then saw the man shooting stand and take aim and fire again. Checking his own ammunition, he found he only had three loaded shells for the Spencer left. The shot would be a long one at about three hundred yards.

Resting the barrel on a boulder, Thaddeus took in a deep breath, but lowered the gun when a bead of sweat ran into his eye. He quickly wiped off his brow on his shirt sleeve. He raised the peep sight on the rifle and raised it up to its upper limit, peered through it and fired.

The shooter on the other side of the canyon never heard the shot but felt something kick him in the gut. He doubled over in pain and began rolling down the canyon wall. By the time he reached the bottom, he was dead from a broken neck.

At first, Cord thought that he had gotten off a really lucky shot, but then thought differently. “Somebody's up there,” he said to Megan.

“Megan, Cord, you all right?” Thaddeus called out as he slid down the canyon wall to the mine. With no answer coming from within the mine, he called out again. Fear began to grip him as he neared the mine. “Megan, answer me.”

The door swung open and Megan was in his arms in a flash. She was sobbing uncontrollably. Cord then stepped out, revolver still in hand.

“You two okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Cord answered.

“Where did he come from?” Thaddeus asked.

“My guess would be Bracken,” Cord replied.

“But how did he know you were here?”

“I needed some fresh air and sunshine. I never thought there would be someone up there. It's my fault. I'm sorry, sir.”

Thaddeus eased Megan to the chair by the door and knelt in front of her. “It's alright, baby girl.”

It had been years since he had called her that. He used her apron tail to wipe away the tears that flowed from her eyes. “You're okay. Papa's here now.” He gave her another hug and stood. “Let's go see who that fella is.”

“You recognize him?” Thaddeus asked Cord as they stood over the body.

“Lance Langtree. One of Bracken's regulars.”

“I guess he was by himself. I didn't see nobody else.”

Cord picked up the Winchester that had fallen down the canyon wall with Lance. He checked to make sure it still worked and found it to still be in good shape. “He's gotta have a horse up there somewhere,” he said as he pointed to the rim of the canyon.

Thaddeus examined the canyon wall. “Too steep to climb here,” he said. “I'll ease down that way a bit and see if I can find a way up. You go back and watch over Megan. It's time you start taking care of her now.”

“Yes, sir,” Cord replied.

It took Thaddeus some time, but returned to the mine at dusk with a horse in tow. “He had plenty of rations and supplies for several days in his saddle bags. Ammunition for that rifle, too.”

Cord looked at the brand on the horse. “Bracken,” he said.

“Judge Koehn,” Dusty said after taking a seat in front of the Judge's desk.

“What can I help you with, Mister Jackson?”

“I hear Bracken is wanting you to declare Cord Lindsay dead.”

“That's right. But I have no reason to other than the fact that his horse showed up with a bloody saddle. Why do you ask?”

“Has there been any other word on Cord's whereabouts?”

“None. But why does it concern you?”

Dusty rose and walked to the door of the office, looked out, and then closed it. “You and me been knowing each other some time now.”

“Yes. I wouldn't say we were close friends, but we have been acquainted for some time.”

Dusty retook his seat. “What if I were to tell you where Cord's body is?”

The judge gave Dusty a strong look and said, “If you know something you are obligated by the law to tell what you know. Do you know where he is? How did he die?”

Dusty again rose and checked to see if anyone was listening at the door and then checked the window. Once seated again, he said, “Cord ain't dead.”

“He's not? Then, where is he?”

“He's at my place. Gut shot over at Buzzard Gulch.”

“That's twenty miles from where the horse was found. How did he get there?”

Dusty went on to tell how Cord had been found by Thaddeus and Megan. He then told of finding the sniper's roost at the top of the gulch wall. “But we have no proof of who shot him,” he concluded.

“No you don't. And the piece of hide in the saddle bags would be of no help.”

“Why not? Cord found it up by the Bracken ranch.”

“Albert Bracken would argue that Cord put the cow there to frame him. That hide is purely circumstantial at best.”

“What else is there?”

The judge rubbed his chin and thought. “This rifle you say, a Whitworth, if it is not very common, and we find it, then we most likely have the weapon used to shoot Cord. But, you would also need to establish ownership for it to stand up in court.”

“We don't have proof of who owns it, but I have a sneaking suspicion as to who does. If you can go ahead and set up a hearing for say, three weeks from today, and grant me a little leniency with the law, I may be able to get proof.”

The judge looked at his calendar and then thought for a second. “If you stay within the law, we'll do it. Now, what else?”

“At the hearing, you call ...” and the plan was laid.

Dusty made one more rendezvous with Marlene and told her of the plan. He then asked her if she could find the gun that was used to shoot Cord. She agreed to look for it and bring it to him before the hearing.

Dusty returned to the mine to find Thaddeus sitting by the door with his Spencer lying across his lap and an extra horse in the corral. “Something happen here I need to know about?”

Thaddeus then told Dusty the story of the shooter.

“Damn, this has gone far enough,” Dusty said. “The judge and I have a plan that if all goes right, Bracken will be in jail for a long time alongside McDonald.”

“What is it?” Cord asked, stepping out from inside the mine.

“First off, we need you alive and healthy,” Dusty said. “If one of Bracken's men found you here, there may be more. You need to stay inside. Besides, a little paleness from lack of sun will help a bit. Megan, I have one of the judge's black robes. You need to make a shroud to fit over Cord's head when he wears it.”

“What am I going to wear a robe for?”

“McDonald is superstitious. If we can pull this off, he just may tell all and blame Bracken in the end. 'Cause, in three weeks, here is what we are going to do ...” Dusty then laid out his plan to Thaddeus, Megan and Cord.

“In the meantime, I need to get that horse and saddle as far away from here as possible. The last thing we need is for Bracken to find it in the area.”

Dusty led the horse for several miles into the desert and turned it loose with a slap on its rump. The horse immediately headed towards home, the Bracken Ranch. Dusty retraced his steps while dragging some brush behind him, erasing his trail. If any of Bracken's men followed the trail the horse made back to here, they would find a dead end.

The day before the hearing, the party of four left the mine in the old medicine show wagon. As they neared town, Cord hid in a closet, away from any prying eyes. He would stay there until well after dark and then sneak into the judge's chambers.

“I got me another idea that just might help. I'll catch up to you later,” Dusty said and departed the wagon at the edge of town.

Thaddeus reined up the old swayback horse in front of the courthouse. “We're here,” he said in a low enough voice for Cord to hear but no one else. “Remember, Megan, business as usual. You set some dresses out for the ladies and I'll sell some miracle cure.”

“Already ready, Papa,” she replied.

A crowd soon gathered and Megan was able to sell several dresses and Thaddeus sold a few bottles of his cure. When the sun slipped away, and the crowd had gone, Cord slipped out of the wagon with the judge's robe in hand and made his way to the back of the courthouse where Judge Koehn was waiting.

“Glad to see you alive, my boy,” the judge said upon meeting Cord.

“Not as glad as I am, sir.” Cord slipped in the door, passed the judge and into the judge's private chambers.

“There's a sofa for you to sleep on,” the judge said, pointing to the piece of furniture. “Nobody will come in here before the hearing. The night maid has already been in. I'll be back at eight in the morning. The hearing is set for nine. Get some sleep. If Dusty's plan works, both you and I will be rid of Albert Bracken.”

“I want to thank you now for your part in this, sir. I know it borders on not being legal.”

“You let me worry about that. I've been told that Albert Bracken has had his men scouring the whole desert looking for you. Now, get some sleep.” The judge closed and locked the door behind him as he left.

Outside the courthouse, the judge ran into a familiar figure.

“Evening, Judge,” Albert Bracken said. “Out a little late, aren't you?”

“Just doing some last minute paper work getting ready for tomorrow.” The judge looked over Albert's shoulder and saw Max McDonald rubbing a small stone that he carried for luck before entering the saloon. He grinned at Albert, “Yes, just getting ready for tomorrow.” He chuckled and walked off.

Cord was awakened by a tapping on the door leading to the judge's chambers. He crept to the door and peered out the key hole. He could make out Dusty's buckskin trousers in the faint light on the other side. He cautiously unlocked the door and opened it. Dusty slipped in and relocked the door.

"I got a few more things lined up for tomorrow." Dusty handed Cord a small cloth bag with what looked like a fuse in it.

"What's this?"

"Flash powder from that picture taker feller. Light it and drop it in the doorway before you come out. You'll also need this."

Dusty handed Cord another bag. Inside it was the bones of a skeleton's hand. "Where'd you get this?"

"Borrowed it from Doc Walker. Took some doing, but he let me have it for the night." Dusty then showed Cord how it was to be used under the shrouded robe.

They went over the plan, adding the two new additions.

"Remember, the door has to be open before you light the flash bomb. 'Cause if people see that door come open, they'll suspect something."

"Don't worry, Dusty. I know how to do this."

Judge Koehn arrived early at the courthouse. He unlocked the door to his chambers and was startled by a call from behind him.

"Morning, Judge."

He turned to see Sheriff Tatum coming towards him.

"You're in early this morning," the sheriff said.

"I couldn't sleep. Thought I'd get an early start and get some paper work done."

"You want me to get you some coffee?"

"No. No coffee. Just see that I'm not disturbed until the hearing. I may even try to catch a few winks of sleep on the sofa."

"Okay, your honor." The sheriff made a salute to the judge and turned to leave the courtroom.

The judge watched him leave, sneered at the spineless sheriff, and then shut and locked the door behind him. He looked and saw the sofa was empty. "Cord," he whispered.

"Here, Judge," Cord replied as he stood from under the judge's desk. "I hid when I heard the sheriff. I didn't know if he was coming in here or not."

"I brought you a piece of ham and a biscuit. Thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks. But what I could use now is a place to relieve myself."

The judge pointed to a door in the back of his chambers. "Through that door to your left is a chamber pot."

Cord didn't even say thank you as he rushed to the door. When he returned, he informed the judge of the additions to the plan.

"There's been some additions to the plan," Dusty told Thaddeus and Megan over breakfast at the local diner. He then went on to tell of the flash powder and skeletal hand.

Megan giggled. "I can't wait to see the look on Mister McDonald's face."

"Missy," Dusty said pointing his fork at Megan. "Mister is a term of respect for people you like. In my book, it doesn't apply to McDonald or Bracken. They're a couple of rungs lower than a snake turd on my ladder of likes."

"I agree," Thaddeus said. "Anybody that would shoot a man from ambush is nothing but a ..." he couldn't find the word he wanted to say, especially in the presence of his daughter.

"Coward?" Megan asked.

"Worse than coward." Thaddeus then began to finish his breakfast.

Dusty looked up to see Marlene enter the diner. She looked at him and nodded her head. But it was more than a nod of recognition.

"She got it," Dusty whispered to Thaddeus. He wiped his plate clean and went and stood at the counter next to where she had taken a seat.

"Where's it at?" he asked in a low voice not looking at her.

"Wrapped in a blanket under the seat of my buggy," she replied without looking at him.

Dusty gave the waitress four bits for his breakfast and turned and faked a stumble that let him bump against Marlene. "Pardon me, Ma'am," he said. He then whispered, "Thanks," and left the diner.

The nine o'clock hour was approaching and people began to fill the courtroom. Dusty stood in the back of the room with something wrapped in a blanket against the wall behind him. Thaddeus took a seat next to Bracken who was seated next to McDonald. Megan sat with some ladies who had bought dresses from her in the back. Thaddeus had a new H&R .45 pistol under his coat.

At nine o'clock, the bailiff called out, "All rise. Culbertson County Court is now in session. The honorable Jonah Koehn presiding."

The judge entered the courtroom from his chambers, purposely leaving the door open. When the bailiff went to close the door, he said, "Leave it open. It's been sticking and I might need to make a dash for the chamber pot."

There was giggling in the courtroom over his statement.

The judge took his seat at the bench, banged his gavel, and declared court to be in session. "We have three things on the docket this morning. Abel Hogan," he called out.

"Here your honor," a man said and stood in the front row.

"You were arrested drunk and disorderly last Thursday. How do you plea?"

"Yes sir, I was," the man said hanging his head.

"I'll take that as guilty. Since I know you and know you have no money to speak of, your sentence will be for the night you already spent in jail and five days public service. Starting today, you get to clean the horse droppings out of the streets."

"Thank you, your honor."

Abel sat back down.

"What are you waiting for, Abel. There's more droppings falling as we speak. Get gone."

"Yes, sir," Abel said and hurried from the court room.

"Barton Wilson," the judge called out.

"Here," the man called out who was sitting next to Abel.

"Same charges as Abel, same situation as Abel, same sentence as Abel. Get your butt out there and help him."

"Yes sir," Barton said as he headed for the door.

"Now, that brings us to the petition Albert Bracken has filed to have Cord Lindsay declared dead and his place to be put up for sale by the county. Since there seems to be no known relatives for Mister Lindsay, it would be in the best interest of the county to keep the land current on the tax rolls. And since his horse was found

riderless and covered in blood, it would seem that he has fallen on bad luck. The sheriff has searched extensively in the area where the horse was found and has not recovered a body.

“The sheriff has returned several times to Mister Lindsay's home and each time has found no activity of life as having taken place there. But, I do have a few questions of my own that I would like answered. There for, I call Max McDonald to the stand.”

Max looked at his boss with puzzlement on his face. “Just go on and humor the judge,” Albert said.

Albert then felt something poke him in his ribs. Looking down he saw the barrel of a pistol.

“Just sit back and enjoy the show,” Thaddeus whispered without looking at him.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” the bailiff asked Max when he placed his hand on the bible.

“I do.”

“Be seated.”

“Mister McDonald,” the judge asked. “You were the one who found Mister Lindsay's horse roaming the desert riderless, were you not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you look for Mister Lindsay when you found the horse?”

“Yes, sir. I looked for some time.”

“After you looked for him, did you come directly to town or did you report to your boss, Albert Bracken first?”

Max pulled the stone from his vest pocket and began rubbing it. “I brought it straight to town.”

“Where you claim you found the horse is nowhere near Mister Lindsay's ranch. What would be your thinking as to how it got so far away from the Lindsay spread?”

“I couldn't even begin to say.”

“Your Honor, I have an idea as to how he got that far from home,” Dusty called from the back of the courtroom.

“The court recognizes Dusty Jackson,” the judge called out. Max started to stand. “Remain where you are Mister McDonald. I'm not finished with you yet.”

The gun barrel in Albert's ribs was pushed in harder and the hammer pulled back.

“Approach the bench, Mister Jackson.”

Dusty grabbed the blanket covered object from behind him and walked to the front of the courtroom.

“I don't believe the horse was found where Mister McDonald said he found it,” Dusty said. He then pulled the blanket from around the Whitworth rifle that Marlene had sneaked out of Max's quarters at the ranch.

“Your Honor, that's my gun. What's he doing with my gun?”

“You claim ownership of that weapon?” the judge asked Max.

“Yes, sir. I've owned that ...” he didn't finish the sentence but stared at Albert for instructions.

“Does it shoot this type of bullet?” the judge asked and removed the bullet that Dusty had taken out of Cord and showed it to Max.

Just then a flash and a large cloud of smoke appeared in the doorway to the judge's chambers. A black shrouded figure stepped through the smoke and pointed a bony hand at Max. Several people shrieked and a couple of the women fainted. Max turned pale and began to shiver with fear.



“I ask you again, Mister McDonald, is that your weapon?” the judge asked over the shrieks of the crowd in the courtroom.

“Don't let him get me, Judge,” McDonald cried, still squeezing his good luck stone in his hand.

“I will keep him back if you tell me the truth. What really happened to Cord Lindsay?”

Max stared at the shrouded figure, and dripping with fear sweat, pointed a finger at Bracken. “He paid me to shoot him.”

Bracken ignored the pistol that was poking in his ribs and made a dash at McDonald. “Shut up, you fool,” he yelled.

But Thaddeus was expecting him to go after Max and brought the gun down on the back of his head, knocking him to the floor. In a flash, Thaddeus was sitting on Bracken's back with the gun at Bracken's temple. “I said sit back and enjoy the show.”

Max then continued, “He paid me to shoot both Cord Lindsay and his uncle.” Fear still had a grip on him. “Albert has been paying off the sheriff for some time to look the other way.”

The black shrouded figure then lowered the bony hand and removed the robe. Many of those that were still in the courtroom gasped when they saw that it was Cord.

The sheriff then made a mad dash for the courtroom door, but Megan tripped him. He landed hard on the floor and two of Cord's friends grabbed him.

Judge Koehn banged his gavel to bring order back to the room. When all was quiet, he told the bailiff, “Place Mister Bracken under arrest. Charges are to be conspiracy to commit murder on two counts, bribery of a public official, and whatever else we can find out. Max McDonald is to be held for murder and attempted murder. Sheriff Tatum, you are hereby stripped of the office of sheriff and will be charged with accepting bribes from Albert Bracken and accessory after the fact to murder. Mister Lindsay, welcome back to the world of the living. Court dismissed.” He banged his gavel and left the room.

Six months later, a newly married couple walked down the steps of the courthouse and climbed into a buggy. Cord and Megan kissed as a throng of people wished them well. Thaddeus and Dusty stood at the top of the steps.

“Weren't you just going to stay for seven days?” Dusty asked.

“I knew it would be longer. Just didn't know it would be this long,” Thaddeus replied.

A sign had been placed over a small shop that read, “Ladies’ Apparel by Megan.”

*The End*

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## **[The Prophecy and the Inheritance](#)**

By **[Wesley Tallant](#)**

The sky was dark, so dark, that even though it was 2:30 in the afternoon, we had to use the head lights on the van, to see where we were going.

We could hear thunder rumbling way off in the distance. Lightning flashed through the clouds. It felt odd that it should be so cloudy without raining, almost eerie like.

In the distance, the outline of an old house could be seen when the lightning flashed. As we got closer, a chill went through the four of us.

As we drove up the hill to the house, we could see that it was an old Victorian style, two story, wood frame, with the classic little doghouse windows in the attic. Many of the windows were broken, some of the doors were off their hinges, and the paint had long since flaked off.

"Straight out of a 'B' horror movie," said Derek as he brought the van to a stop.

"Yeah. I hope Uncle Walter knew what he was doing when he left it to me in his will," said Vanessa.

We got out of the van, and ever so slowly, started walking up to the house. We were walking so close that we kept bumping into each other.

A wolf howled and a chill went down all of our spines. "Nice touch," I said.

Vanessa's Uncle Walter had passed away two months earlier and left the house to her in his will.

The will said that she would get the house, and property, only after she had spent the night in it on a Friday the 13th.

Vanessa had tried to get him to sell it several times in the past, but he just wouldn't do it.

Developers had tried for years to get it from him, but he just wouldn't sell it.

Although it was far from any major roads, they wanted to make it into a resort and spa. Mineral water in the springs down the hill was what they really wanted.

But, in order for Vanessa to get it put in her name, she would have to spend the night there.

Vanessa was too scared to spend the night there by herself, so Derek Parnell, Andrea Oakes, and I, William Darwin, decided to go with her. After all, there is supposed to be safety in numbers, and the lawyers needed witnesses to say she stayed there anyway.

All of us knew and loved Uncle Walter, as if he was our own kin. We sat and visited with him many times, until his death, at age 93.

He grew up in the house. He was even born there. He only left it when he spent some time in the army during WW II. In fact, he lived in that house until twenty years ago. That's when his health started to fail and he checked himself into a nursing home.

He would tell us stories of family curses and strange happenings in the house, but we just thought he was a little senile. As we walked up the steps of the house, we began to wonder if they might be true.

The whole town knew that Uncle Walter was wealthy, but he didn't have any bank accounts. "Don't trust them sharks," he would say. He got his money several years ago when he sold the paper mill. Where he kept it, no one knows.

Once a month, a nurse would drive him up to the house. He would tell her to wait in the car while he went inside by himself. He would stay only a few minutes before he would return with just enough money to pay his bills at the nursing home.

So here we were, about to walk up the steps, into a spooky old house, and who knows what else.

Although I had never seen the house before, I felt that I had from all the stories that Uncle Walter had told about it.

We all paused at the front door, each one looking to the other to turn the knob. I said, "This is crazy," and grabbed the knob and pushed. The door creaked open and the knob came off in my hand.

One by one, we entered. Cobwebs hung from everything and the dust was an inch thick.

On the wall of the entryway, a picture of his favorite hunting dog still hung. A plaque on the bottom of it read:

*'Old Blue'*  
*Faithful to the end*

As we continued further into the house, we entered into the family room. Books were still on the shelves in perfect order. Furniture was still in place and covered with sheets.

All of a sudden, there was a loud crashing noise. The girls and I jumped and turned around to see that Derek had tripped over an umbrella stand. We laughed at ourselves for being so scared.

And there he was. Uncle Walter's picture still hung above the fire place mantel, and wood was in the fireplace waiting to be lit.

Uncle Walter's family bible still lay on the coffee table. The same bible that he talked about so much but would not let anybody get for him. If anyone mentioned getting it for him, he would only cuss and yell "Leave it be." Evidently he had a reason for leaving it there.

As Vanessa stood in the family room and looked around, Derek and I started to explore the rest of the house. Andrea stayed behind to keep Vanessa company.

The kitchen was dark and damp. The old wood-burning cook stove was showing signs of rust.

Cabinet doors stood open and some of them were sagging on their hinges. It was clear that there had not been any meals prepared in here for some time.

Antique china was stacked in one cabinet, with pots and pans in another. An old icebox was in one corner. Derek opened it. "Empty," he said.

"Well, I wouldn't want to eat anything that might have still been there," I answered.

The dining was huge, even bigger than the family room. A large oak table took up most of the room in the center. It had to be twenty feet long and five wide. High back chairs lined the edges with one large chair at one end. "This had to be Uncle Walter's chair," I said and pulled it out and sat down.

Paintings of family members hung on the walls. The name plates on the bottoms told us who they were. Vanessa's aunt, uncles, cousins, and her parents were there. We even found a picture of Vanessa, from when she was very young, hanging next to her parents.

They had died in a plane crash when Vanessa was very young. She was raised by a spinster aunt until she passed on a few years back.

All of a sudden we heard the two girls start screaming and rushed back into the family room to see what was wrong.

Vanessa and Andrea were as white as the sheets on the furniture. They were holding onto each other and staring at a box on the floor. As I tried to calm the girls, Derek picked up the box and opened it.

A look of horror came over his face as he showed me what was in it. It was the head of a woman. Her skin was dried and looked like leather. Her hair was long and black. Her mouth and eyes were open.

A nameplate inside the box read:

*"MY DARLING LOLETHA"*  
*I LOVE YOU TOO MUCH TO LET YOU GO*

Loletha, Uncle Walter's wife. She had supposedly drowned in the lake behind the house forty years ago, but her body was never found. Police searched with dogs for weeks and even took Uncle Walter in for questioning. But with no body, they had to let him go.

Uncle Walter would often tell us how much he loved her and how beautiful she was. He would sit and dream of her as if she was still alive. He went on and on as if she was an angel. But Vanessa told a different story.

Although she disappeared years before Vanessa was born, visiting family members would talk about how she was involved in witchcraft and the occult.

On Sundays, when Uncle Walter would go to church, she would go into the woods and chant to the devil. This was known for a fact, because Vanessa's father had followed her once.

But Uncle Walter was so in love with her that he refused to listen to such tales. Nothing could convince him that this was true, until one day, he came home from church early and found her hiding her spell book behind the bookshelf. They argued and he would only say that the last time he saw her, she was walking towards the lake.

Townpeople would talk of witches in the area, but only one name would be mentioned: Loletha.

As we looked around, we found it odd that there were no pictures of Loletha.

I decided it was best to hide the box with her head in it. Out of sight, out of mind, or so I thought. So I put it in the kitchen, on the big butcher's block in the middle of the room.

Since it was about to start to rain, and getting even darker outside, Derek and I began to get our supplies out of the van and bring it into the house. Sleeping bags, food, camp stove, and a lantern were soon set up in the family room.

We each had a pocket flashlight and Vanessa was using hers to look at her family tree in Uncle Walter's bible. Descendants as far back as 1763 were listed in the pages. Even Vanessa's name was there. But Loletha's name had been erased from where it had occupied the space next to Uncle Walter's name.

Did Uncle Walter really believe the tales about Loletha but refuse to admit it? One could only guess; and this was getting spooky.

Vanessa continued to thumb through the old bible but stopped when a piece of paper fell out. It was folded in half and very old.

Vanessa picked it up and carefully unfolded it. The handwriting was Uncle Walter's, we knew this from the way he made his 'Es.' The writing was faded and barely legible, but we could make out the words of a poem. We all thought that it might be a clue as to where Uncle Walter kept his money, but we were wrong.

It said:

*When Old Blue howls,  
Under the north wind chimes.  
Four holy ones,  
Will find their times.*

*Evil will come,  
To do them harm.  
But back away,  
From the purest one's charms.*

*The four holy ones,  
Will stand their ground.  
Not giving an inch,  
To the vilest of sounds.*

*The evil will be chased,*

*From the world above.  
Led by the one,  
That once was loved.*

*Back to the depths,  
From whence it came.  
Never to rise  
And come again.*

When Vanessa finished reading the poem, an eerie chill swept through all of us.

We read the poem again, and I realized that Uncle Walter's dog was named Old Blue. But he had been dead for years, so surely it wasn't speaking of us. Vanessa was the only one who could be considered holy since she was the only one who went to church.

We chuckled off these thoughts and went about fixing supper. Canned beans and wieners and crackers.

After I had eaten my fill, I looked at my watch. 7:35, this was going to be a long night.

We sat and talked for hours. Mostly about where Uncle Walter's money might be hidden. But Vanessa kept reading the poem over and over. From time to time she would even stare towards the kitchen. I could tell that she was disturbed about what had happened so far.

As my digital watch beeped past 11:00 PM, the wind started to blow. It started slow and began to build. As it grew, we could hear wind chimes from all around the house.

I never liked wind chimes, they hurt my ears. I grabbed my flash light and went outside, determined to stop them from ringing.

I found four sets of chimes. A set on the front porch, one on each side of the house, and a set hanging under a tree in the back.

As I reached for the set in the tree, I noticed a small gravestone under it. Curiosity got the best of me so I bent over to read it. It said;

*HERE LIES OLD BLUE  
MAN'S BEST FRIEND  
TRIED AND TRUE*

It was then that I realized that the house faces the south. I was on the north side of the house taking down wind chimes from over Old Blue's grave. The wind picked up even more then and when it blew through the tree, it sounded like a dog howling.

I raced back into the house and read the poem to myself. It must be right. Fear gripped me like a vice. The others asked me what was wrong. I could only mutter "Old Blue is howling under the north chimes."

Derek laughed, "That's childish." But Vanessa knew different. I could see it in her face. Andrea only sat in disbelief.

Again the wind picked up in velocity, the old house creaked, Old Blue's howling got louder, and Derek stopped laughing.

Then I remembered about the one that once was loved, Loletha. Was tonight the night that she would return with whatever evil she had met after her death to reclaim her head?

I started looking through the books on the shelves. Most of them were novels and reference books; I didn't know what I was looking for, only that I would know I had found it after I found it.

Finally I found a book with an upside down star, inside a circle on it. This was it.

As I flipped through the pages, a picture fell out of it. I picked it up. It was a picture of a woman with long black hair. She was very beautiful. On the back was written only one word, Loletha. So that's what she really looked like.

The picture had an evil and sinister look about it. The evil that was hidden in the lovely Loletha came flowing out.

The book itself was a book of witchcraft and evil spells. I was sure now that Uncle Walter knew about Loletha's evil doings.

Just then a strange knocking sound came from the kitchen. My watch beeped midnight. The witching hour. The time of night when evil is at its strongest.

Derek ran to the Kitchen and came back with the box. It was empty. Loletha had returned and reclaimed her head.

Strange noises were coming from all around the house. From upstairs, the basement, outside, noises like we had never heard before. There were shrieks, screams, moans, and more. Each one more evil sounding than the one before.

I still could not see us as the four holy ones, but everything else in the poem had come true.

Vanessa picked up the bible from the coffee table and cradled it in her arms.

She started reciting passages from it. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, For thou art with me." She repeated this over and over again. Andrea started to say it along with her.

I again began to flip through the book of spells that I held. Towards the back a page had been ripped out. The page before it told of how to call up evil demons, so I could only guess that the missing page told of how to send them back.

Andrea screamed and I turned to see a specter come through the kitchen door. It was Loletha. As beautiful in her evil death as she had been in life. A red glow seemed to fill the air around her. She was chanting in a language that I had never heard before. As she came closer, other voices began to join her.

Vanessa was still reading aloud and yelling passages from Uncle Walter's bible.

I again began to flip through the book of spells. When I glanced up at Loletha, I saw that she was holding a piece of paper out in front of her. I knew that it was the page needed to send her back to the depths from whence she came. She raised it up over her head, laughed, and the paper burst into flames.

As she started floating towards me, I felt the book begin to try and pull away from me. But something told me to hold on and not let her have it.

As the pull got stronger, I called to Derek to help me hold onto it, but he was stiff with fear and no good to me. I felt some arms around my waist; Andrea had found the strength to help me.

Loletha was determined to get the book from me, so much that she forgot about Vanessa for a second. Vanessa then hit on a passage from the bible that caught Loletha off guard. Loletha spun towards Vanessa as she read from the bible.

"Revelations 19, verse 2 and 3. For true and righteous are his judgments. For he has judged thee great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and has avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And they said alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever."

As Vanessa finished reading this, she threw the bible at Loletha. When it hit her, the other voices became silent. Loletha then began to scream in pain as the flesh began to melt from her face. She then burst into flames herself and was gone in a puff of smoke. We could still hear her screaming as the red glow began to fade.

When the glow had completely faded away, the wind had stopped blowing, the rain had stopped, and it was so quiet that you could hear your own heart beat. We had stood our ground.

The girls and I were breathing a sigh of relief when we heard a thump. I turned around to see that Derek had fainted.

The rest of the night was spent in eerie silence, each little noise was met with a jump. Nobody talked or hardly even moved.

As the dawn came, the sun shined bright, the air was crisp and clean, birds sang, and I didn't even mind the chimes over Old Blue's grave making what this time was a sweet sound.

It almost seemed like a dream, but we all knew that it had happened.

While we were fixing breakfast, I got to thinking. Loletha wanted the book of spells so bad that she found a way to come back from the dead to reclaim it. If she could do it once, she might be able to do it again.

I discussed this with the others and we decided it would be best if we destroyed it. The wood was still in the fireplace, and we even found some fresh matches there, too. Soon we had a roaring fire going and tossed the book into it. It burned with an evil looking green flame and was soon nothing more than a pile of ashes.

Vanessa picked up the bible from the floor where it had landed after hitting Loletha the night before. As she laid it on the coffee table, she noticed that the back cover had torn lose. Inside she found a letter from Uncle Walter. It read:

*Dear Vanessa;*

*At the time I am writing this, you are only six years old. But there is a charm about you that is destined to come out later. That's why I am taking such great interest in your growing up.*

*Since you are reading this I can only assume that you have fulfilled your destiny. I knew of Loletha's evil long ago and knew what she was going to try to do. I tried to stop her by killing her, but soon realized that I had only succeeded in delaying her evil plans. I knew that one day she would return and it would be up to you to stop her. It must be the morning after that confrontation and you have won. That means that the house and all its belongings are yours.*

*So now I can tell you where the money is.*

*Go to the picture of Old Blue. On the back you will find a key. Take the key out to the tree above his grave. Inside a hollow of the tree you will find a box. The box is big, so take your friends with you.*

*Inside is your inheritance.*

*Love*

*Uncle Walter*

We looked behind the picture, sure enough, the key was there. At the old tree we found the hollow that the letter told about. He was right, it was big. It took Derek and me both to get it out. The lock was rusty, but we finally got it open.

Inside were stacks of money, 10, 20, 50, and 100 dollar bills.

We spent the rest of the day counting it. When we were finished, we had counted \$586,380.00 in cash with a large pile of stocks and bonds.

Vanessa put the money and other papers back in the box, and sat quietly in thought. She then had Derek and me put it back into the hollow of the old tree. "Old Blue has guarded it this long, I don't think he'll mind guarding it until the bank opens up on Monday," she said.

When the bank opened on Monday morning, we were the first customers. The letter from Uncle Walter and the box was placed on the bank president's desk.



Accountants came in and counted up the value of the stocks and bonds. Vanessa is now the richest person in town.

Vanessa never sold that old house. She had it fixed up, moved into it, and to this day keeps the family bible on the coffee table in the family room.

Oh, and by the way, she married me.

*The End*

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## [Reel in the flickering light](#)

[Sean Tate](#)

I awoke to find myself alone and wandering down a path that was not known to me. How I had come upon this path? I cannot say. I had been asleep and dreaming, behind closed doors, in the confines of my own home only moments ago. My initial instinct was to panic, but I remained calm and collected and carried on in the only direction at my disposal, forward. Nothing seemed to stir around me: not the sound of a bird, or the rustling of leaf against leaf. I continued on, taking in my surroundings. Dense forestation as far as the eye could see, the forest floor was littered with fresh and discoloured leaves, but made no sound as my feet came down upon them. It was hard to keep track of time here, my watch stuck on the midnight hour left me guessing. I paused for brief moment to catch my breath when I noticed a flickering light in the distance. Since there was no other option available to me I proceeded forward, with the hope of finding a way out of this claustrophobic place. As I made my way towards this light it seemed to fluctuate as though some powerful gust of wind was at it from all sides. I could only guess it was wind but couldn't be sure, since not a sound could be heard. I continued forward for some time until I came upon two paths diverging. One was well worn and looked as though many a boot had walked this way, the other could have easily been overlooked had it not been for the other. The well-worn path seemed to lead towards this light and it made sense to me to take this path and forsake the other. No vegetation seemed to grow underfoot. It was like the ground beneath me was sterile, and could offer no sustenance to any plant life, no matter how hardy it be.

I took the well-worn path and carried on. The going was easy at first, but soon, the trees started to close in around me; it was as though they had a mind of their own and were purposely trying to hinder my advancement. While hindering my progress in moving forward, they gave me no option of turning back. I fought my way through the branches and found myself in a clearing.

The clearing was no better than the forest; it was devoid of any vegetation and earthly creature. I looked behind me to find the trees had interlocked to form a natural wall. I was transfixed by this amazing feat, never before had I seen nature act this way. Something unnatural was at work. I turned and continued my advance towards the flickering. I could see in the distance that this light was coming from the left hand window of an old tower house, no more than five storeys tall. It only seemed to be a short walk away. I reached the door, and with little effort, forced it open. Upon entering I noticed the place was pitch black but had no difficulty in seeing. The place had fallen into disrepair and there was little sign of the previous occupants. Had there been moonlight this night, it would have shone through the holes that had started to

appear in the roof. Finding no one on the ground floor I began to make my way upstairs. The stairs looked sturdy but I still took care to watch my footing. Having reached the first floor I began to look around, hoping to find anyone, but my hope was slim. I noticed that stairs leading up to the next floor were down the end of the hallway. I proceeded towards them, but not before I checked every door along this floor. Every door held tight. Just when I thought it would open, something forced it closed. I was about to make my way upstairs when someone, or something, stirred below. Was it footsteps? It sounded like hooves upon stone. That sound unnerved me, and with haste I made my way to the second floor. The second floor resembled the first and I had the same success with the doors as I had below. I paused for a moment. There was that sound again, hooves upon stone! I was certain of it; they were making their way up the stairs that I had come up only moments ago. I was resolute; I would not be overwhelmed by what lurked below. I spent no time in examining the doors on third, or the fourth floor since I knew I would encounter the same resistance as the doors before. I had reached the fifth floor. Behind one of these doors held the source of the flickering light. I quickly went to the first handle within my reach, but not even a budge; the handle refused to turn. The same with the next one. And the next. My hope was waning. The hooves had quickened their pace and were advancing towards me. They had just come onto this floor. At long last I reached the desired door, it opened with ease and I gladly entered. The hooves that followed me were now outside and from underneath the door a shadowy form was projected onto the floor within. How? I cannot tell, since there was no light source outside to cause this. I took in my surroundings. This room was different from what I'd seen below; it was a bed chamber, neatly kept, no sign of any disrepair was to be seen. And there, on the windowsill, was the source of light. A candle, but it looked as if it had just been lit. There was no sign of any wax dripping down its side; it was in a constant state of perfection. There was no evidence of an occupant here. The bed looked freshly made and nothing seemed out of place. I made my way towards the bed and sat on its edge. The pillows looked welcoming so I laid my head down and closed my eyes. It was foolish of me, I know, but weariness was getting the better of me. I closed my eyes and dreamt; I didn't think it possible given the dream-like state I was already in. I started to stir. It felt like some unknown weight was pressing down on my chest, getting heavier and heavier. My arms lay limply at my side; they were of no use to me. Hooves! There was the sound of hooves again. I felt breath upon me: it sounded as though it was being expelled from large nostrils in short bursts. The pressure increased and still I could not wake up. "Please, anyone," I tried to yell. "Please wake me, for the love of God wake me!" But no words would pass my lips, I was alone. The pressure kept increasing and increasing ...

*The End*

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## [Halloween](#)

By [Barbara Weitzner](#)

Austin and Alice had the perfect marriage. They shared the best and they shared the worst. By the happenstance of genes, Austin was tall and handsome and Alice was

skinny and unattractive. It did not seem to take on any importance until their daughter Jill was born. Jill was extraordinarily beautiful.

Austin idolized Jill. He'd rush home from work to play with Jill while Alice cooked dinner. Where he once brought home flowers for Alice, Austin now spent money for toys.

Pictures of Alice in Austin's wallet were covered with snapshots of Jill.

Alice had loved Austin as much as she could but it wasn't enough. She was no longer important. Appearance was a considerably higher priority to Austin than love and faithfulness. Alice began to feel resentment and jealousy for her child. To punish Austin, she took Jill and ran away.

Heartbroken, Austin searched and searched, but never found them. Each night before he fell asleep he spoke to his child. *Dearest Jill*, he'd whisper, *you will forever live in my thoughts. Someday I may laugh again and dream new dreams again ... but not yet ... not while every day I see your face and your spirit in everything around me. I pray that someday, somehow somewhere we will be together.*

Sixteen years later Alice brought Jill home to Austin on Halloween eve. She averted her gaze for fear that her triumph showed in her face when Austin opened the door and looked upon his 350 pound child.

"Trick or Treat!" she said.

*The End*

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### **Frogmore International:**

A light at the end of the road

By **Gary R. Winstead**

The swamps around Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot are legendary for creepy crawly things and things that go bump in the dark. The moss covered Cypress trees appear as apparitions to the untrained eye on a dark and foggy night. Mysterious disappearances, untold and unexplained, haunt the marshes and wetlands of South Carolina.

Perhaps the most famous disappearance was that of Private First Class John Davidson, USMC, stationed at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina. It is said he just vanished in the mists of the swamplands at a place some call Land's End and others call Frogmore International, near the town of Frogmore and not far from hell.

The event happened on All Hallows' Eve, 1968: as Cutter would say later, "Somewhere along Land's End Road John just vanished from the back of my truck, I swear it!"

The 2.8 miles, straight as an arrow it is said, is the playing field for a dead soldier from 1910. The locals say he got in a fight with a farmer over the farmer's daughter and met his demise at the end of a pitchfork. From that time forward he was doomed to walk Land's End Road carrying a lantern to light his way. The light it is said guides the soldier's ghost, and if he takes a liken' to ya he snatches you right out of the vehicle you are riding in.

That is where our story begins: Cutter and John from Muncie, Indiana were enjoying adult beverages in copious amounts well into sunset the day before the night in question. "Ain't no such thing as a ghost, 'specially a dead soldier-boy ghost,"

slurred John after the second pitcher of beer arrived. "Ain't no such thing, I don't care what the Sarge says."

Cutter smiled a knowing smile at his military buddy and took a long sip on the frothy amber liquid. "Tell ya what, John, how bout we head down to Frogmore and have a look for ourselves? We can make it by sundown tomorrow night, which, by the way is Halloween. I know for a fact the ghost will appear for sure." He leaned back in his chair, "Unless you is afraid." A challenge it was, the gauntlet cast down. Would John do as expected, after all he was a big bad Marine, or would he demur and face humiliation?

"Let's go, right now, right now bro."

"Now hang on, ain't no reason to hurry, it's a long drive from the Point so we should get some sleep and start at first light."

"Good idea, which way to the barracks, make way down the middle!" John shouted as he stood and tipped the chair he had been lounging on over backward, downed his beer in one gulp and staggered out the door. Cutter followed closely, apologizing to the portly bar keep as he wiped down the bar top. Cutter made sure the Muncie boy was safely in his bunk then closed his own eyes with no vision of what was about to happen. Sleep came easy for the two inebriated buddies.

The morning was cold and clammy. A fog, common in this part of North Carolina, hung heavily over the base at Cherry Point as Cutter opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. Fog had seeped into the barracks, and an ethereal face made of mist and fog peered down on the lonesome cowboy as thoughts of doom filled his heart. Someone had left a window open and a late October chill filled his little part of the world. Cutter's thoughts drifted to "do I or don't I go through with this?" It was a feeling he could not shake and would later say he should have listened to his inner self.

True to John's reputation as a prankster, a bum arrived at the foot of Cutter's bunk. Smelling like cheap wine and reeking of cigar smoke, torn shirt and one shoe with an open toe he said, "Time to go, we want to get to Frogmore before sundown. I got a case of beer and a jug of ripple waiting out by the truck. What else we need?"

As if by the magic that was All Hallows' Eve a mighty gust of wind ripped a branch from an old elm outside the barracks window. It made an ominous sound as it crashed to the ground taking out a window with it. "Oh, geeze, we better beat feet before the duty sergeant gets here or we will be cleaning up that mess all day." With that the pair double timed out the door and sprinted towards the old yellow Dodge truck tucked like a serpent in the corner space reserved for E-5s and above. Thankful it had not been towed away in the night, the now profusely sweating Marines threw the beer and wine into the space behind the seat, fired up the old eight cylinder and motored out the front gate. Cutter would tell authorities later that he felt a presence tugging on his shirt sleeve and a voice that sounded hollow telling him to *stop, turn around and get back in bed cause you ain't gonna like how this night ends.*

Cutter shrugged his shoulders, looked at his left arm, and accelerated out the gate in Havelock and headed towards New Bern and points south. Six uneventful hours later the now tired and hungry warriors pulled into a rest stop on the edge of St. Helena Island, South Carolina. It would be just a short trip to Frogmore: and what happened that day still haunts his dreams.

A cold wind assaulted the pair as they stepped out on the island and pondered their next move. "Well, it is getting dark so we need to find a spot where we can catch this 'ghost'," quipped John the eternal skeptic. "After all, there ain't but a hundred other cars parked along this stretch of highway."

“Well we is safe here,” said Cutter. “The ghost of Pvt. Quigley can’t pass the Chapel of Ease. So if we stay here and just watch, you will see him.”

“Nah, man, you scared? Let’s get on down the road, down by Penn Central about half way along Land’s End Road. It ain’t but about two and a half miles long. And I want to be right in the middle of it. You know, when it don’t appear.” Reluctantly the cautious cowboy maneuvered his old pickup, still spraying hay out the back, onto Land’s End Road and drove two miles past the Chapel of Ease.

“This good enough? Look there are cars every ten feet full of drunks and lovers. This place fills up on Halloween so let’s just stop and grab a beer out the back.” John nodded and grabbed two, both for himself, and sat on the hood of the truck. The sun was just setting and the fog rolled in like a shroud over the coffin of the deceased.

When he first saw it coming down the road Cutter told the local constable, “The Light looks like a car’s headlight but with one lamp burned out, but as it comes closer, I could swear it was bigger but dimmer than any headlight.

“The Light has an oval shape and had a hue between yellow and pale orange. I swear it was coming right at us. It was about 10 or 12 feet in diameter and glowing a soft yellow in the foggy night. I braced for what I expected to come next, but it stopped. The light just stopped and bounced up and down on the car that was two vehicles down from us. Then it disappeared.”

Fear gripped Cutter as the light vanished in the mist and fog and a light steady rain started to fall. John was laughing hysterically at the sight and yelling like a banshee. As quickly as the light disappeared it reappeared at the end of the two and a half mile stretch of flat road, bouncing up and down like a football player warming up for the kickoff.

The rumble of car engines was thundering above the fog as head lamps came on sporadically. A formation of sorts was formed as car after car peeled out and sped away from the approaching light. Now John was standing in the middle of the road waving a beer and screaming for the ghost to come get him.

Cutter jumped in the old Dodge, fired up the engine and beseeched his military buddy to climb in as the light grew bigger as it approached the duo. Car after car was speeding by, mostly full of Marines from nearby Beaufort and all of them drunk and rowdy hanging out the windows and shouting epithets at the ghost.

With a last great gasp and deep throated bark, Cutter managed to get John into the bed of the truck and told him to hang on tight. The old flathead eight lurched onto the road and coughed a cloud of smoke and oil as the now panicked Marine floored his old Dodge up Land’s End Road. Cutter could see the yellow glow of the orb right behind him, coming fast. He had to get to the chapel. The chapel was sanctuary. The chapel meant they were free. One quarter mile from the chapel Cutter glanced one more time in the mirror. To his horror the light was in the bed of his truck. With a mighty push of his right foot, Cutter stomped the accelerator and swallowed hard. There it was, the chapel. And with a deep sigh of relief the old Dodge roared past.

Just before reaching the chapel Cutter heard John’s very distinctive voice crying in what sounded like a kitten being smothered by its mother. That was the last sound Cutter would hear for the next ten miles as he sped up Sea Island Parkway past Lady’s Island, finally coming to rest at the junction of 802 and 21. He pulled over at the side of the road and gasped and swore to himself. “What the heck you afraid of, Marine?” Then he had laughed just enough to try and fortify his courage; when he remembered John and bolted from the truck. “That was somethin’ huh? Hey where ya? Don’t do hidin’ on me pal. Where are ya?” John was nowhere to be seen. “Oh my, what have I done? I gotta find him.”

Cutter spent the rest of the night and into the morning driving up and down the stretch of road between 802 and the Chapel. It was known the ghost would never pass the church so Cutter knew he was safe to that point. As the morning sun burned off the fog and life returned to normal, Cutter drove up and down Land's End Road looking for the lost soul from Muncie, Indiana. It doesn't take long to drive 2.8 miles up and down a dozen times. By now Cutter was absolutely petrified that the ghost had taken John and that Cutter would be held responsible. With a long face and trepidation he drove the six and one half hours back to Cherry Point. During his drive the sight of the yellow light settling into the back of his truck flashed in and out of his already fried brain pan. The mewing sound John had made filled his now depleted mind with sorrow. *If only, if only*, kept playing like a broken record in his thoughts.

Cutter reported immediately to the Sergeant of the Guard and recorded John's disappearance. A subsequent inquiry absolved Cutter of any responsibility as it was thought Cutter has been way too drunk to have seen what he said he did and that an eye witness had placed his buddy at the local pub on the night in question. Since there was no sign of foul play, no blood or torn clothing, the brass had decided there was no crime committed by Cutter, and John was deemed to be AWOL, (absent without leave).

Cutter was sent to building eight, room 306 where the resident psychologist determined he was fit to return to duty. And two weeks later he mysteriously received orders for Vietnam.

Eventually Cutter's conscious thoughts of John and Muncie, Indiana faded as denim does in the wash. Every Halloween, however, the memories rob him of sleep and a tinge of fear creeps under his skin as a cold sweat forms on his brow.

So never underestimate the power of the light. It could haunt you too.

#### *Epilogue:*

Eight months later Cutter was enjoying an adult beverage in Iwakuni Japan when the door opened and John strolled in like he had been there the whole time. Needless to say the two talked about his AWOL status and the time he spent in the brig before consuming far too much sake.

It turns out John had indeed jumped from the truck and headed home but first he had stopped at a pub outside Cherry Point in an effort to kind of thumb his nose at the Corps. The eyewitness had actually seen John that next day while Cutter was recklessly driving up and down Land's End Road. He was picked up a few weeks later by the local PD who then turned him over to the Marines. And so it goes.

The Legend Continues:

One woman said that her hair grew stiff and made crackling noises as the Land's End Light passed her car. She felt that the Light put out an electric charge. Others would suggest a supernatural influence. In fact, a large share of eyewitnesses agree that the Light is a ghost. Where there is no agreement, however, is on the identity of the ghost. No less than *five* ghost tales center on the phenomenon:

The Light may be the lantern of a Confederate soldier who was on patrol along Land's End Road in November of 1861, on watch for Union soldiers who were expected to invade St. Helena Island. Some say the sentry's post was Bermuda Bluff, according to Land's End resident Kelly Brown. A Yankee soldier (or soldiers) sneaked up behind him and cut off his head with a long knife, tossing the head into the waters of Port Royal Sound - the body was left ashore to rot. The poor soul now goes up and down the road in search of his head, carrying his old iron lantern. "People

around here really believe in that fella without the head," Mosse Road resident Troy Beaman told Dave Hendricks (again in the *Beaufort Gazette*.)

On the other hand, the Land's End Light could be a *Union* soldier beheaded after the Federal forces occupied St. Helena Island in 1861.

A few months before October 2000, Land's End resident Kelly Brown herself saw three ghosts in uniform leaning on their rifles around a campfire near Ft. Fremont.

The Light is said to be the spirit of an unhappy slave who was sold to an owner far away from the Island. He now haunts the land he was forced to leave, searching for the wife he left behind.

The Light may be a fairly "young" ghost, the spirit of a soldier from Fort Fremont killed in a fight around 1910 ([Pvt. Frank J. Quigley](#)). *The Beaufort Gazette* of May 2, 1910 reported that six artillerymen were wounded in a brawl with local civilians. One of them died soon afterwards.

Charles LeBold of Hilton Head Island recalls a version of the "Frogmore Lights" story from his Marine Corps days on the Beaufort Air Station from 1968-1969. This account differs from most others in that it involves two lights (ghostly headlights) instead of just one ball of light. Mr. LeBold recalls hearing about a certain oak tree on St. Helena Island. "where many years prior a schoolbus load of children ran off the road and hit the tree with the loss of many young lives. The story was, if you sat under that tree, on a certain full moon night, you would see headlights come down the road, see them leave the road and hear the screams of the children." Mr. LeBold tried a number of times to find the tree and to encounter "the Lights", without success.

Other witnesses are less willing to see mysterious forces at work at Land's End. Some claim that the "Light" is nothing more than marsh gas or swampfire. This *ignis fatuus* is methane gas in spontaneous combustion. Opponents to this theory say that the Land's End Light is a dim light of stable color, unlike the rolling, blazing spheres of swampfire with their changing colors. They add that swampfire has no recurring pattern (the Land's End Light is always seen along the same stretch of highway) and needs considerable time for enough methane to build up to feed its fire (while some say the Light on St. Helena Island appears every night).

In the early 1970s, researchers from Duke University came to St. Helena Island to study the phenomenon firsthand. A participant in the study, Catherine Wooley, published an explanation in 1973. She stated that along "ten perfectly straight miles of road", the headlight beams of a car coming on far in the distance would appear to be a single, stationary sphere of light. Wooley attributed the quirky appearances and disappearances of the Land's End Light to dips and hollows along the length of the road: the light beam would be in motion, after all, although the distance gave the illusion of motionlessness.

Local historian Gerhard Spieler based two objections to Catherine Wooley's conclusions on his personal observation of the Land's End Road:

"The straight stretch of road consists not of 10 miles, but of 2.8 miles."

"There are no dips or hollows in the road, there is not even one dip."

So the Land's End Light remains a mystery ... and a local attraction for skeptics and believers alike. (*The above from **The Land's End Light**, author unknown*).

*The End*

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*We hope you have enjoyed this anthology of stories. You can find out more about all the contributors and their other books below.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Helen Alexander is a writer and digital artist living in San Francisco, California. After graduating from the Academy of Art University, Helen worked as a video game artist in San Diego and Los Angeles. Currently she is back in San Francisco, at work on several new projects, including a comic book, a children's book and a dark fantasy/horror novel. You can visit Helen at [helenalexander.weebly.com](http://helenalexander.weebly.com) for updates, interviews and previews of new stories and works in progress. Her short story “*The Ugly Princess*” appeared in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Glodwyn’s Treasure Chest*.

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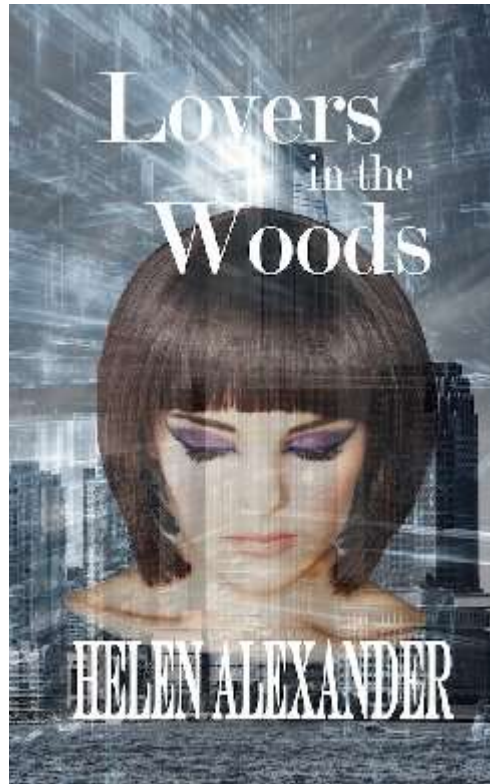
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Reviews of ***Lovers In The Woods***:

*"...a mind-trip of the best kind. If you like unpredictable fiction with a twist, you will love this book."*

*"Helen Alexander's *Lovers in the Woods*, is an inventive and imaginative science fiction novel, set in the futuristic landscape of Metrodom. Many of its inhabitants are drones, Dolls, or other creatures having odd appearances with tentacles and wings. In spite of their unique features, they act and socialize like humans. [...] The themes of the book raise questions about identity, humanity, life, and responsibility. Although many of the characters are not human beings in our current understanding, they have the same motivations and goals that we do."*

*---[Fantascize.com](http://Fantascize.com)*



Reviews of *Otherplanet*:

*"...an intriguing story which left me wanting more. [...] Clever and imaginative..."*

*"This story moves at a brisk pace, but it keeps your attention quite well. It is complex, yet easy to follow. I certainly will not spoil anything for you, but the end has an interesting twist."*



Reviews of *Robot Planet: A Story for James W.*

*"It reminded me of some of the great Isaac Asimov's stories, where things are sort of backwards, if that isn't too much of a spoiler! [...] a nice introduction to the genre for the younger reader, avoiding cliché-ridden myth and magic and presenting a story from an unusual angle. [...] A definite five stars."*

---Goodreads reviewer



The Adventures of Mike & EZ  
(a web comic based on the Sci Fi novel  
*Lovers In The Woods*)

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### [John L. D. Barnett](#)



John L. D. Barnett served with the 24th Royal Artillery Missile Regiment in Germany, and then transferred to the Royal Military Police, serving in Germany, the Middle East and Hong Kong. Later he worked as Chief Security Officer for the King of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. Arriving back in England in the early 70s, he sailed and worked on the Grimsby fishing trawlers as a 2nd Engineer, when the Cod Wars with Iceland were at their peak. He has been happily married to his wife June for 35 years, having raised two boys who now have children of their own.

After successful spells as an HGV Class 1 Petroleum Tanker Driver for Burmah Castrol, and Driver Foreman for Q8 Petroleum and successful property developer, he took up writing and illustrating books in his spare time and has so far completed twenty books. He is a canoe and Judo Club instructor.

He is the author of *The Sea is My Grave*, the Biography of his father Bill, who experienced the sinister events forming the account in *A Haunting War* above, along with two volumes of autobiography, *Yorkshire Rebel*, and *No Pain No Gain*.

John is also the author and illustrator of the *Friz the Bee* series and *The Cloggs*, published by Crimson Cloak Publishing, and illustrator of *The Legend of Tim Turpin* (written by Peter Bernfeld and published by Crimson Cloak Publishing).

In addition he has illustrated the following books written by Molly Hill, published by Sarah Book Publishing, USA:

*If I Were a Crocodile*

*If I Were a Mermaid*  
*If I Were a Fly*  
*If I Were a Dog*  
*If I Were a Skunk*  
*If I Were a Super Hero*  
*If I Were a Giant*  
*If I Were a Dinosaur*  
*If I Were a Butterfly*  
*If I Were Invisible*

As well as

*Terrific Tales of Trembling Tim the Two Tone Tiger* by Peter Bernfeld,  
And *Bucky Berrott*, written by George E. Lander, published by Sarah Book  
Publishing, USA.

<http://johnbarnett590.wix.com/johns-new-web-site>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/John-L-D-Barnett/659436580826839>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/johnldbarnett>

<http://author.to/JohnLDBarnett> (Amazon author page)

Books by John L. D. Barnett:

John is the author of the *Friz the Bee* series, published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.

<http://crimsoncloakpublishing.com>



*The Bee family members Grandad and Grandma Bee, their son, Fred Bee, his wife Honey Bee, and their six children, Friz, Bud, Bluebell, the twins Rose and Tulip, and last but not least, Baby Beni, all live in the Bee Hive at the edge of Willow Woods. Friz Bee is the eldest son and a Worker Bee who gets up to all sorts of mischief and finds himself in hot water on more than one occasion.*

Releasing soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing:

*Bertie the Barge*  
*The Adventures of Poppy the Dog*  
*The Bee Royal Wedding (Friz the Bee series)*  
*Royal Bee Honeymoon (Friz the Bee series)*  
*The Royal Twins (Friz the Bee series)*

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## [Peter N. Bernfeld](#)



Peter is an ex helicopter pilot, ex airline pilot, ex-restauranteur, and ex-hypnotherapist. He is the author of various sci-fi and historical fiction. He has lived all over the world and now lives in Andover, UK.

<http://peterbernfeld.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/peter.bernfeld>

<https://twitter.com/PeterBernfeld>

<http://blog.mailasail.com/troutbridge>

<https://uk.linkedin.com/pub/peter-bernfeld/2b/97a/a8>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/peterbernfeld>

<http://author.to/peterbernfeld> (Amazon author page)





*The Legend of Tim Turpin*, Crimson Cloak Publishing  
Peter N Bernfeld's clever tongue-in-cheek story of the famous thieving duo of tiger and horse will delight children and adults alike. It is amusingly illustrated throughout by John L D Barnett.

Also by Peter N. Bernfeld:

*Afterdeath: A Barnikel and Fearnaught Occult Detective Thriller, Volume 1*

*Jogger in Black: Volume 2*

*Sing A Song of Saturn*

*Karno's Casebook*

*Kitty Cracks Case (Karno Book 1)*

*Polly Picked the Pistol Up (Karno Book 2)*

*The Kaieteur Caper (Karno Book 4)*

*The Poisoned Pastie (book 5)*

*Eliezer's Journey*

*Eliezer's Return*

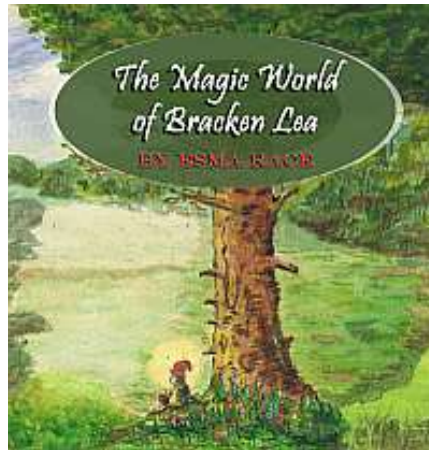
*The Mysterious Dr. LeMesurier*

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## [Veronica Castle](#)

Veronica Castle lives in the High Pennines of northern England. She is the illustrator of *The Magic World of Bracken Lea* by [Esma Race](#), and *Little Bear's Trial* by Roger Bone, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*Links to more information:*

<http://crimsoncloakpublishing.com/veronica-castle.html>

<http://raceesma.wix.com/esma-race#!veronica-castle/c1tpe>

<http://www.farcourt.co.uk/ge/zentangle.html>

<https://www.facebook.com/esmarace>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/veronicacastle>

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## Janice Lewis Clark



Bio: Janice Clark lives in the Pacific Northwest, where the morning fog drifting over the coastal hills could easily conceal dragons or any number of magical creatures. She and her brother share a home on partially wooded acreage, frequented by a variety of birds, deer, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, the neighbor's free-range chickens, and several cats who hunt the area. She does not currently own (or is not owned by) a cat or any other four-footed being. Frequently-resident grandchildren and a large garden are sufficient to occupy any time not taken up by writing. Her short stories "The Dragon Said Moo", "A Slip In Time", and "The Courtship of Gladys Pierson" appeared respectively in Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Glodwyn's Treasure Chest*, *Steps In Time*, and *Love Matters*.

Other publications include:

Fairy Gold (novelet prequel to Apprentice Healer series)

Molly the Beekeeper's Daughter and other stories (short story collection)

A Different Kind of Hero and other stories (short story collection)

A Brave Doll (picture book—free on website)

A Home Where God Lives: Discovering His Blessings [with Anita Donihue]

(Christian /inspirational collection of prayers, poems, stories and essays exploring different types and aspects of "home")

<http://www.janiceclark.net>

<http://www.teawiththeblackdragon.blogspot.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/PrincessButtermilkBiscuit>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/JanClark>

### **The Hall of Doors series:**

*Book one, **The Mountains of the Moon**: Sammy's worried. Her cat has disappeared again. No one knows where Princess Buttermilk Biscuit goes on full-moon nights. Will she come back this time?*

*When Sammy follows her cat up a moonbeam to a world of mist and moonlight, she meets Selena, who lives in a beautiful fairy-tale castle. Sammy is fascinated by the Hall of Doors with its magical portals to other worlds. But the dreamlike adventure turns into a nightmare when Sammy is faced with the hardest decision of her life. Will she have the courage to make the right choice?*

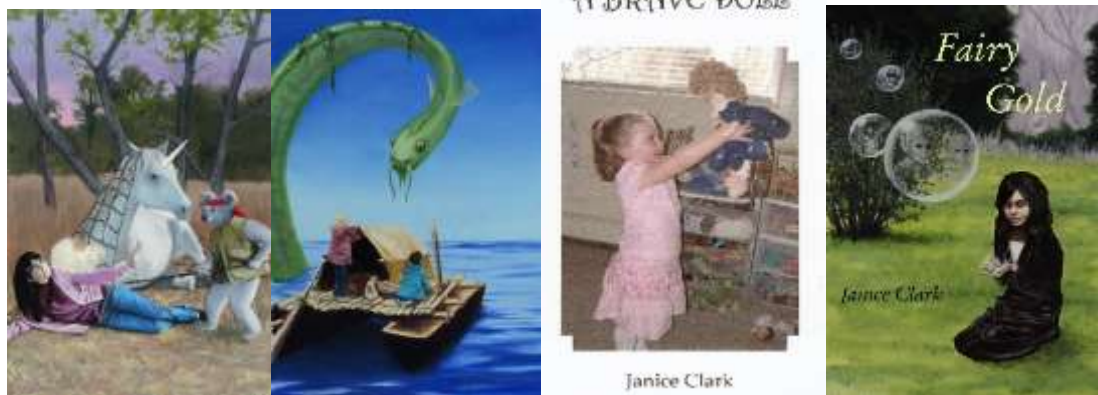
*Book two, **The Door in the Sky***



*Book three, **The Mirror Door***

*Book four, **The Secret Door***

*Book five, **The Water Door***



***Fairy Gold** This is a “prequel” to the story of Teeka, Angelina’s daughter, in the **Apprentice Healer** series. The first chapter of **To Heal a Broken Planet** is included. Publication of that novel, and its sequel, **Into the Unknown**, is pending.*

***A Brave Doll***

Other free materials on the website include “extra scenes” for the first three Hall of Doors books and an assortment of short material.

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## Mark Conte



Mark Randolph Conte has published fiction, poetry, articles, interviews and Guest Columns in 67 publications including Yankee, Crazy Horse, Potomac Review, Washington Post, Miami Herald, Philadelphia Daily News, Tallahassee Democrat, New York Arts Journal, Northwest Florida Daily News, Southern Poetry Review, Poetry International, Poet, Devil's Millhopper, Apalachee Quarterly, Snake Nation, Poem, and others. He was Director of the Florida State University Poet Series, and was appointed Master Poet for the Poet in the Schools program by the Florida Arts Council and Assistant Director of the Center for Participant Education. He is a member of the Authors' Guild & Academy of American Poets. He won honorable mention in the PEN American awards in short fiction in 1979, first prize in poetry in the Barbwire Theater awards and the Packard Poetry Award. His story *Fall Semester* appeared in *Steps In Time*, volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, and *Magic* in volume 3 *Love Matters*.

[www.markrconte.com](http://www.markrconte.com)

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/fictionguy>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mark-Conte-Author/384349038434670>

On Twitter: [@proseman](https://twitter.com/proseman)

*Walking on Water*, Cross Cultural Press

*In the Arms of Strangers*, Gaius press

*Of Flesh and Stone*, Aberdeen Press

*The Ghost*, Solstice

Anthologies:

*Florida in Poetry*, Pineapple Press, 1995

*In The West of Ireland*, Enright House, 1992

*A Friend of the family*

*The Easter Lamb*, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*In the Vianello family a lamb is bought on Good Friday, fattened up all day Friday and Saturday, and slaughtered Saturday night to be cooked for Easter dinner. But this year, the three Vianello boys, Dante, Johnny and Carlo, along with the Irish girl next door, become fond of the lamb, which they have named Delilah, and devise a daring plan to rescue it from this fate. An amusing and inspiring family story for all ages.*

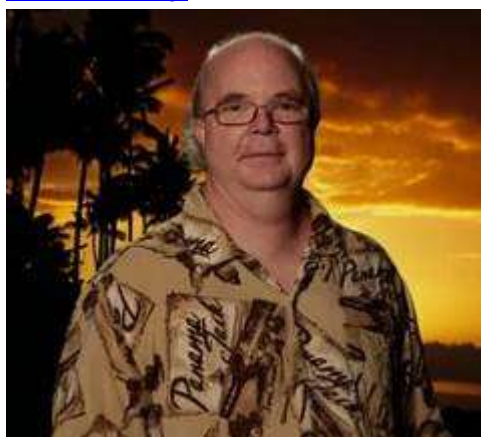
Five Star Review from *Reader's Favorite*: "an inspiring story of love and kindness ... heartwarming"

Four-out-of-Four Star Review from *Online Book Club*: "... light-hearted with abundant humor ... I loved both the story and its characters..."

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## [T W Embry](#)



Todd was in culinary school doing an essay for the English portion of his AA degree. After finishing his assignment in a scant 20 minutes, the professor looked at his work, then asked him: "How many books have you written?" Todd had forgotten the young boy who used to write ghost stories to scare his grandmother. Later, he met an author who was giving a lecture at the local library and thought that would be a

cool thing to do. Remembering the words of Professor Wolfson in culinary school, he sat down at the computer and started what would become *Revenge from Mars*, his first novel, soon to be re-released by Crimson Cloak Publishing. His short story “*The Man Who Created Himself*” appeared in Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Steps In Time*. He is currently working on his book *Ravings of a Bi-Polar Mind*.

Todd’s book *Alien Manifesto* is published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.



**Synopsis:** *When orphaned ex-Navy S.E.A.L. Thomas Scott decides upon a life of crime, he does not expect to be recruited to join an elite Special Forces operation charged with stealing an alien artifact. Especially a mixed-species alien team headed by inter-galactic billionaire Snarth. The close-knit team soon becomes Tom's family in more senses than one, which complicates matters when the mysterious artifact turns out to hold secrets that may plunge the whole of the known universe into a devastating war ... Sequel *Earth's Mirror* to be published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.*

<http://twembry.com/>

<http://marielavender.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/interview-with-author-tw-embry.html>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/twembry0>

<http://author.to/twembry> (Amazon author page)

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## [Anthony J. Gerst](#)



Anthony resides near the confluence of the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers, in the stomping grounds of Aldo Leopold and Chief Black Hawk. At an early age he began contributing letters to the editor to the Burlington Hawk Eye and he has been printed in several states and in various publications around the globe. His area of interest shifted in 2000 from being a political activist to an avid environmental writer. He has contributed to Planet Save, Oped.news and boomer warrior among other sites. His first novel, "*The HAARP Letters (A Climate Changing Reality,*" is scheduled for release in January 2016 by Crimson Cloak Publishing. Set mid-century, the story begins in Alaska at a doomsday shelter after an abrupt climate changing event called Big Thunder has occurred.



<https://www.facebook.com/climatesociologyseries>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/climatewriter>

[http://anton316.wix.com/authors-page?\\_ga=1.88649371.1843511092.1434117868](http://anton316.wix.com/authors-page?_ga=1.88649371.1843511092.1434117868)

Also by Anthony J. Gerst:

"*Ghosts of the Erie Canal,*" published in 2005 by Quixote Press. A collection of short stories focusing on historical events that are both entertaining and educational.

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## Esma Race



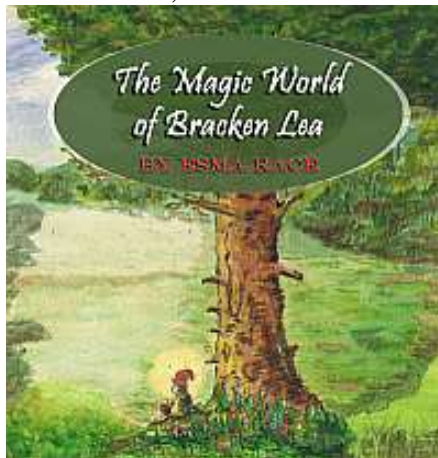
Esma Race was born and raised in the small Cheshire village of Weaverham. She has a great love for the natural world, and has always been able to sense the nature spirits which feature in her Bracken Lea stories. She is very interested in natural healing, and is a practising reflexologist in the North of England, where she now lives with Geoff, her husband of 45 years. She is a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and enjoys reading, walking, travelling, gardening, and English history.

Her short story “*Horrid Rex Bites the Dust*” appeared in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies *Glodwyn’s Treasure Chest*; “*The Eternal City*” was in Volume 2, *Steps In Time*, and “*The Search*” appeared in Volume 3, *Love Matters*.

She is the author of:

*The Traveller* (short story),

*The Magic World of Bracken Lea*, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*"Discovering the Magic World of Bracken Lea was a treat"*

*--Long and Short Reviewer*

*" ... adorable ... After two stories I was hooked."*

*--OnlineBookClub Reviewer*

<http://www.esmarace.co.uk>

<https://www.facebook.com/esmarace>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/esmarace>

[https://twitter.com/Esma\\_Race](https://twitter.com/Esma_Race)

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma\\_Race](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma_Race)

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/esmarace>

<http://author.to/esmarace> (Amazon author page)

Synopsis of ***The Magic World of Bracken Lea:***

*A series of short stories featuring the Fairy Folk of Bracken Lea Wood: a tale of Nature Spirits for humans of all ages.*

*Welcome to the magic world of GLODWYN the Gnome. His friends include other gnomes, flower fairies, a Twisted Tree, Astrid the Fairy Queen, and the birds and animals who also live in the wood.*

*Glodwyn the gnome is a bit of a rebel. He lives and works in the ancient woodland. He is unusual amongst the Fairy Folk in enjoying the company of humans. His good-natured interest in their world seen through the eyes of his unknowing "friend", Walter the Stacker Truck Driver at the local factory, leads him to interfere in their affairs, with interesting results both for the Fairy Folk and humans. With his help, the Fairy Folk rescue a little boy from drowning, save the life of an injured cat and later that of a confused old lady who collapses in the Wood.*

*The Fairy Folk raise the alarm when a baby's mother is taken ill, and later prevent disaster at the baby's Christening, when a bad fairy threatens the child's happiness. They help a Leprechaun find his way home, and get a lost engagement ring back to its owner. Both unwitting humans and Fairy Folk work together to save nearby woodland from development. From arranging a litter-pick in the woods to finding a new wand for the Fairy Queen, it is a busy life for the Fairy Folk.*

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**Patrick M Shanahan**



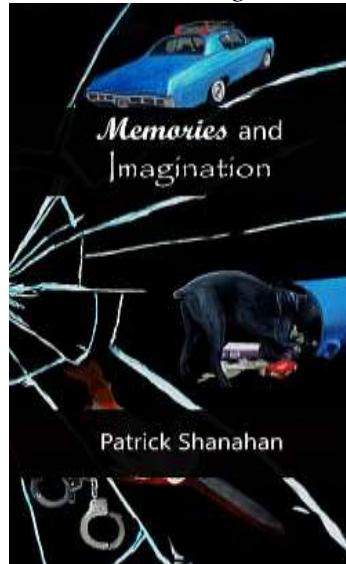
The second oldest of thirteen children born to Irish Catholic parents, Patrick grew up in Chicago. His works include human interest pieces, children's stories, short stories and three full length novels. His favorite genre is crime fiction. His articles and short stories have appeared in various newsletters, newspapers, and national magazines for the past eight years. His short story "Mr. Ghost Man" appeared in the third Crimson Cloak anthology, ***Love Matters***.

<http://www.paperbkwriter.wix.com/patrick-shanahan>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/PATRICKshanahan>

By Patrick Shanahan:

*Memories and Imagination*, Shanahan's fourth book, is a collection of fast-paced tales that includes cold case detective dramas full of unexpected (though plausible) twists and turns alongside warm-hearted stories about lost love found, as well as playful snapshots of daily life, reminiscences, and chance encounters. An entertaining mixture of intriguing stories, from cold case enquiries to snapshots of daily life, reminiscences and chance encounters: there is something for everyone in this thoughtful book. From Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*Terror on Home Soil*  
*The Justice Club*

Author of numerous human interest stories in DRG owned national magazines. Currently writing columns for Moberly Monitor Index, Moberly, Missouri and The Home Press Macon, Missouri. Interviewed and written over 100 military veterans' stories appearing in Loc Haven Nursing Home (Macon, Mo.) annual Veterans' Salute.

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## Travis I. Sivart



Travis I. Sivart writes steampunk, social DIY, science fiction, medieval fantasy, young adult, speculative fiction, horror, poetry, and more. He has published short stories in more than a dozen anthologies, full length novels, as well as editorials on manners, pipe smoking, and medieval re-enactment. He is a father, public speaker, cook, pipe smoker, cat & squirrel lover. Find him on Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, and other major online retailers, or at his website at <http://TravisISivart.com> .  
<http://www.twitter.com/TravisISivart>  
<http://www.facebook.com/TravisISivart>  
<https://plus.google.com/+TravisISivartStoryteller>  
<http://www.pinterest.com/travisivart>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/visatr>  
<http://author.to/travissivart> (Amazon author page)

Also by Travis:

*Aetheric Elements: The Rise of a Steampunk Reality Steampunk For Simpletons 27 Thoughts on Enjoying Life* (Free on B&N, Smashwords, etc) *Journal of a Stranger* and the upcoming full length epic fantasy, *The Downfall: Harbinger*

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## Wesley Tallant



The son of a WW II disabled veteran, Wesley Tallant is himself an ex-Navy veteran of the Viet Nam era. He has a wife of 41 years and three grown boys, and lives in Blossom, Texas. Retired after 24 years with the Paris Texas Fire Department, he now writes full time. He is the author of *Mr Sparks, the Firehouse Dog*, a children's short story in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *The Road*, in Volume 2, and the poem "*Crackers*" in Volume 3, as well as the following books from **Crimson Cloak Publishing**.

<http://wttallant.wix.com/wesleytallant>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Wesley-Tallants-Author-Page/484791544922209?fref=ts>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/wesley-tallant/55/2a8/704>

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/wesleytallant>

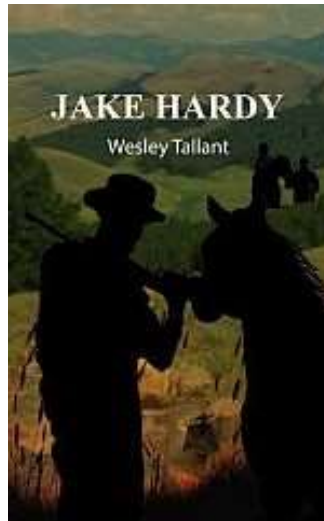
*The Wishing Elf* (children's)



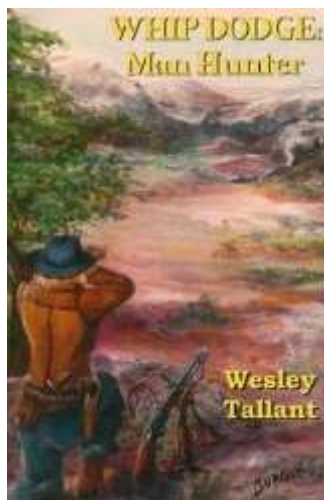
*Little Big Toe* (children's)



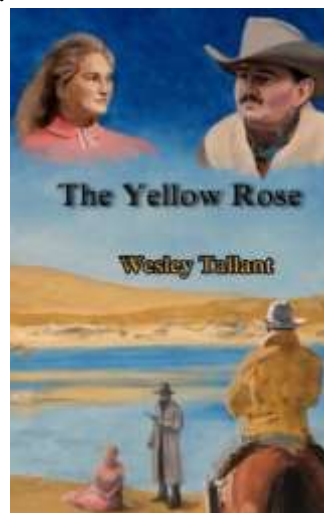
*Jake Hardy*



*Whip Dodge: Man Hunter*



*The Yellow Rose*, + synopsis:



*In 1886, Bexar County rancher Mike Callahan goes for his yearly pilgrimage to honor the father he lost in the battle of the Alamo. While he is there on the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Alamo, his wife Rose is kidnapped. He leads a posse of men, including the county sheriff, in an attempt to rescue her. He is killed but questions soon arise as to who shot him. Intrigue and family betrayal follow Rose as*

*she and her foreman, Dusty Hayes, strive to keep the ranch that Mike named after her, running.*

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## [Sean Tate](#)



Sean Tate lives in Ireland, and is currently studying English and Linguistics in UCD. He writes and reviews for The Looking Glass Magazine <http://www.tlgmagazine.org/sean-tate.html>. His short story 'Nine Lives' was published in the latest issue of the magazine: <http://www.tlgmagazine.org/view-volume-four-issue-one.html>. He also reviews for Inis Magazine: <http://www.d1168095.cp.blacknight.com/taxonomy/term/744/all>. He is currently working on his first novel, *The Wedlock Abductions*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century paranormal thriller.

<https://baldmanfacts.wordpress.com>  
<http://baldmanproblems.com/>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/BaldMan>

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## Barbara Weitzner



Originally from New York, Barbara lives in Delray Beach, Florida. For many years she has published articles in a South Florida magazine, and in *New England Writer's Magazine*. Her play, *Robbie Von Hooten Is A Jerk* was read to an audience at Sugar Sand Park, 2010 in Boca Raton, Florida. *An American Christmas* received honorable mention in the 2006 La Belle Lettres short story contest. Her short story "Apartment 5B" appeared in Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Steps In Time*.

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/barbara-weitzner/56/841/140>

<https://www.facebook.com/barbara.weitzner>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/barlon22>

<http://author.to/barbaraweitzner> (Amazon author page)

Books by Barbara Weitzner:

*A New Start*

*The Parradine Allure*

*Choices*

*The Most Glorious Thing Ever*

*Choices*, an anthology of short stories, available on *E-books*

Short Stories: *Please Wake Up* was published in Soundings Magazine; *First Love*, appeared in Gemini Magazine; and the article *Never too Late* appeared in Southern Writing.

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## Gary Winstead



Gary Winstead, the youngest of eleven children, was born in 1948 and grew up in Pontiac, Illinois, an obscure farm town in the middle of the Illinois Corn Belt. At the age of eighteen, he joined the United States Marine Corps and served for four years, rising to the rank of corporal (E-4) before earning his honorable discharge. He went on to receive a bachelor's degree in physical education, a master's in educational administration from California State University, Fullerton and a PhD in Veterinary Science. He has been married to Faye, the love of his life, for forty-five years and has three stepchildren, all grown, and four grandchildren. He is the author of **So You Want to be a Marine**, the short story *Diablo Blanco* in the second Crimson Cloak Anthology **Steps In Time**, and is the award-winning director of a short film adapted from his story *The Pony No-one Could Ride* which appeared in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies. He is currently working on *Riding through life with Love by my Side: "A Story of a Cowboy and His Wife's journey Through Alzheimer's"*.

<http://savingliteracy.blogspot.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/winsteadgary>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/371850629606243/>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/winsteadgrw>

<http://author.to/garywinstead> (Amazon author page)

***So You Want to be A Marine***, autobiography



*The Marine Corps immortalized by Hollywood hardly resembles the dysfunctional organization I joined in 1967, just as the Vietnam War was heating up. Incompetence, arrogance, sadism—all was rampant from the top down in an indifferent hierarchy that rewarded obedience over competence and sycophancy over truth-telling.*

*Like so many other Marines, I joined the corps because I had few choices available to me. As the youngest of eleven children, all of us living in poverty in rural Illinois, and as someone who had lived his whole life intimate with deprivation and hardship, I had few paths available to me.*

*I was surrounded by characters—outsized individuals with larger-than-life personalities, colorful ticks, and perplexing complexes.*

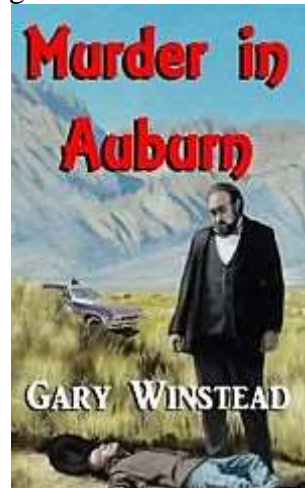
*There was the lance corporal from Pittsburg who liked to call himself Pitt. Rail thin; with a neck like a turkey's to support his oversized head, he owned a crooked set of teeth that had yellowed from tobacco smoke. He had a quirky habit of sprinkling his cigarette ashes into whatever he was drinking at the time and then chugging it*



*down, all in order to attain a more perfect high. Pitt, as I learned during my first night in Vietnam, was all about getting high, even while manning a checkpoint as an MP.*

*So it was that I endured four years of indifferent and sometimes sadistic leadership, the absurdities inherent in any impersonal hierarchy that values group-think and obedience over individuality and integrity.*

From Crimson Cloak Publishing:



Detective Novel *Murder in Auburn*

Part of the new Crimson Shorts short story range:

*A Dream Come True*

*The Chukar Fiasco*

*Kippy*

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## World Child Cancer



### **Treating children with cancer worldwide.**

Put simply, we treat children with cancer not fortunate enough to live in the developed world. And where treatment isn't possible, we provide effective pain relief.

How do we do this? We partner our network of international hospitals and volunteer specialists with teams on the ground. The great thing about this is: not only do we provide access to expert treatment; we also help build local knowledge. Each project is funded for a minimum of 5 years during which time plans for the long term sustainability of the project are put in place.



We work in Central America, Ghana, Cameroon, Malawi, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Philippines, and a collaborative Wilms Tumor Project to improve kidney cancer across Africa. Please get in touch by emailing LeAnn at [leann.fickes@worldchildcancer.us](mailto:leann.fickes@worldchildcancer.us) , if you'd like more information on our projects.

<http://worldchildcancer.us/>  
<https://twitter.com/WChildCancerUSA>  
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*Pictures courtesy of World Child Cancer*

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### [Knit a chemo cap](#)



If you know someone who might lose their hair after chemotherapy, try knitting them a chemo-cap in soft cotton yarn to wear after treatment. The scalp can be rendered tender, so a soft natural fibre is best. This pattern is given in three sizes for children and adults. For a boy or man, you could knit the ribbing plain (without the twist stitch shown). The caps may be adorned with a fabric badge representing the recipient's favorite sports team or other interest, or with ribbons or knitted fancies such as the **crocheted flowers and bumble bee** shown. The pattern for the flowers and bee can be found on the Crimson Cloak website for free download:

<http://crimsoncloakpublishing.com/knitting-crochet.html>

Small size: 12", stretches to 16"



Medium size: 14", stretches to 20"

Large size: 18", stretches to 24"

**Instructions:**

First, choose a nice soft yarn for your project, and knit a sample square to check gauge/tension. The yarn shown was an unbranded cotton: such a yarn may be prone to shrinkage so you may wish to pre-wash the yarn to avoid excessive shrinkage later on. My knitted tension square showed that this yarn knitted at 5.5 rows and 3.3 stitches to the inch (2.5cm) on 5 mm needles.

Next, if you can, measure the circumference of the recipient's head. Cotton doesn't have much stretch but with the ribbing the largest hat was 18" inches round when relaxed and easily stretched to over 22", so would accommodate a reasonable range of adult sizes. Remember that the cap shouldn't be loose, as the sufferer will have no hair to prevent it sliding off.



Cast on using the thumb-and-tail method, which is stretchier.

Start with 64/56/stitches, proceed in K2 P2 rib for 2 rows.

\*Next row TWIST STITCH ALL THE KNIT STITCHES to form "mock cables" (knit 2<sup>nd</sup> stitch from left needle, do not pull off needle but knit first stitch on that needle and pull both off together), and purl the purl stitches.

K2 P2 for three more rows \*\* then repeat from \* to \*\* until the work measures 5".

Change to stocking (stockinette) stitch and continue for another 1.5 inch or 1 inch respectively for the larger two sizes. For the smallest size go straight to the next step.

Next step: K2, K2tog to end.

SS 3 rows.

K1, K2tog to end

Purl one row

K2tog to end

Next row: P2tog to end.

Cut yarn leaving a tail for sewing up, thread tail through all remaining stitches and pull tight.

Sew up and decorate as desired.

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*We hope you have enjoyed this book. To find out about other Crimson Cloak anthologies, please visit the Crimson Cloak Publishing website.*  
<http://www.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/>

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