

The background of the cover is a photograph of a rustic wooden wall made of horizontal planks. A broom with a long, thin handle and a bundle of straw at the bottom leans against the wall. The floor in the foreground is made of dark, weathered wooden planks.

Worshday
&
Other Tales

John W. Cowart



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&
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Bluefish Books



**Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida**

www.bluefishbooks.info

A WORSHDAY & OTHER TALES.
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To Ginny



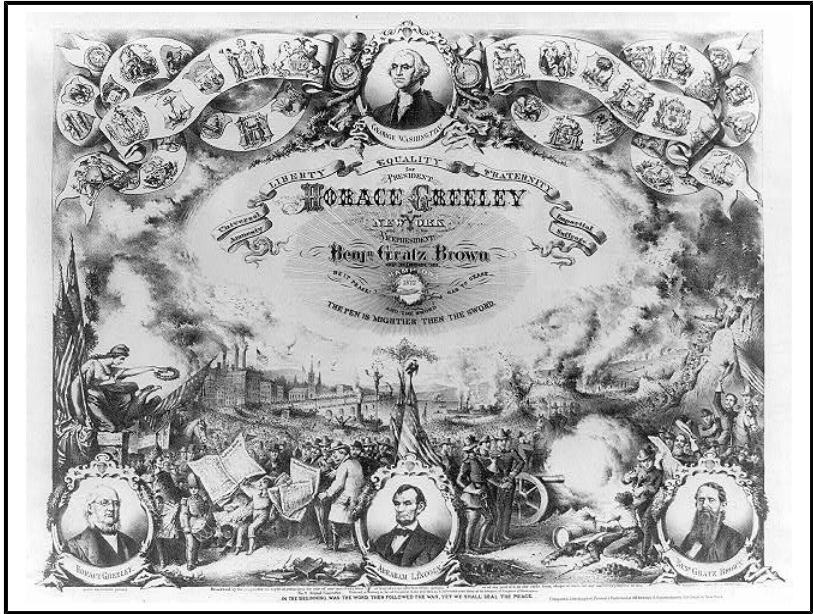
You are the Muse who makes my story happy.

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WORSHDAY ¹



Leonard Barrs grumbled about the election as he cleaned his guns, two pistols, a Macon G&G (Griswold and Gunnison) six-shot cap and ball, and a 36 caliber black-powder Navy, the kind with the octagon barrel.

He'd also carry his rifle just for show; shot for the old Enfield Musketoon was hard to come by and he had none. With his 18-inch double-edged Bowie Knife in his belt, this show of weapons ought to get him to the courthouse well enough to vote.

While he fiddled with those damn guns, Effie Barrs whittled slivers of a lye soap bar into a lap pan at the kitchen trellis table. While the menfolk rode off

¹ Worshday was the first story I wrote. My grandmother said it really happened to her grandmother back during Reconstruction days.



to vote (and most likely gulp, gossip and grouse about That Bastard Grant at the Falstaff across Courthouse Square) she had chores to do.

Weren't fair.

Vote'n Day had already been voted onest.

Like all real Florida men Leonard Barrs voted for Horace Greeley against That Bastard Grant. Lincoln was bad enough—but Grant! Another term with him in office weren't tolerable.

Then Greeley up and died betwixt Voten Day and the Electoral College meeting!

What could you 'spect from a New Yorker?

Now there was nobody to stand against That Bastard Grant.

Leonard Barrs and none of the Florida men around wasn't gonna stand for that. "We want another election with maybe Benjamin Gratz Brown on the Liberal Republican-Democrat ticket. Least he's from Missouri, what is a damn sight better than New York or wherever That Bastard Grant is from. " Leonard grumbled.

"Look what That Bastard Grant did at Vicksburg, and Petersburg, and ... well, you know! Another term with him as President—that just weren't tolerable!"

Effie kept slicing the soap bar into thin yellow slivers the size of pinecone burrs. She'd heard all this before. Politics got no worshing done. Nor fields plowed. Nor yard hoed down. Nor doors hung.

Doors was a sorespot between Effie and her husband of two years.

She wanted him to get on with hanging doors, front and back, in their new house.

He'd felled the pine logs for the doors in the Spring and let them dry out all summer long. But he'd still have to split out boards and plane them smooth for door wood, and hammer out hinges.

So the house stood on it's cypress blocks without doors in the frames.

Effie split croaker seed sacks lengthways and tacked them in the empty door frames. She dribbled a little sperm whale oil on the burlap—the smell of it kept out mosquitoes.

Last time Leonard was in Graham he bought a 25-gallon tin of sperm oil at the seed store; Effie preferred it to the cheaper train oil for her house lamps because it burned with a cleaner, whiter flame. And the pungent smell did keep mosquitoes at bay better than the even cheaper kerosene that had come on the market.

The burlap door curtains hung down short of the floor, but they was wide enough and they'd just have to do till Leonard got around to making doors.

Wasn't like there was anybody way out there in the pinny woods to come in the house. Nearest neighbor, old man Jenks and his brood, was a long sight down the dirt lane—you couldn't even hear him call hogs in the evening. The Jinks lived that far away

Leonard and Effie moved out of Jacksonville after he came back from The War—place was overrun with Niggrahs and damn carpetbagging yankeys which was worse.

“No money. No work. Damn yankeys taking over the banks and property—Good Lord, the property those carpetbaggers stolt; just about all the land, and script, and mules the guvment gave the Niggrahs after The War, the carpetbaggers finagled them out of, then worked 'em worse than the gentry did in Plantation Days and gave 'em less.



“And they call that Reconstruction—though Lord only knows what it is got reconstructed.,” Leonard grumbled.

Effie put aside her bar of yellow soap and used the back of her hand to brush her waist-long, straight black hair, that bespoke her Indian blood, out of her face. She plucked a splinter of kindling wood off the hearth and used it to light her clay pipe.

Her smoke curled upward as she listened to her husband.

She’d heard Leonard gripe about That Bastard Grant and the carpetbaggers too often to care much. If women was allowed to vote, maybe the country might not get straight, but house doors would get hung, she thought.

The Barrs lived on a farm in Bradford County, Florida. Like most of northern Florida’s farmers, Leonard and Effie Barrs had to literally tear a living out of the course sandy soil in order to live and support a family of what was eventually 16 children. They had to work at many jobs besides farming. In addition to the farm, Leonard also tapped pine trees for turpentine. He also worked in a saw mill which was to claim two of his fingers and much of his blood over the years. He also was a carpenter working at everything from house building to cabinet making.

There was only one place to vote in Brandford County, Starke, the County seat. This town was a full day’s ride from the Barrs’ homeplace.

The only way white men could vote was to band together and ride into Starke as a group. Each one with his shotgun or squirrel raffle prominently displayed across his saddle. There was seldom any trouble but the guns assured there wouldn’t be. They were mainly voting insurance.



Effie had packed her man a lunch pail with bacon biscuits and field peas for the long ride to the county seat.

Right at sunup that crisp November morning she watched him saddle up and ride off through the ground mist toward the Samson River Bridge where he would meet up with some of their closer neighbors—the nearest lived eight miles across the swamp.

Leonard's three hounds trailed behind the horse's hooves. The forth dog, the bitch Ulysses, had a new litter or pups; she lay under the porch nursing them.

As the party of men rode toward Stark, the group would grow as they met others along the way until they reached the county seat in voting strength.

For Effie, Voting Day meant double her usual chores. The three cows had to be milked, the hogs sloped, the baby tended...

And besides all that, it was worshday.

First, she filled the cauldron with well water, two buckets at a time. This cauldron was a huge cast iron tub; during the season it was used to boil down sugar cane into syrup. Once the thing was full of water, she'd add the clothes and home-made soap. then build the fire under it to boil the mix.

Effie split the wood for her fire with a hatchet and brought her clothes to a boil. While they boiled, she thoroughly beat them, stirring and poking with a long staff. After this, she ladled off the boiling soapy water and added cold rinse water—again two buckets at a time from the well twenty yards away. This was brought to a boil and the whole process repeated.

Finally she pronounced that load of clothes clean.

Again she added cold water and pulled clothes out before the water could boil again. Then she began the arduous job of wringing everything—even



bedsheets and spreads—by hand. At last the wash was hung out on the line to dry.

In the midst of all this, she heavily starched all the Sunday clothes so they would iron out stiff and pretty.

Since washing was a full-time chore, Effie bundled up Thad, who was 18 months old, and set him on a blanket in the yard to play with a pine cone. The baby was in view of the washpot yet not underfoot.

Like all Florida dwellers of the day, Effie always kept her yard hoed down to bear smooth dirt which she swirled in patterns with her stiff twig broom. Not a blade of grass anywhere near her house. Snakes can hide in grass. Might not have a door yet, but Effie tended her yard.

Effie was in the house cutting up another thick bar of yellow lye soap for her third wash load when the happy sound of Thad at play turned to alarmed shrieks.

Effie pushed aside the burlap curtain that covered the door to the farmhouse. As she watched a Florida panther pulled the baby from the blanket by his right arm and started out of the yard towards the bushes. Effie saw the panther's black-tipped tail and her baby's blood dripping from its black nose onto its tawny coat.

A Florida "painter", meaner cousin to the mountain lions of the west, grows seven feet long from tail tip to sharp-fanged jaws. They weigh up to 160 pounds. They can leap 50 feet and run up to 35 miles per hour.

Apparently mountain lions or cougars have come down through Georgia from the Appalachians. They adapted themselves from mountain life to the cypress swamps and tidal marshes of Florida where



they prey on deer, raccoons, possums, rabbits and other small game.

In modern times, the Florida panther has been designated the official state animal by romantics who have never been bitten by one. Nowadays panthers are shy of people and few men have seen them out wild. but back then Florida was wild and the big cats bold and aggressive.

So even in sight of the house and the wash fire, this panther could not resist this baby served on a blanket.

The birch Ulysses charged from under the porch baying at the huge cat. The panther swirled around and, without loosening it's grip on the baby's arm, slashed the dog's belly open with one swipe of it's claws. Guts poured out as the dog writhed in howling agony. Baby Thad screamed in pain as the tiny bone in his upper arm snapped in the panther's mouth.

Effie snatched up the first weapon that came to hand, her twig broom, and raced across the yard toward the slinking panther. She began to jab at the beast's eyes with the bristles of her broom.

The panther halted its retreat to claw wildly at the thrashing broom. It lost its grip on the child and backed away snarling. Effie gathered up Thad in one arm and backed slowly toward the house fencing the cat all the way with her broom. The cat followed at broom's length, crawling flat on its belly, fangs bare, ears laid back flat, claws unsheathed, ripping at the broom every inch of the hundreds of miles back to the house.

The burlap curtain across the door stopped the cat.

Once Effie and the baby were inside, the cat hesitated. It seemed afraid to crawl under that curtain. It sniffed unsure and puzzled at the



unfamiliar smell of sperm whale oil that soaked the cloth.

Leonard had built this new frame house himself. But harvest time and butchering hogs this fall had taken precedence to most of his carpentry work. Splitting boards, planning them smooth, framing and



hanging doors consumes a lot of time. Leonard just had not gotten around to that bit of finishing work.

So as a stopgap, Effie had hung burlap curtains made of cornmeal sacking in each empty window and door frame. Whale oil on the cloth discouraged mosquitoes from entering.

The door curtains ended about six inches from the floor.

The panther clawed and swatted at the bottom of that curtain like a huge kitten playing with the end of a thread. The curtain frayed and shredded but the cat hesitated to crawl under the flimsy but unfamiliar barrier at the home's entrance.

Then the beast paced back and forth in front of the door, ranging up and down seeking another way in to the mother and baby inside. Effie could see flashes of its tawny hide each time it passed the door frame.

Thad was clawed badly. He was to be scared the rest of his life. Effie bathed the deep scratches and smeared the cuts with lard as she watched the door in fear.

The cat grew tired of pacing at the entrance and began to methodically explore the whole house. It



walked around and several times scratching at the wooden walls. It clawed its way onto the roof and was terrifyingly light-footed and quiet while it was up there.

This farmhouse, like most cracker homes in Florida, was built about two feet above the ground on cypress pilings. The cat soon discovered this and was under the house as well as around it and above it. All the while it was sort of muttering in low growling whines. At the end of each round of the house, the cat would return to a snarling attack on that burlap curtain.

Night approached.

Before sundown, the cat discovered the smoke house.

The smokehouse did have a solid wooden door to seal predators and mice out, away from curing hams and bacon.

With a single vicious attack the panther tore in and soon made shambles of the Barr's meat supply. It probably ate a little, but soon it was back at the curtain, down on its belly, peering under at the woman and child inside.

Effie warmed a scant supper of greens in broth for herself and the child. The low moaning of the prowling cat—sounded like it was muttering to itself—drove her wild. But even worse were those long silent periods when she could not hear the panther and wasn't sure where it was.

Far across the field the cows lowed pitifully that it was well past milking time. They hurt.

Soon the pigs began to protest their ever-present hunger. These sounds distressed Effie. But the cat's attention was not to be diverted from this huge turtleshell of a house shielding his chosen prey behind a burlap curtain.



To the other maddening sounds of that night Thad added his fevered wail. Effie made him a sugar-teat, a spoonful of sugar twisted in the corner of a handkerchief. He sucked on it greedily but the treat did not calm him as it usually did.

Effie lit every lamp in the house—Leonard would complain at the waste but she wanted light—even though it cast spooky flickering shadows on the log walls.

Even in the dim light of the whale-oil lamp Effie could see the angry red welts across Thad's face grow more and more inflamed.

The baby's cries drove the cat into a frenzy. Now it raced around and under and over the house frantically seeking a way inside.

The baby cried all night.

Toward dawn there was a period of almost quite. Still there was the pained lowing of the cows clustered at the gate, and the baby's quiet whimper. But the night grew still.

The cat began to scream.

Panthers lack the small bone in the back of their throats that enables other great cats to roar. So their call is more high-pitched, a shriek, rather than a roar. Everyone who hears a panther scream thinks of a woman giving birth.

This yowling continued until the sun began to show. Then the cat settled down to a steady monotonous pace around the house, always returning to the door to give now half-hearted bats to the curtain.

With the first scream of the panther, Thad started awake. Crying. As the sun rose, the poor cattle grew frantic. But the cat had now set his rounds like clockwork.



The day dawned clear and altogether too beautiful. The universe was out of step with the beast-surrounded farm house. About 3 in the afternoon, the panther began to methodically tear the cypress wood shingles off the roof right next to the chimney.

He'd found a weak spot.

He was coming in.

As light began to show through the hole the cat had worked in the tough cypress shingles, he paused in his digging, hesitated, then sprang off the roof, and darted away.

It was still 45 minutes before Effie heard the far-off sound of the approaching horsemen.

Later that week—after he hung a good strong door—Leonard Barrs and some neighbor men set hounds on the trail, treed the panther, and shot him. They brought the body up to the farm on the back of a skittish mule.

But Effie always swore they got the wrong cat.

“That ‘un ain’t near as big as the one what most et Thad,” she said.





THE LUMP IN OUR DRIVEWAY



For what we're paying for this new home you'd expect tall marble columns and scented fountains; actually the construction is only slightly sturdier than a cardboard box and the garbage disposal odor can hardly be described as scented!

In our case, new construction equals shoddy construction.

But we didn't know that when we bought the place.

We thought we were buying a dream house at a bargain price.

My husband's waged a running battle with Mr. Forteshay, the contractor, ever since we moved in six months ago. So, when the driveway began to crack,



we naturally assumed it was caused by the contractor's use of thin cheap cement.

In spite of the dreams, we never suspected the real cause.

I suppose that we longed to own a home of our own so much that we overlooked problems—even if we'd known what to look for. There were basic construction faults that we did not notice till we were already committed.

And, with the mortgage market as crazy as it is with all the foreclosures and interest rate problems, we were anxious to buy before any kind of home at all would rise out of our price range.

Anyhow, Mr. Forteshay, the contractor who built all the houses in Morning Glory Estates, kept promising to fix the garbage disposal, the bathroom window that won't come down, the hall door that won't close all the way, and the back burner on my new countertop range—but he never had. He'd promise, I'd wait all day for a repairman to show up. But one never came.

Thank God we don't have that sewer line problem the Morrisons have. They threaten to sue.

In spite of our difficulties with Mr. Forteshay, on the whole we've been fantastically happy with our new home. Maybe it was just a matter of changing from one bedroom to another but for the first time in ages I've been climaxing—not every time, but now I seldom get left hanging. I wonder if it's not the fresh environment. Even when Jim is at work, I often go into our bedroom to fold clothes, or read, or sew. Any little task that needs doing, I take in there even when I could do it in the kitchen or laundry room or family room. Our bedroom's become my favorite place.

And the dreams!



I've dreamed the most beautiful dreams since we moved here. Intimate, tender dreams that leave me feeling wholesome and satisfied when I wake up. Sometimes I just lay there after I click off the clock radio relishing the receding dream, savoring the feeling of well-being it leaves. I feel as though something important and pleasant has taken place during my sleep.

From little hints he's dropped, I think Jim has the same quality dreams.

So, even with all the aggravation over repairs and what Mr. Forteshay calls "tweaks", we've been basically happy here.

Then the drive cracked.

Jim first noticed the cracks in the driveway one Saturday morning when he was playing ball with Tommy. He's fixed a basketball hoop at the front of the carport. Of course, Tommy can't throw the ball that high, so Jim lifts him up to shoot at the basket.

Our house is a cracker box affair built on a single concrete slab. The builder calls this style a *Winchester*. It's the second least expensive of the six basic floor plans in the development. All the house styles and streets in Morning Glory Estates have names with an English-flavor. I think they did that just to bump up the price.

Because it looks like the driveway is just an extension of the same concrete slab that forms the foundation, Jim was really upset about the cracks.

To me, they didn't look like much to get excited about; they were just little crooked hairline sutures that reminded me of the crackling lines in the glaze of an old teacup.

None of them came inside the carport, so we decided that our foundation wasn't in danger, but we added this problem to our list of complaints to ask



Mr. Forteshay to fix and we decided to keep a close eye out for what Jim called “Structural Deficiencies.” You could tell he used capital letters with those words.

During the next month my dreams grew progressively sweeter.

In one dream Jim, Tommy and I were climbing a lush green mountain in a place that looked like pictures of Hawaii. We were so high we could look down on clouds drifting below over a river broken by thundering waterfalls. I say thundering because they looked thundering; we were too far above them to hear the sound.

We rested on a broad shelf of rock cushioned with soft thick green lichen and as I lay on my stomach looking down, a flock of enormous white birds flew majestically above the river. And I was as far above them as they were above the blue river. Heavenly!

Mr. Forteshay finally answered one of the messages we’d left on his office answering machine. I think he ignores messages. But he finally sent a workman out to fix the bathroom window and look at the other things. The man said he’d never seen a driveway crack like that before, but it was nothing to worry about. The house is just settling, he said. He also said a subcontractor had installed all kitchen appliances in all the houses in Morning Glory Estates and that’d I’d have to call them about the garbage disposal and the burner. He gave me their phone number.

They also have an answering machine.

Nothing happened for about a week.

Then, one Sunday after church, Tommy discovered something interesting about the driveway.



Jim and I were sitting in lawn chairs, thinking about planting a flowering tree in our front yard. The only green in our front yard now are the squares of sod; they haven't been down long enough to meld together into a solid lawn. You can still see the lines between each square.

The contractor had clean cut all trees in the development to clear building sites, scrapped the earth raw, then, after the rows of houses were built, planted straggly red maple saplings along the roads to replace the real trees he'd cut down.

How many years does it take maples to grow?

Jim favored planning a dogwood; I thought a redbud or crepe myrtle would look nice. He said I'd have to be the one to rake leaves and he did not want a tree obstructing the way when he mowed the grass. It was the kind of comfortable disagreement people have after they've been married a lot longer than we have.

"Watch me, Mommy. Watch me."

I twisted around so I could see what he was doing. Tommy rolled his ball halfway across the drive, it hesitated a moment, then rolled back to him. Our drive is supposed to be level, but each time he pushed the ball away, it never made it across to the other side, but rolled back to him.

"Here, son, let me try it," Jim said. Taking the ball, he nudged it across the drive with his foot. It rolled back to him. He tried it from the other side. Same thing.

He rolled the ball first from the street, then from the front of the carport with the same result.

No doubt about it; there was a lump in the middle of our drive.

"This is something new," Jim said. "That hasn't been there before. I'd have noticed it when I was



dribbling if it hadn't been level. How can concrete swell up like that?."

"The man Forteshay sent out said the house settling made those little cracks. Do they look any bigger?"

"Not that I can tell. Looks to me like if it were that, the concrete would sag in the middle, not at the edges. Maybe the dirt is washing out underneath the edges. It doesn't look like it, but that could be the cause. I'll call Fortesay again tomorrow."

"Unless the walls are going to collapse or something I want my kitchen fixed first. That's more important."

"You may think so, but we can't play basketball in the kitchen, can we Tommy. I'll call Forteshay tomorrow."

"Tell him about the garbage disposal again too."

Forteshay's answering machine ignored our calls.

We didn't pay much more attention to the driveway until the night the policeman came.

That was a Monday night. I remember, because when I brought Tommy home from his Cub Scout meeting, Jim was watching the pre-game show for the Jaguar's game on Monday Night Football and I hurried Tommy to bed and watched the last part with him.

We skipped the 11 o'clock news and cuddled for a while before going to sleep.

I dreamed of a banquet that night. I'd prepared a German chocolate cake to carry. Everyone was to bring a dish. I arrived at the banquet hall early before anyone else. It was a huge log building lined with carved wooden pillars and rough paneled walls. Shields, spears, war axes, and bearskins decorated the walls. Long plank tables flanked by wooden



benches filled the hall. It looked like a Viking Valhalla, but there were crystal chandeliers filled with glowing candles hanging from the dark ceiling

Other guests hadn't arrived yet, but their food offerings were already laid out on the tables along with polished wooden trenchers and heavy mugs shaped like rams' horns. I placed my cake on the sideboard and peeked at the covered dishes already set out. I felt pleased that my gift was appropriate for the feast.

A delightful expectation warmed me as I felt the guests were gathering outside the massive double doors at the end of the hall. It was like the feeling you have on Christmas Eve. Something wonderful is about to happen. The door would burst open and the King of Glory would come in with His retinue...

But, instead of entering the hall, someone started pounding at the door.

I woke up confused. Someone really was pounding at the door, our front door. Jim was already struggling into his robe. I quickly slipped into mine. The clock radio showed it was 3:30 a.m.

It was a policeman at the door—not actually a real policeman but an officer from Nightwatch Security, the guard firm hired to patrol our gated community at night. He looked like a college student in an ill-fitting uniform, and he was nervous about disturbing us.

Our car had rolled out of the drive and was blocking the street. Only a little dogwood tree on the other side of the street had kept it from rolling onto the Cully's front lawn. When we got back from Cub Scouts, had I not set the parking brake? I couldn't remember. I know I couldn't pull all the way into the car port because Tommy'd left toys scattered in the way. I couldn't remember if I'd left the car in park and set the brake, or not.



Anyhow, there was our car crossways in the street with the rear bumper resting against the Cully's little dogwood.

Jim fished keys out of his pants pocket and the security guard helped me move Tommy's stuff out of the way. I felt foolish moving toys in my robe and floppy pink mules at three in the morning with a policeman. He acted embarrassed too, but he kept maneuvering to peek down my robe.

I was standing at the back of the carport when Jim started the motor and switched the lights on to pull in. From that angle, looking towards the headlights, I saw a wide, low bulge in our concrete drive... Like something was under there.

Next morning, after Jim went to work, I examined the drive more closely. It showed no sign of buckling like you see in old sidewalks pushed up by tree roots. Our cement was not cracked but laced with those hairline crackles in the smooth surface like old china gets. And those crackles were not all the way across the drive but in an oval pattern right in the middle. I kept thinking the solid concrete resembled a rubber sheet with something pushing and bulging up from the other side.

After several frustrating phone calls to his answering machine, I finally got Mr. Forteshay to come out himself. His car was followed by a green dump truck pulling a vile-smelling, wheeled cauldron of tar. He and the workman milled around in the yard for a while speculating on what caused the bulge and how to smooth it out. Mr. Forteshay said he'd read about some people out in California whose home was on a pocket of oil which started seeping out of the ground. That caused a lot of damage to their property and a lot of trouble because they lived in a subdivision like ours and they couldn't put down an oil well.



There's no oil underground in this part of the country that I know of, so I was concerned that maybe there was an underground spring beneath our drive.

Anyhow, he said the workmen would take care of it.

But I saw all they intended to do was smear tar around on the surface, so I said I'd have to call my husband first. Then Forteshay said that if the workcrew couldn't do it right now, then he didn't know when they'd get to it. "They have other jobs to do, you know," he said.

His highhanded attitude pissed me off. I lost my temper, said some unladylike things and told them all to get the hell out. I try to live like a Christian, but sometimes it's just too much!

Jim got home from work to call Forteshay at his office and was so damn reasonable—and even apologetic—as he talked on the phone that I got mad at him too.

I didn't dream at all that night.

The next day I took matters into my own hands; I called the County Board of Realtors, the City Building Inspector's Office, the Consumer Affairs office, and the Better Business Bureau.

Every one of them gave me a runaround.

Exasperated, I finally called Action Line—that's a service the newspaper sponsors to help people cut through bureaucratic red tape.

They sent a representative out next day.

Anita Crofts, a sleek, chic, young career woman, listened to my complaint and looked at the drive herself. She used her cell phone to call a friend of hers who was an engineer of some sort and he came right out. He didn't know what caused the lump in



our drive either, but he took core samples from the soil around the edges using a thing like a big corkscrew on the end of a long metal rod with a T-shaped handle. Anita promised to let me know what they found out, and they left together.

Jim and I made up that night. I hate to be out of sorts with him. Nothing seems right when we're at odds. We put Tommy to bed then had a delicious time in bed ourselves.

I dreamed of riding on a carrousel in Springtime. I rode on the back of a silver mermaid round and round past overhanging pink blossoms. Ahead of me a laughing, dark-haired girl rode a prancing black unicorn. And in front of her, Santa Claus rode a waddling fat polar bear. Hundreds of slivers of broken mirrors covered the posts, ceiling, and center panels of the carrousel, and the animals circled to the happy tinny sound of a harpsichord...

Anita must real have some influence, because the next morning two housing inspectors and a man from Consumer Affairs came by. They assured me that the bulge—which was noticeably larger than yesterday—was confined to the drive and posed no danger to the foundation of our house.

That afternoon two carpenters from the subcontractor came out and replace the garbage disposal and the burner on my countertop range, and fixed the hall door. I felt we were really getting somewhere.

By Sunday, the bulge had swelled (swollen?) larger. By the time we got home from church, we couldn't park in the drive; the bulge had increased to about the size of our coffee table, only not as tall. The concrete seemed to be stretched over a little hill, but it showed no sign of breaking.

Jim stayed home from work Monday and I called Anita to tell her about the growth of our bulge. She



drove out accompanied by her engineer friend (I never did catch his name) and a photographer. I think the photographer figured we were trying to perpetrate some kind of scam or hoax. He acted cynical. Jim and the engineer talked. Anita and I talked. The photographer took pictures of Tommy riding over the hump on his bike with training wheels.

Anita called the building inspectors out again and they inspected. They couldn't tell what caused the bump. Anita's beeper went off; her paper was sending out a reporter and a geologist.

They asked us questions and the geologist said that an underground spring couldn't cause this because the water would flow underneath the concrete and bubble out the edges. Besides, concrete doesn't stretch.

The reporter told us about some people down in Florida who woke up one morning to find a ten-foot wide hole in their front yard and by sundown their home had collapsed into an eighty-foot deep sinkhole.

Anita told him to shut up because we had enough to worry about with this wart growing in our drive.

For some reason her using the word *wart* offended me.

I couldn't say why, but the word *wart* was too harsh a word and carried a bad connotation. I thought of the thing more in terms of an underground balloon.

Of course I didn't say anything to her about it. To a certain extent she intimidated me because she's such a person of action and a career woman and moved among the men as an equal associate while I'm just a housewife. I tried not to let that influence



my liking her. But there you have it. She is trying to be helpful—but this thing is certainly not a *wart*!

The photos and article appeared in Wednesday morning's paper and by Friday a horde of people descended on our home. I had to call Jim home from work to help handle the situation. There was Mr. Forteshay and his work crew again, and two men from the county health department. The two housing inspectors brought their supervisor; (they wanted to condemn our hose, but Jim raised Hell). A team of geology students from the university showed up. And a man from the city nuisance abatement board wanted to present us with a notice demanding that we eliminate all nuisances including "rats, snakes, trash, weeds and noxious vegetation" from our property. He threatened to place a lien on our house if we do not comply.

Mr. Forteshay, upset by the publicity, argued with Jim about the cost for ripping up the old drive and replacing it with a new one. He informed us that the drive was concrete, not cement, implying that we were idiots not to know the difference.

The geologist and his student cronies set up a portable drilling machine of some kind and bored a hole right in the center of the lump in our drive. A thick golden yellow fluid pulsed from the hole for a few minutes then stopped. A lab test later showed it to be a fluid similar to white wine.

Within a few minutes after the drilling stopped the lump in our drive began to crack open like an egg giving birth.

I mean the concrete actually pulsed and quivered, and a six-inch wide fissure appeared running the long axis of the lump.

Some nut in the crowd yelled, "Monsters"! and all the people gathered in our front yard stampeded to a safe vantage point across the street. Jim and I and



the lump were by ourselves on our side of the street. Don't ask me how, but I knew we had nothing to fear.

The cracked edges of the lump widened and a human—yes, Ill say human—form struggled to free himself from the concrete covered shell of earth. With a shrug and a toss of his hair, he shook off the earth clinging to his body and stood slowly upright.

And we marveled.

He stood almost eight feet tall and he was the color of a newly minted penny, like burnished copper just poured from a smelting pot. His hair and powerful wings were white—white like a first magnitude star, or a spear of summer lightening. He was the most thoroughly masculine being I've ever seen. I don't just mean that he was naked and enormously erect, although I couldn't help noticing that he was, but he looked like every good thing that comes to mind when you think of the word *masculine*.

He also looked... wise... I almost said *intelligent* but it went beyond that. He looked as though he would understand you... I mean understand anything you told him about yourself.

He stood, one foot still in the hole and the other planted in the drive. His head towered above our basketball hoop. He fanned his wings, slowly, deliberately, in the sun.

Then he appeared to notice us and the crowd across the street for the first time and stepped fully out of the hole.

It was then I noticed he was wounded, the drill had punctured his chest just below the left nipple. The golden wine fluid oozed from the wound.

He took three steps toward Jim and me then faltered. He raised his hand to his wound and touched it. He looked anxiously toward the crowd



across the street. He tried to say something to them. But couldn't. He looked as though he had something urgent to say, something terribly important to tell us.

And, how do I say this... he looked as though he loved us.

When he discovered that he couldn't speak, he touched the wound again like he was trying to staunch the flow.

He staggered, wings outstretched, against our car parked at the bottom of the drive. He sank to one knee, raised his dripping hand and drew the sign of the cross in the air towards us. then he flopped over on his side, quivered a moment, then lay still as the silver faded from his wings like the silver fades from a fish stranded on the beach.

I can't say he stopped breathing because I'd never noticed if he breathed in the first place. But, if he did, he stopped.

"Quick. Call a doctor. Dial 911 for the rescue squad," someone yelled as the crowd surged back to our side of the street to form a circle around the dead angel.

Immediately the argument began over who had custody of the body. The university people insisted on hauling it in their pickup to their lab. The newspaper people objected, claiming the body as well as all rights to the story and any photographs anybody there might have taken. Mr. Forteshay jumped up and down yelling that the body was his since his company held the mortgage on the property.

One woman in the crowd yanked a handful of feathers from the white and copper wing as a souvenir—or to sell on E-Bay.

"Stop!" a voice commanded. "Stop. All of you get off my land. Off my property."



It was Jim. I'll swear, I didn't recognize his voice at first. I've never heard him use that tone before. He stood in the doorway of our house with his shotgun leveled at the crowd of ghouls, officials, reporters, neighbors and students.

I felt so proud of him.

The crowd backed away off the lawn out into the street leaving me standing over the body of the angel. Jim trotted over to my side and said, "Susan blast anyone who steps foot on our property before I come back out." He handed me the shotgun. "Will you do that"?

"Yes, I will," I said.

And I would have too although I had no idea of what Jim intended.

He ran back into the house and made two phone calls: one to our credit card company borrowing the full amount they'd extend us—Thank God for credit unions. The other to M.S. Erdershiem & Sons, licensed funeral directors.

Someone in the crowd must have called the police because the hearse and the squad cars arrived at the same time. A cop took the shotgun out of my hands. A few minutes later the county coroner arrived. The various officials and Mr. Forteshay fumed and fussed.

The medical examiner examined the body in our drive.

"This is not a human being," he declared. "Best I can figure, it's to be classified as an exotic pet. You folks ought to have a permit to keep a big bird like this, but no crime has been committed. Since it's not human, no death certificate nor autopsy is called for. As far as the medical examiner's office is concerned, if it's not human remains, you can throw the animal



in the trash or bury it in your backyard or whatever you people do with dead pets.”

A pet???

This caused a furor among the various officials, one wanting this, the other wanting that.

The geologist howled about the lose to science and the need of this specimen for research, but Jim resisted like an oak withstanding a troublesome squirrel.

Jim stood them all down insisting that our angel be given a Christian burial.

In the end M.S. Erdershiem & Sons took custody of the body. Jim rode off in the hearse with the attendants to make whatever arrangements. Cremation? Burial in a pet cemetery? What?

Jim called me from the mortuary to talk it over. I called our pastor to explain what had happened and what we wanted. He’s seen some of what happened on tv news. He agreed to allow us to conduct, not a funeral, but a memorial service for *our pet* and to allow burial in a far corner of the churchyard.

It took the Erdershiem people days to get a specially constructed coffin large enough. They kept the angel on ice in a side room.

Either Jim or I stayed with him at all times.

University professors, government officials, UFO nuts, tabloid reporters, and ordinary curious people besieged our house. It was an exhausting hassle, but finally it was over. Jim had to fight like a tiger, and it bankrupted our savings and maxed out the credit card but the angel was finally buried in a closed casket ceremony in the grounds of Trinity Church. Hundreds of people attended the memorial service and Pastor Horner preached a beautiful homily about how sometimes people entertain angels unaware.



Things settled down after that.

Almost.

Jim bought some sacks of concrete (or cement for all I know) and repaired the gaping hole in our driveway himself. Tommy's out there playing basketball right now; he can almost throw it as high as the basket. The tour busses don't clog our street anymore, and our matted and trampled lawn is beginning to revive.

The biggest practical difference in our life is that we can't take a vacation this year because Jim used up all his time off getting all this straightened out.

One other thing, attendance is up at church.

Except for the raggedy patch Jim made in the drive, the house is about the same. No, it isn't. There's a water stain in the hall ceiling. Jim says Mr. Forteshay's crew used green lumber for the rafters and one of them is warping. And the bathroom window never did get fixed right; it still stuck.

One other thing...Last night I dreamed that Jim and I were in an enormous canopied bed, laying naked on silver satin sheets. The bed rested on a sort of little barge floating in the center of a blue lake. A huge crowd of fabulous creatures surrounded the lake—centaurs, unicorns, myriads, saints, mermaids, apostles, dryads, dragons and every sort of intelligent being watched us make love. It was wonderfully erotic. Jim cuddled and rubbed me with soothing hands until I thrashed with yearning... When we climaxed, the assembly of watching creatures rose and stood with a roaring, thundering ovation of approval as we stood up on the bed bowing and curtsying on the silver sheets.

When I awoke rain pounded on the roof extending the sound of applause from my dream. I felt deliciously relaxed. I rolled over and looked at Jim



sleeping. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head. He was wide awake. Grinning.

“You dreamed it too.,” I asked.

“Yes. The bed. The lake. The applause. The love. You... Yes, I dreamed it too.”

“There’s another one growing”?

“I think so. We’ll look for it when the rain stops”>

“What do we do till then”?

“I’ll think of something.”

He did.

When the downpour stopped our backyard was a solid sheet of standing water because the lot hadn’t been graded to drain right.

A small oval mound of grass protruded from the water between the back of the car port and my clothes line post.

That afternoon Jim and I planted a circle of azalea bushes around the mound, hiding it from view.

We aren’t going to let anyone else know. We want to find out what wonderful, urgent, important thing this next angel wants to tell us.

—End—

---Written on July 4, 1979--jwc

Bad Children/Good Children



Billy Holden leaned over the back of the school bus seat and whacked Terry on the head with his social studies book.

Terry twisted around grabbing the book with both hands and ripped off the front cover. Billy grabbed a handful of hair and pulled as hard as he could bracing his foot against the seat back for leverage.

With Terry stretched backward against his seat like that, Monica, a third-grader from Ms Carson's class who sat beside him, took advantage of his strained position to poke his belly with her purple false nails.

Nat, who sat with Billy, pushed over the seat to snatch Monica's lunchbox off her lap. "Give that back!" she shrieked. "That's mine. Give it back right now."

"Or you'll do what" Nat sneered.

"You kids stop that right now! Get quiet. I won't have this racket on my bus!" yelled old Miss Evert



from her driver's seat. She was not watching traffic, but looking in her rear view mirror trying to see who was being bad this time. She swerved to avoid creaming a tiny Ford Escort in the left lane.

"Old witch," Bobby taunted, giving the handful of hair an extra twist before shoving Terry's head forward.

Mrs. Evert hated bad kids. She hated having to drive the school bus through evening traffic with 34 kids screaming and fighting and squirming in their seats. Some afternoons they threw spitballs at the back of her head. Sometimes they threw things at passing cars when drivers got so stupid as to pull up along side the big yellow bus. They pushed. They shoved. They yelled. They fought. They teased. They made nasty signals with their fingers.

Day after day after day this went on.

Well-behaved kids, and few they were, ended up knocked to the floor and stomped by the others. They broke one kid's glasses. They took one girl's Harry Potter book, one she got for her birthday, and threw it out the window.

Mrs. Evert lectured them to no avail.

"Old hag" they called her to her face. "Stupid old witch."

She even reported them to the principal.

"What happens off school grounds is not the school's responsibility," the whimp said. "You are in charge. These precious children are our future. You must maintain discipline on your bus. And remember, there's no such thing as a bad child."

The principal has a master's degree in educational theory. All day he stays in his office doing paperwork. With the door closed.



On Monday afternoon a new kid got on the bus. A good kid. His parents were from China or Viet Nam or one of those country.

“Slanty-eyes” Billy called him and the name stuck.

“His skin is yellow and he’s got a yellow streak down his back,” Terry said.

“You people eat puppy dogs”, Betty Jordan said. “Is that what you bring in your lunch box”?

“Naw,” Bret said. “He’s free-lunch. Poor yellow trash.”

Mrs. Evert called back, “You hooligans stop teasing the new kid. Ain’t proper to tease somebody just because they’re different.”

“You’re the one who’s different, you old witch,” Monica called.

“Who said that? Who said that? Who was it said that?” the driver yelled

“Who. Who. Whooo.” Chanted the bus load of children. Imitating owls. Cackling like witches.

Miss Evert reported the incident to the dean of boys.

“Now, Miss. Evert, it can’t be that bad,” he said. “The children have been sitting quietly in class all day. When they get out, it’s only natural for them to release some of that pent up energy. All kids are good kids. You need to focus their creative energies... Maybe you could teach them to sing *Row, Row Row Your Boat* on the bus.”

Tuesday afternoon Nikita sat in the very back row of seats and when the bus picked up speed on the Interstate, he pulled down his pants and mooned passing cars.

Wednesday, Mary Lou teased Rodney till he threw up on the floor. All the kids laughed and pointed and



held their noses. Kenny held Rodney down and rubbed his hair in it. Mary Lou kicked Kenny and got some on him. Broyston stabbed Rachel in the arm with a pencil. And Marvin took Paula's Simpson watch.

When the bus got to the stop where Marvin's mother met it every day, Miss. Evert told his mother about the watch.

"Are you accusing my child of stealing? I'll have you know my Marvin's a good boy. You're a bitter old witch. Just because you don't have children of your own... My Marvin is not a thief. He got that watch in a Happy Meal. Didn't you, Honey. I'm going to report you to the school board. If you can't handle little children, you shouldn't be driving a school bus. You're not suited for the job."

Thursday, Tina scrubbed a picture of a bat with black crayon in Sandy's library book. Patricia chewed a big wad of bubble gum and pressed it into Leslie Martin's long blond hair. Pressed it in and smeared it around so good that her mother would have to take scissors and cut those tresses. That'll teach her to show off... But while Patricia was leaning over to glop up Leslie's hair, Carl unwrapped a Baby Ruth, warmed it in his hand and put the candy bar in Patricia's seat so that when she sat back down it stuck to the back of her dress and when she got up to leave the bus at her stop, all the kids laughed and pointed and she didn't know why at first. But when she brushed the back of her skirt, she flew into a rage and bit Tonya.

Miss. Evert had to break up the fight and both girls kicked her shins and yelled, "Leave us alone, you stupid old witch. Leave us alone. Child abuse! Child abuse!"

When the last child finally got off the bus, Miss. Evert circled back along her route, turned down a dirt



crossroad, parked the big yellow bus beneath a tree, got out, walked into the woods and had a long talk with two of her oldest friends.

Friday, Billy Holden brought his basketball on to the bus. He bounced it off the heads of kids sitting in front of him. Somebody got hold of it and soon it was ricocheting all over the inside of the bus. Nobody was safe.

Willy used a knife he'd snuck into school to cut both straps on Cindy's backpack. Cindy swung the book bag by one strap and hit him in the face. His nose bled. He wiped with his finger and flicked blood at everybody in the first two rows. "Hey, Dweebs," he yelled. "Suppose I got AIDS" Huh. Suppose I'm infecting your asses."

Kids screamed and climbed all over the seats to get out of the spatter.

Miss. Evert did not say a word to quiet them.

If anyone had noticed, today she wore a set of headphones with her Walkman tuned to a golden oldies station. She hummed along with the Beachboys to *Help Me Rhonda* as she signaled for a left turn off the main road. The basketball bounced off the back of her seat as she slowed to a stop beside the crumbling brick wall of the old Anderson cemetery.

Out of habit she flicked on the bus's flashing red safety lights; no car is supposed to pass a stopped school bus when its loading or unloading children.

Releasing her safety belt, she pulled the lever to open the bus door. Standing up, she called above the din of the children. "Everybody off the bus. Everybody off the bus."

"This ain't our stop" several children protested.



“Ran out of gas,” the old witch lied. “Everybody off the bus. Wait right here. I’ll fill the tank, and I’ll be right back for you.”

Pushing and shoving, gouging and hitting, the children clambered down the bus steps. They milled around in a pack as Miss Evert closed the door. They watched the big yellow bus pull away leaving a hanging cloud of dust as it bumped down the dirt road out of sight.

Some of the kids fought with sticks they’d picked up off the ground. Some threw rocks at birds. Some chased others, pulled hair, taunted the weak.

It got dark.

Two huge shapes rose from behind the brick wall.

And stepped over.

Morg and Taint, two gigantic trolls, friends of the old witch, herded the squealing children up against the wall. Some kids tried to scatter and run. Morg caught them and dropped them in his basket.

Some kids clustered together hugging each other and sniveling in fright. Taint scooped those into the basket, picking up six or eight at a time.

Tommy Norton tried to poke Morg with a stick. Morg snatched him up in one claw and squeezed his head till his brains gushed out his nose.

Monica tried to hide in a niche in the wall. When Taint tried to pull her out, her arm came off, so he ate her on the spot before she bled out.

Soon every kid left alive was safely in the basket.

The only thing left on the road was the basketball.

Morg kicked it into the bushes.

Late that night, Morg and Taint lounged in front of their camp fire. Taint stretched leisurely and



yawned, his yellow fangs reflected the moon. Morg covered his mouth politely as he gave a soft belch. “Excuse me,” he said. “Those certainly were good children.”

“Yes, indeed. Best we’ve ever had, don’t you think? Miss Evert out did herself this time.”

“Yep,” Taint said. “Those really are good children... any left?”

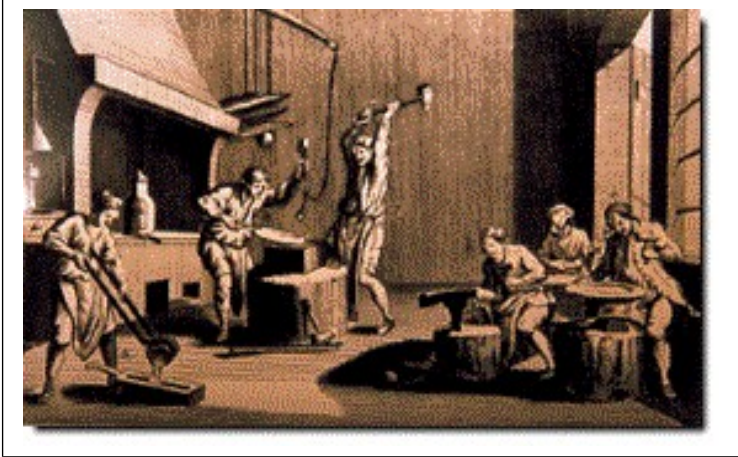
“Six or eight, I think,” Morg said, lifting the lid of the basket and reaching inside. He lifted out a squirming child, admired it in the moon light, then bit down. Juices ran down his chin and dripped on his hairy chest.

“Good children,” he said wiping his mouth on his forearm, “Really good children.”





MOVE OVER, PAUL REVERE ¹



Paul Revere's Silver Foundry

There was no way my wife could find out about it.

She'd never suspect a thing.

I'd be able to do it without her getting the slightest inkling. Her church choir would practice for their Christmas special music for at least four hours. That would occupy her all evening, and I would be alone in the house—supposedly innocently watching tv.

Also, both the boys planned to spend the night at Stevie's house after their Boy Scout meeting. No one in the family would know for sure where I was or what I'd be doing. I would be free to pursue my secret plan.

Even before she left, I casually began to get things ready. Under the pretense of fixing myself a snack, I checked the silverware drawer. The spoons were there in the back. Solid silver. Antique flatware,

¹ Nonfiction. This really happened in the early 1960s.



an inheritance from my wife's aunt. We seldom used them. They'd never be missed. And the old cast iron pot we used in summer camping rested uselessly in the cabinet under the oven. It also was expendable.

As I banged around in the kitchen, I practiced not looking guilty. I feared my expression might betray me. But I succeeded in appearing innocent; she left for church never suspecting a thing.

I chuckled with anticipation.

The car no sooner cleared the drive than I started work. I pulled the charcoal grill out of the utility closet and carted it into my den. There was a heavy rain that night so I had to do it inside; besides, I didn't want nosy neighbors observing my clandestine activities.

The tin snips weren't in my tool box!

I nearly panicked. Where were they? Would scissors do? I rummaged around getting out the charcoal and a can of fire starter. Then I remembered seeing Freddy using the tin snips for some Boy Scout project. I dashed up to his room. Lord, what a mess! He had cached the snips and a spool of wire in a tennis shoe under his bed. Thank God I stumbled onto them.

I threw open the den window for ventilation, pyramided the charcoal in the grill, soused the briquettes with starter fluid and lit the fire.

Too much smoke.

I ran back to the utility closet and pulled down a fan from the shelf. Plugged it into the hall socket and positioned it so the flow of air pushed the smoke back toward the den and mostly out the window. Good.

Back to the kitchen. How many spoons would I need? The silver looked thin. Three ought to do; better make it four.



Using the tin snips, I cut the spoons into small chunks—silver is tougher than it looks—and I dumped the chunks into the iron pan and set it on the grill in the den.

Everything was going fine.

Now for the plaster. There wasn't any plaster. I was sure I had a box somewhere. Last time I saw it was... Halloween! Just before Halloween, Johnny had been making a plaster statue of Frankenstein's monster. I dashed up to his room.

How could he have gotten the whole box wet making one little statue? Hoping there was powder in the bottom, I peeled the cardboard away. A solid white brick. I could have scalped him. Why don't those boys ever put away...

The only thing to do was to jog down to the corner Quick-Mart. I had to have that plaster of Paris. I checked my fire and started sloshing through the rain. The store had one box left on the shelf. If only I could get it home without getting it wet. I should have driven her to church, then I'd have the car.

When I got back, the iron pot was red hot and the little silver giblets had turned black; but they weren't any softer. I added more charcoal. Dropped some on the living room rug... Clean it up later.

I mixed the plaster over the kitchen sink and poured it into a shallow aluminum pie pan. While it stiffened, I went to my desk to get the arrowhead.

Actually, I think it was a spear point; it's too long to fit on an arrow. When I was a teenager, I found it underwater while diving in Florida's Ichetucknee Spring. Some Paleo-Indian chipped this flint into shape long before the Spaniards landed. A flawless stone blade, primitive and lethal, yet possessing the balanced symmetry of perfection. It



looks as “right” as an egg, or a feather, or a sand-dollar.

Ever since I was a boy myself, I’d kept it nested in white cotton in an old watch case in my bottom drawer. Such care seemed incongruous, for it had remained keen-edged after maybe 10,000 years on the river bottom. Once, perhaps, it had been embedded in the hide of a mastodon or saber-toothed tiger; now, I was going to cast its exact proportional shape in silver as a Christmas present for my wife.

Envision it, an elegant slender taper of silver on a delicate silver chain against the deep royal blue of her best dress. Such simple perfection. Such loveliness. Besides that, it wouldn’t cost anything.

Having bought the boys a road-racing set at a price which would dent Rockefeller’s budget—also two pair of skates, two BB guns, and a puppy (still to be picked up at the kennel), I was near broke. So the silver arrowhead represented a gift which would be beautiful, meaningful, valuable (the price of silver being what it is) —and cheap.



My father was a molder and I absorbed the general idea of metal casting from him. All you have to do is melt the metal, pour it in a mold, let it cool, and voila! -- the precise replica of your pattern. Only... Only my silver wouldn't melt.



A Silver Tankard made by that other Paul Revere

It seemed no softer than when I'd first cut it. I tried to remember how my father melted metal in the foundry... a Blast Furnace! Much hotter than a regular fire. What a brilliant idea.

Taking the canister vacuum cleaner out of the closet, I fastened the hose at the exhaust outlet so the vacuum blew instead of sucked. I threaded the flexible hose through the lattice-back of a chair and aimed the nozzle directly into the bed of coals. What heat. That should do the trick.

Back in the kitchen, I buttered my precious arrowhead so plaster wouldn't stick to it and I pressed it into the pie pan. After a bit, I lifted it free and there was its exact impression in the plaster. I felt inordinately pleased with myself. Paul Revere,



move over; another skilled silversmith is in the making.

The pungent stink of something burning interrupted my self congratulations.

I dashed into the den. The jet of forced air from the vacuum blew the grill's heat laterally against the door to my den. The paint blistered. The door smoldered. But the silver in the pot was beginning to puddle. I refused to stop this close to success.

Rushing to the yard, I tripped over a sprawled bicycle—last Christmas'. "Never buy 'em another present," I muttered groping for the garden hose. I poked a hole in the den's screen window, shoved the hose through and twisted the spigot full blast. Dashed inside and tried to capture the end of the hose which thrashed around like a wounded octopus. Caught it. Soaked the door enough to stop its smoking. Let the hose go again and dashed out to jerk the flailing thing back outside.

Scrambled back inside. Thank God, the silver was liquid. But the hose had wet my fire. I rushed the molten, but cooling liquid, to the kitchen and poured it into my plaster mold. Good Lord! I forgot the eye for the chain in back. Quick. Before the metal hardens.

I snatched a little can of apple juice out of the refrigerator, popped the top, and thrust the aluminum ring part-way into the back of the hot silver arrowhead. Whew...

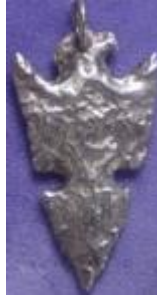
I sagged against the kitchen counter, breathing. I ran a little cold water in the pie pan, then cracked the mold open. The silver arrowhead came out exactly as I envisioned it—only more beautiful.

The fire still blazed in the grill. The vacuum roared. The door smoked. The hose gushed in spastic arches on the lawn. And the front door burst open.



Freddy and Johnny rushed in. “Dad. Dad,” they yelled, “We saw smoke from Stevie’s house. What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Calm down, Boys,” I said. “I want you to help me clean up this mess and swear to keep it a secret. Nothing’s wrong. I’m just making your mother a necklace for Christmas.”



A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE BLUEGILL MOUND



In his *De Oraculorum Delectu*, *Plutarch* records that in the reign of The Emperor *Tiberius* an Egyptian ship's captain named *Thamus* piloted his boat through a violent storm which blew the vessel far out into the Atlantic.

Contrary winds pushed the ship west for days before *Thamus* regained control of the helm and made landfall at a coast he called *Epirus* (location unknown). Desperate for fresh water the sailors entered the mouth of a broad river. As *Thamus* neared the shore he heard many voices in the forest by the river screaming in grief, wailing and weeping and mourning as they shouted, "The great god *Pan* is dead! He's dead! The great god *Pan* is dead!"¹

Terrified, *Thamus* and his crew refused to land but chose to retrace their course to the east. After a brutal voyage the ship landed at *Sardis* where the

¹ Παν ο μεγας τεθνηκεν! (Pan o megas teqnhken!)



sailors spread the news they had heard from the eerie grieving voices in the forest.

Examining Plutarch's calendar of events during the reign of Tiberius, from ancient times, scholars have dated this incident as having occurred on December 25th in the year One.

As the attached preliminary report proves, I believe I have located the site of ancient Epirus in Northeast Florida.

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE BLUEGILL MOUND

Because of slanderous remarks printed in the popular press, I feel it is only right that I begin this report with a brief statement of my professional qualifications:

I majored in archaeology at Florida State University graduating in 1974 and I earned my masters from the University of Arizona. I traveled to Germany and received my Doctorate from Tubingen University.

After that, I returned to Florida and for the past six years I have been a field archaeologist for the Florida State Historical Survey Board. During this time, I have acted as a consultant for the St. Augustine Restoration Commission. I have also conducted underwater research in the caves of Wakulla Spring and directed the excavation of the Interstate Highway System in the State of Florida. My mission for the Survey Board is to excavate and preserve historic and prehistoric sites threatened by construction and development as Florida's population expands.

Never before in my career has my professional integrity been called into question.

The Bluegill Mound is located in Mandarin, Florida, a suburb of Jacksonville. Mr. Fred Dubbs, a



surveyor working on the Route Planning Commission laying the path for Interstate 295—Jacksonville Bypass—brought the mound to my attention. The property on which the mound is located has been in the possession of the Bluegill family since 1912. Before that, this parcel, a 500-acre tract, numbered Du58 through Du62 in the University of Florida site survey file, was part of one of the McIntosh indigo plantations; and before that, it was included in the Don Benito land grant from the Spanish Crown. The land was purchased by the Federal government in 1996. In so far as I can determine, no previous owner of the land had the educational background necessary to perpetrate a hoax.

On November 12, 1997, I began excavation of the mound with a team of six archaeology students from Jacksonville University. Our first step was to clear the mound of dense undergrowth. The mound was covered with smilax, scrub palmetto and the thickest profusion of wild grape vines I have ever encountered. This may have been a clue to our later discoveries. We also removed four holly trees and numerous small oak trees. A large water oak, approximately 48 inches in diameter, which grew near the summit of the mound, we left standing at that time. There was absolutely no evidence that the mound had been disturbed in recent history.

The cleared mound proved to be an elongated oval eight feet six inches high and thirty-four feet long. The oval was oriented on an east-west axis and the west end was cut away by erosion due to inroads of a salt marsh at that end of the mound.



I decided to run a step trench from the east end of the mound to determine if the contents were of significant value to warrant the labor of removing the large water oak. I drew a base line along the longitudinal axis of the mound and laid out a grid system to pinpoint the exact location of each artifact uncovered. This entire dig was conducted in a totally professional manner; our techniques and procedures can be verified step by step from the extensive field notes compiled by myself and Ms Rita Wilson, who acted as recorder. I am confident that any intrusion into the mound since it was originally constructed would have left evidence which we would have discovered.

There was no such evidence.

With the exception of Dale Green, the team photographer, all the students had worked with me on previous digs in the Duval County area. We rotated the duties so that each student could gain experience in every phase of work. Two men worked as excavators, another two took the wheelbarrows of dirt to the dump area where one man ran the dirt



through a sieve to filter out small articles. I personally charted and recorded artifacts in the trench while Ms. Wilson recorded beads, potsherds, teeth, etc. recovered by the sieve.

The work proceeded slowly because the ground was interlaced with matted roots from the extensive vegetation which we had removed. At no place in the work did we find this system of roots previously disturbed. This indicates that the primary burial must have remained intact since the original interment. If these remains are proved to be a hoax, then the perpetrators must have been Indians, and they did not cultivate goats.

In Grid E6, under two feet of soil, we uncovered the remains of an intrusive or "basket" burial. These remains included two adult males, three adult females, and a child of undetermined sex. The only artifacts associated with these bones were 18 clay beads and the shards of an incomplete bowl (St. John's Check Stamped, Phase III, sand-tempered). This pottery dates these remains in the late 16th Century. Such "basket" burials are quite common in Florida. The people who made them were not Mound Builders themselves, but moved into the area at a later time. These people, the Timuquana, still considered the mounds as "sacred ground" although they did not build mounds. Instead, the Timuquana stored the bodies of their deceased in a charnel house in their villages until all the flesh rotted away. All the bones in the charnel house were then gathered into a single basket which was buried in the side of an existing mound.

In Grid Es3, we uncovered the skeleton of an adult female, approximately 20-years old. Hers was a typical burial of the Florida Mound Builders. Apparently, each mound was begun around the palm log crypt of some chief, shaman, or other important individual who would be the primary burial. A small

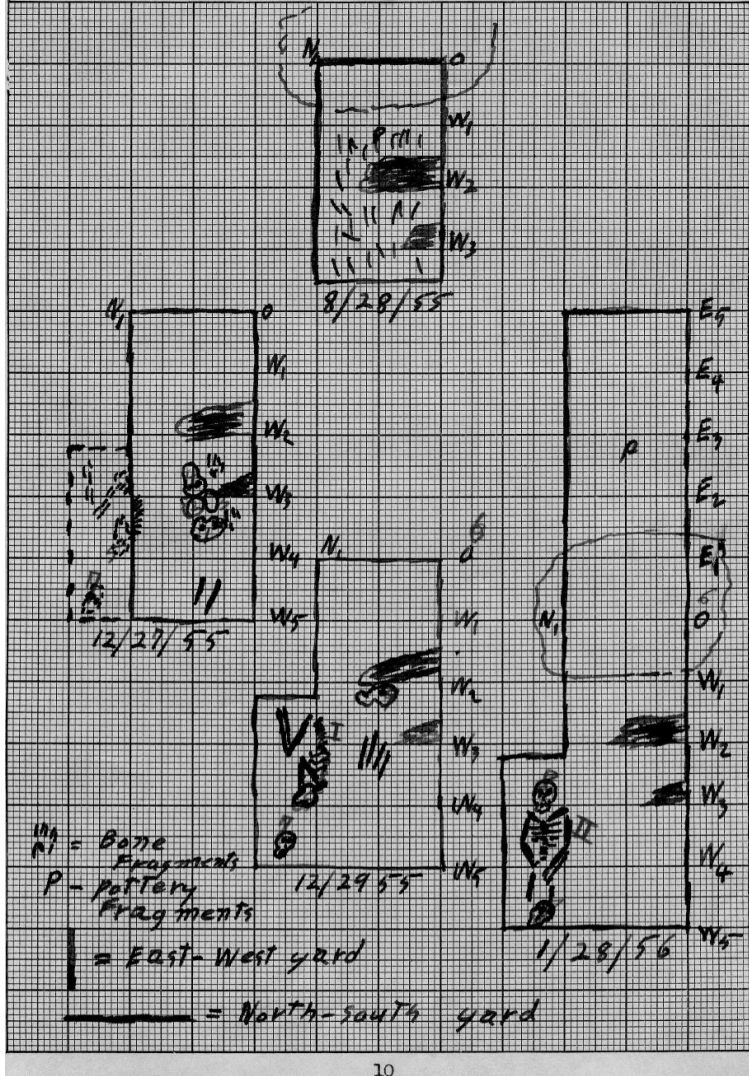


mound would be raised over his crypt. As other individuals in the tribe would die, their bodies would be placed on the original mound in a flexed position and covered with dirt mixed with iron hematite to give the earth immediately around the body a red coloration, possibly signifying blood or life. Then the grave was covered with a thick layer of oyster shells to protect the body from animals and then more dirt was added to smooth out the contours of the mound. The skeleton in Es3 had been buried in this manner.

Her funeral offerings included two small bowls (Deptford series-shell stamped) and six flint arrowheads. A polished soap-stone pendant lay above the sternum. All the bones were badly broken up by the inroads of tree roots. After the mound was fully excavated, we found it contained twenty-one (21) individuals buried in this secondary fashion. All were young females of approximately the same age. Later findings show that, other than the primary burial, there were no males or children buried in this mound, but fetal remains indicate that sixteen (16) of these females were pregnant at the time of death. In the light of later discoveries, these fetal remains bear further investigation. At the time we uncovered this first complete skeleton in Es3, we had detected nothing at all out of the ordinary about this mound.



At Mayport, near Jacksonville, in 1564. Huguenot Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues made this engraving showing naked Timuquana maidens in a religious ceremony with obvious sexual connotations.



The first indication that this mound contained unique remains occurred in grid Nw-18, at a depth of five feet below the present-day ground surface. There we uncovered a rough slab of coquina rock. This slab (6'X2'4"X3") lay in a horizontal position supported by four vertical slabs of the same material thus forming the first rock crypt found in the state of Florida. At first, I thought this was of Spanish construction because the Spanish made extensive use of coquina in their building programs. However,



no object of European origin was uncovered during the entire excavation. Unless the skeleton in the primary burial came from Greece, I believe that the crypt was constructed by Native Florida Indians.

When we had removed enough sand to see that a rock crypt was involved, I decided to enlarge the trench, and, starting at the present day surface, began to systematically level the entire mound.

The five slabs comprising the crypt were not joined with mortar. They appeared to be natural slabs of unworked stone. At the northwest corner of the crypt, the stones did not touch and we found that it was not completely filled with sand.

Survey Board staff photographer Dale Green mounted a camera and fiber-optic light system on a periscope affair, and with this equipment, he was able to photograph the inside of the crypt before we removed the top slab. His photographs revealed the hollow chamber to be about two feet high with a smooth floor covered with sand washed in through the spaces between the stones of the coquina structure. The photographs also revealed a large effigy urn (Weeden Island-incised) partially buried in the silt and lying in such a position in the SE quadrant that it would have undoubtedly been broken as we removed the top slab if we had not been aware of the urn's location. Mr. Green has published a monograph on his periscope camera in *Antiques Technology* (Vol. IV #3. 1998). This technique should prove invaluable in examining other ancient tombs before they are opened.

By rigging a block and tackle system from an overhanging oak branch we removed the top slab of coquina. We also removed the long side-slab at the south end to facilitate excavating the crypt. By this procedure, we recovered the effigy urn intact.



From this point on, I did the actual digging myself using small hand trowels and brushes. The rain-washed silt covered the floor of the crypt to a depth of 18 inches. Starting at the open south end of the crypt, I cut away vertical layers of sand down to virgin soil.

The first bones I uncovered were the humerus, radius and ulna of a left arm. The individual was stretched out on his back with his head to the east. From the small size of these bones, I first thought it was a young boy's burial. Among the bones of the left hand was a primitive wind instrument consisting of a graduated series of short vertical flutes bound together with the mouth-pieces in an even row. The pipes of the flutes were carved of polished soapstone and they were bound together with hammered copper bands.

I uncovered the ribs and found eight fresh-water pearls in the thoracic cavity. There were also twenty copper beads and, by carefully removing the sand in the rib cage and charting the position of each bead, I was able to reconstruct the necklace as it must have been when it was originally strung.

As I worked down towards the hips, I realized for the first time that the bone structure was peculiar; the pelvic girdle seemed twisted and the upper ball joints of the femurs were set at an angle to the side. In the center of the pelvic girdle was a tapering curved shaft of bone fifteen inches long with smooth nobs at each end. It was a baculum (penis bone) such as is found in mink, dogs, goats, and whales.

At this point only the mid-section of the skeleton was uncovered and I coated the revealed bones with a mixture of cellulose acetate in sute to prevent their deterioration.



Near the left shoulder of the skeleton, I uncovered a shallow bowl (Weeden Island-cord marked) filled with oyster shells and peach pits, apparently the remains of a votive offering. Then I uncovered the skull itself. It was cracked in two places, probably the result of tree roots. However, the flicking of my brush revealed that growing from the temporal bones were the castings of two back-curving eight-inch corrugated horns. And, when I removed the sand covering the unfamiliar bone structure below the pelvis, I found that his legs ended in small hooves.



Daddy Breaks The Egg Spell



When Daddy went down to the convenience store for a half-gallon of milk, he brought a witch back home with him.

Actually, he didn't bring her right back, he came home, got Mom, and the two of them walked back down to the park near the store and brought the witch back.

Of course they didn't know she was a witch, although I don't suppose it would have mattered if they did. As far as they were concerned she was just a girl sleeping in her sleeping bag on the ground in the park. The woman at the convenience store told my Dad about her and to him the most natural thing in the



world was to go get her and bring her home to our house.

My Mom and Dad are very religious and they take seriously the Gospel teaching about caring for the sick and naked and hungry. I suppose that sort of thing is alright, but I think you can be a good Christian without getting all that involved and going to so much trouble. I think charity begins at home, and if we kept in our own family all the money they send off to missions and orphans overseas and all that stuff, then we could probably have our own pool or something.

Anyhow, when Dad set the half gallon of milk on the table and said to Mother, “There is need”, I knew we were in for bother and aggravation. *There is need*—that what they always say to each other when one of them has some charitable project to be acted on without explanation or delay. It’s a secret signal between them—Big Secret! Even Ellen knows that one.

They said that like on the time Dad and I came home one Christmas Eve and found Mom pulling presents out from under our tree and snipping off the name tags and putting the gifts in a shopping bag.

“What’s going on,” Dad asked.

“There is need,” Mom said, “Pack up all the groceries we can spare for a family of three. Susan, you get three sleeping bags out of our camping gear in the garage. We only have about 20 minutes.”

Dad and I rushed off to our appointed tasks without another word of explanation. Until later.

It turned out that Mom had met this woman on the bus—she was a crack addict or something—and this woman and her kids had just moved into town so they didn’t qualify for welfare, or Food Stamps, or anything; so Mom was fixing up a Christmas for them.



We hurried to get the stuff ready because the woman was supposed to get home by three o'clock and Mom wanted the stuff there by then.

Dad drove like crazy across town to get there before the woman got home and we put all the things on her front porch and left quick so she would not ever know where the Christmas goodies came from.

Mom and Dad always tried to give things in secret.

When I was a little kid, I got excited over doing things like that, but as I grew up, I realized that it was sometimes my stuff they were donating to the poor.

Screw the poor!

After I graduate and go off to college, the poor are going to have to look after themselves. Be responsible. Take the consequences of their actions. I'm a Republican.

There have been times Mom and Dad have given help to someone only to find out that they were really better off than we are! But they keep on doing it. So it was no big surprise when they came in with this girl who'd been sleeping in the park.

She looked a mess. She had long straight black hair, tangled and matted. It looked like it had never been washed. Her face was as pale as paper and her eyes looked old. Right off I knew she was high on something.

Mom scrambled her some eggs and she wolfed them down only to throw up at the table.

Dad cleaned up the mess. Mom took her in the bathroom and bathed her while Ellen, my little sister, and I made out the living room sofa into a day bed. She flopped on the bed and slept without moving for almost 18 hours.

She told us her name was Sister Seraphim and that she was 20 years old—but I don't think she was really



any older than I am. She said she was a vegetarian and that she'd run away from home—she wouldn't say where—because her father had raped her. She was just traveling around the country living anyway she could. Some guy she hitchhiked with put her out of the car over on the Interstate and she'd walked to the park near our house and crashed there two nights before my father heard about her and brought her home.

My parents explained that she could stay with us until she could get straightened out, but they insisted that she bathe regularly and help with the housework and look for a job every day.

She acted kinda sullen, like she expected to be served, but she accepted their conditions because it was too cold to go on sleeping in the park.

I helped her wash her clothes and all she had were a couple of pairs of jeans and three dark pullovers—no underwear at all! Mom fixed her up with some of our clothes, but she preferred her own.

After that first night, we fixed her a cot in Ellen's room and tried to adjust to having a stranger in our home.

Sister Seraphim—we called her SS—went out every afternoon, but I don't think she asked anybody about a job. I think she just hung around the park, or walked down to the river, or hung around the garage with the local bike riders. At home, she stayed aloof and distant and did her chores sullenly.

Sunday when the rest of the family got ready for church, she slept late, refusing Dad's invitation to go. Dad didn't press, but I could tell he was disappointed. He puts a lot of stock in church attendance. He thinks everyone ought to worship somewhere. He offered to drop SS at some other denomination if she wanted. But she refused.



Sister Seraphim lived with us for about two weeks before I found out she was a witch.

One night I heard Ellen giggling, and I left my homework and went into her room to see what was funny. Sister sat on the floor all tangled up like a contortionist. She said she was praying. She did look funny but sort of solemn too. She said she was praying to the great horned god to reveal the future to her.

I knew that Daddy wouldn't think much of that because we're Christians, and Sister explained that Christ said to love our enemies and satan was our enemy, so we're supposed to love and worship satan.

I'd never heard anything like that before.

It sounded reasonable—but freaky. And I just couldn't put my finger on what was kinky about what she said. Besides, it was exciting and intriguing to have a real live witch worshiping the devil right in my sister's bedroom. I knew I should say something to Mom and Dad.

But I didn't.

It wasn't long before word got around school that we had a special guest at our house. Some of the girls dropped by to hang out and talk to her. Betty Ann Bootus bought a love-portion from her, but was afraid to try it out.

We all felt that the things Sister said and did were a lot of rot, but there was always the lingering suspicion that there just might be something to it. It was all too exotic and a little scary.

Mom and Dad suspected that something was going on (parents always do) but they didn't know exactly what it was and it was too late for me to tell them. I can't imagine what they would have done.



Sister Seraphim showed us a few simple spells to help with homework and to cause pimples to dry up. I got a B on my civics paper and a gooey disfiguring pimple on my cheek popped without me squeezing and it went away almost overnight.

It all seemed rather harmless and helpful until the night we did the egg spell.

It was cold as the mammaries of a sorceress that night. Dad was off to some church meeting. He's an Elder. Mama was watching a *House* rerun on tv. So Sister Seraphim, Ellen, and I were in their room browsing *Facebook* sites and chatting. Ellen said something about wishing she knew what to do next year, sign up for band or take chorus. Sister Seraphim said, "The future is all predetermined. But I can show you what's in your future if you like."

Ellen said, "We won't have to pray to satan, will we"?

"No. All we have to do is work an Egg Spell."

"What's an Egg Spell?" I asked.

"It's simple. All you have to do is break an egg in a glass of hot water at midnight. Stir it up, and look through it at a candle flame. The egg will take the form of your destiny."

"That's all there is to it"?

"That's all."

Well, it sounded harmless enough and there didn't seem anything evil about it at the time. After all, what could happen?

So at midnight by my Snoopy clock, I sneaked back into their room. Ellen had already snuck up an egg for each of us from the kitchen and I brought in three clear water glasses and ran hot water in the bathroom to fill them. Sister Seraphim provided the black candle.



She drew a chalk triangle on the floor, set the candle in the center, put a glass of hot water on each point of the triangle and an egg beside each glass.

We had to lay on the floor to look through them —“prostrate ourselves,” Sister said.

I felt eerie doing that.

I mean with the only light coming from that candle and with us laying so close to the flame, our shadows loomed grotesque and inhuman on the walls. Even the familiar furnishings of my sister’s room appeared strange and distorted from the angle I could see them at. The whole thing felt spooky and Ellen and I showed it by giggling too much.

“Crack your egg at the stroke of midnight,” Sister Seraphim whispered.

I felt like a fool laying on my belly at the point of that triangle with my egg poised over a glass of hot water at midnight.

The whole thing was ridiculous and I started to say so when Sister hissed, “Shut up! You’ll attract demons.”

That startled me. I didn’t want to attract demons. This was just a harmless girl thing, a spell to learn the future. Wasn’t it?

The Little Mermaid clock radio on Ellen’s nightstand clicked and Sister ordered, “Crack your eggs. Scoop all the insides into your glass. Don’t spill any.... Now break the yoke and stir it up with your finger without lifting the glass from the floor.”

Raw egg feels yucky.

“Now look and see your destiny taking shape.”

I peered down through the gunk at the flickering flame.



Strands of slimy yellow yoke mingled with globs of egg white floating in a slow circle in my glass. I looked and looked straining to distinguish some specific shape. But all I could see was glop.

I started to giggle but right then Ellen let out a scream and began to sob hysterically.

I scrambled to my knees knocking over my glass in my hurry. On my hands and knees, I scrambled over to Ellen's side.

"Look at it! Look at it!" she screamed.

And I looked.



The broken egg still slowly swirling in her glass looked like a skull with one yellow eye and one clear.

"I'm going to die," my sister shrieked. "I'm going to die"!



“Hush. You’ll wake up Dad,” I said... But I was too late.

Dad burst into the room with Mom right behind him still pulling on her robe.

“Ellen, what’s the matter, Baby,” he asked though his tone changed as he took in the occult paraphernalia and he demanded, “What the hell’s going on here”!

With that he snapped on the wall switch and light filled the room. He stood there looking like a fierce, protective, pot-bellied Greek god in boxer shorts. For the first time I noticed that the hair on his chest was white. His stance was that of a tv wrestler on *Friday Night Smackdown*, or a warrior-gladadiator steadfast to defend his home. My thin-haired Father looked like all the solid authority in the world planted there like an oak beside the dresser.

“What’s going on here,” he demanded again.

As I stammered out the explanation his countenance clouded over, a thunderhead building up, darkening with my every word.

“Enough!” he stated. “There will be no more of this, girls. Worship the Lord thy God. Him only shalt thou serve!

“Sister, you are a welcome guest in this home; you may stay as long as you wish--But if you cast any more spells in this house, I’ll turn you over my knee like my own daughter.”

Then for the first time since I was eight years old and built a fire in the closet, my father gave me and Ellen a spanking. It was just a single whack but that was all that was needed; that spank brought bright solid reality back into focus.

But I couldn’t believe Sister’s behavior. She actually tried to intimidate my Father.



“Don’t you dare disturb the emblem,” she snarled. “If you disturb the triangle you may call up an angry demon.”

“The most damnably angry thing you’re likely to see tonight is me,” Dad said.

With that he snatched up Ellen’s glass, raised it to his lips and drank the whole thing down. Raw egg and all!

“That ends that nonsense,” he said smacking his lips. “You can’t cast spells with eggs from a convenience store.”

He snuffed out the black candle with his foot stamping it into the floor.

“Girls, Rinse out those glasses and go back to bed,” Mom said.

Sister Seraphim stayed two more days.

We never saw her again after that. I heard that she’d moved in with some guys from the motorcycle shop.

The night she left, as Father said grace at the dinner table, he said, “Lord, thank You for food, health, and safety. Bless the child we took in and keep giving her the best she’s willing to accept from Thee.

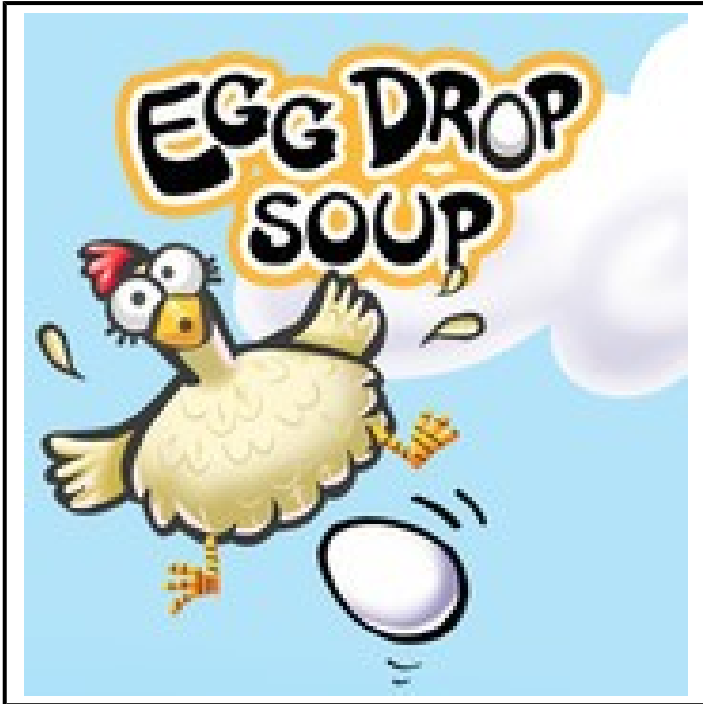
“Thank You for the privilege of caring for this stranger. It was hard on us and I hope we did the right thing. Next time please send us some jolly wino or gentle old widow woman. I know You told us to take in strangers, but it seems like every year they get stranger and stranger!

“Bless us, Lord, and keep us, we pray. Amen.”

Ellen and I never dabbled in the occult again and Dad never mentioned it again...

But once.

We were eating out at a Chinese restaurant and when the waitress brought our egg drop soup, Dad peered deeply into his bowl and announced, “In the swirl of this egg, I foresee the future... It says you girls are going to pay for this meal out of your allowances.”



—End—

HARD SELL



It did not look sinister when he took it out of his mail box. It was an oversized, glossy silver envelope with his address showing through the cellophane window—an advertisement. Third-class junk mail. One of those computerized form letters with his name printed in bold face type at various places throughout the text.

Here's what it said:

A Special Offer For Matthew B. Willis

Mr, Matthew B. Willis of Apartment 2-B, 2130 Thelma Street, Jacksonville, Florida, 32208

Matthew B.. Willis. You have been selected by our computer to receive this special offer. Your 1998 Ford Fairlane is presently equipped with Michelin Series 34 tires. You have now driven 6,821 miles on these tires. If you bring your car to our SILVERGLOSS Service Center at 1322 Crimson Road, we will remove these old tires and replace them with a set of **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tires.

Mr. Willis. you can own these fine **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIAL TIRES** for only \$839,73, plus your old Michellns.

Each year thousands of people are injured in accidents caused by blowouts. The **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-**



BELTED SAFETY RADIAL is guaranteed to be the safest tire on the market. Why trust your safety to anything less?

Mr. Matthew B. Willis, before August 15th bring this certificate to our service center for your special preferred customer discount.

If you come in on or before this deadline, you will also receive—at no additional charge whatsoever—a Free **SILVERGLOSS** sun screen visor to protect your car's interior from damaging rays and heat.

EnTIREly Yours,
Harry L. Boan
Service Manager

Matthew Willis tore the circular in half and tossed it in the trash, a rash action.

On August 18th, there was another Silver-gloss advertisement in his apartment mailbox. It too was personalized by the computer:

A Special Offer For Matthew B. Willis

Mr. Matthew B. Willis, 2130 Thelma Street, Apartment 2-B Jacksonville, Florida 32208

Dear Mr. Willis,

Our records show that you have not yet taken advantage of our special offer on **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tire.

Mr. Willis, do you realize that the streets of Jacksonville, Florida, are littered with glass, nails, and many other sharp objects which could puncture your tires and cause a dangerous blowout? Each time you drive, your life depends on your tires,

Nation-wide, last year, 67,027 deaths or injuries occurred due to tire malfunctions, **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tires, are guaranteed against such malfunctions.



Mr. Matthew B. Willis, we have extended your deadline for exchanging your used tires (which now have 7,021.3 miles on them) until September 25th. And, since we have increased our inventory, you, Matthew E. Willis may purchase these new **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tires, for only \$739.19 plus your used Michellns.

Do not fail to take advantage of this fabulous offer!

EnTIREly Yours,
Harry L, Boan,
Service Manager

He also threw this ad in the trash.

On September 27th, there was another circular in his mailbox:

A Special Offer For Matthew B. Willis

Matthew B. Willis
2130 Thelma Street,
Apartment 2-B
Jacksonville, Florida
32208

Dear Matthew,

The Florida State Highway Patrol reports that in the first eight months of this year 7,932 traffic accidents have occurred on Florida highways. 5,218 of these involved drinking drivers, and 2,708 involved tire malfunctions. Six were due to miscellaneous factors.

In tire-related crashes, 8,688 people died or were horribly mangled; legs broken, teeth cracked, faces smashed.

There were disembowelments. Tire malfunctions are dangerous.

Matthew, your tires now have 8,102.6 miles on them. For your own safety Matthew Willis you must consider taking advantage of our generous offer. We have once again extended your deadline and reduced the price. Your revised



deadline is October 31st, Halloween. and your adjusted price is now only \$639.26 plus your used Michelins.

For your convenience, you may use any major credit card.

Of course, you understand Mr. Matthew B. Willis that having missed your original deadline, you are no longer eligible to receive the free **SILVERGLOSS** sun screen visor.

EnTIREly Yours,
Harry L, Boan,
Service Manager

Into the trash.

On November 5th, there was a three-by-five yellow paper in the apartment mailbox, a notification for a certified letter. Matthew had to go to the branch Post Office to sign for the letter. It was from the tire company. Another computer-personalized form letter:

Special Offer

Matthew B. Willis
2130 Thelma Street,
Apartment 2-8
Jacksonville, Florida
32208

Mr. Willis:

Your third extended deadline has now passed and you still refuse to take advantage of our generous offer on **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tires. Perhaps you do not realize that this offer is for five tires; we include a brand new spare in this offer and installation is free!

That is five mounted, balanced tires for only \$639.26 plus your old tires in trade,

Mr. Willis, you must consider not only your own safety but also the safety of others. Our computer shows that in order for you to drive from your home at Apartment 2-B, 2130 Thelma



Street, to your place of employment at 1306 Burkshire Avenue, you must past through two School Zones.

What would happen if you had a blowout and crashed into a group of school children? Imagine the mangled bodies of the little children. Hear the thud of the impact. Picture a broken child sprawled across your maroon hood,

Mr. Willis., you can prevent death or serious injury to yourself or others by keeping your 1998 Ford Fairlane. (Lic. # 2F-2255) in top mechanical condition especially with new **SILVERGLOSS 320 STEEL-BELTED SAFETY RADIALS**, the World's Finest Tires.

Willis. you must not be a menace to others. You have only three more days before your November 9th deadline to take advantage of this offer.

EnTIREly Yours,
Harry L, Boan,
Service Manager



A Second Certified Letter:

Apartment 2-8

2130 Thelma Street,
Jacksonville, Florida

Willis,

Why do you persist in refusing to consider either the public's safety or your own? Do you understand the danger you face as you drive to work?

Willis. you cross the Isaiah Hart Toll Bridge every weekday morning between 6:27 and 7:36 a.m. If you have a blowout on the bridge and crash through the guard rail, there is a drop of 141 feet (or 152 feet depending on tidal variations) from the center span before your car hits the water. Beneath the Isaiah Hart Toll Bridge at that point the water in the shipping channel reaches a depth of 42 feet, 8 inches, (again allowance for tidal variation must be made).



Could you survive such a fall?

Your safety, Willis, rides on your tires.

You have a final deadline of 32 hours in which to respond to this final offer. Our previously quoted price stands firm.

EnTIREly Yours,

Boan

At 3:31 a.m. on November 13th, two men clad in silver-gray jumpsuit uniforms with distinctive racing stripes over the pockets pounded on the door of Apartment 2-B. When it opened, the taller man grabbed the pajama-clad occupant's arm saying, "Come on, Buddy. You're going for a ride."

—End—

WHAT HAPPENED AT THEO'S ¹



Something happened to me this morning. I really thought he was going to kill me.

I can just see the headlines now:

Enraged Cook Batters Local Boy To Death!

Actually the humiliation of what happened was worse than the danger, but with all those people staring at me I felt like I wanted to die. I mean, at first I thought I'd have been better off if he had gone ahead and brained me, but now the way things worked out, I'm not so sure. I've been wondering about it all afternoon.

I suppose I should start at the beginning and tell this real slow because you aren't going to believe that

¹ Mostly nonfiction. This really happened to me back in the early 1960s. Yes, I was that dumb.



a Christian could get into so much trouble by just trying to do the right thing. This has been a real eye-opener for me.

My name is Jerry Harness. I'm 17. And I'm on the track team at Andrew Jackson High. As soon as I graduate in two months, I'm going into the Air Force. I've already talked to the recruiter, and it's all set up.

I accepted Christ in VBS when I was 10, and—except for getting mad enough at my two sisters to stomp them about once a week and for looking at girls the wrong way sometimes—I'd say I'm trying to be a pretty good Christian. My hobbies are running and the moped I got for my birthday last year.

Speaking of birthdays, tomorrow is my dad's birthday, and my sisters hadn't picked up their presents yet. I have mine; it's a Civil War sword that I got from Ruddy Hertz by promising to give him my moped when I go into the service. Dad collects old Civil War stuff so I think he'll like it. Anyhow, I already had my present, but my sisters didn't have theirs yet. That's part of what got me in trouble.

Today is Saturday, and before I leave for my basic training, Dad wants me to help him get the house painted. It's been about five or ten years since we painted it last, and the paint's flaking off up under the eaves. Dad gets dizzy standing on a ladder—something's wrong with his inner ear—so I'm supposed to get the high places, and he'll paint the screens and the lower parts of the walls.

Mom has this thing about working in good clothes. She's a fanatic about it, so I keep an old pair of jeans and an old sweat shirt in the back of the closet just for dirty jobs like changing the oil or working on my moped or painting. So this morning, I changed and put on this old raggedy stuff to work in. I left all the stuff from my pockets: my pocketknife, my change, my wallet, my



comb, my keys, everything, on the dresser when I changed.

Since I was going to have to scrape off all the old flaky paint under the eaves before I could paint up there, I wore an old baseball cap with the bill turned around backwards to keep paint chips from getting down the back of my collar.

There are, by actual count, 800,000 eaves on this house, and every one of them need scraping!

You have to stand on the next to the top step of the ladder and reach way up above your head to get to them, and after a little bit of scraping, your shoulders feel like a moose just stepped on you. By the time I'd finished the first two eaves, they'd multiplied to 900,000.

I'd been scraping paint for about two hours when Judy, my 13 year old thorn-in-the-flesh sister, came out to pester me.

"Jerry, I need a favor from you," she said.

"Can't do favors from on top of a ladder," I called down. "You'll have to do whatever it is yourself."

"Aw, come on Jerry. Look, I can't yell about it. Come down here where we can talk."

"How about fixing me a glass of tea, and by the time you get it fixed, I'll be ready to move the ladder. I'm almost finished here."

She wasn't happy about the deal, but she was the one who wanted the favor. So by the time I finished scraping as far as I could reach from that spot, she was waiting at the foot of the ladder with a glass of ice tea.

I would have stayed on top of the ladder if I had known what was going to happen.

"Look," she said handing me the glass, "Marian and I have chipped in together to buy Dad a Timex for his



birthday. We've been paying on it for weeks now. We're supposed to pick it up at National Sales downtown today, but she's off with her scout troop. And Mrs. Carl just called for me to come babysit Tod while she goes to the emergency room with Ritchey—he's cut his foot. I can't get downtown before they close at noon, so can you run down and get the watch for us? Please?"

Well, I thought my sisters ought to get better organized about what they needed to do, but trotting downtown to pick up their gift appealed to me more than scraping off eaves in the hot sun.

Besides, by the time I got back, the side of the house I was working on would be in the shade; so I took her receipt for the watch and jogged downtown. It isn't all that far, and jogging keeps me in shape for track. But just the same, I barely got in the store and picked up the watch before they closed.

Since it was still hot and the shade wouldn't have moved around the house yet, I decided to take my time going back. I strolled over to the park by the library. You sometimes see some really neat looking girls going to the library. That's the real reason I started to go by there. And indirectly that's what got me in trouble.

That's where I met the bum.

He came up to me on the sidewalk about a block from the library. He really looked a mess. He wore floppy shoes—one black and one tan—without any laces. A straggly beard covered his face, and his red, bloated nose told me that, although he didn't seem drunk at the time, liquor must have the best of him.

"Hey, Friend, could you lend me a little change to get a bite to eat? I'm a little down on my luck and need a hand," he said.

Well, my first thought was to keep walking, but that's where being a Christian got me in trouble.



It's funny how one minute I can be thinking about going to the library to gawk at the girls and the next minute thinking about the Sermon on the Mount and vice-versa. But that's the way I am. I wonder if other guys are like that?

Anyhow, right then I remembered what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount "Give to him that asks of thee and him that would borrow turn thou not away."

I also recalled what he said about "the least of these my brethren" being hungry. Obviously, as a Christian I was supposed to do something to help this guy, but I figured that if I gave him money he'd just spend it on cheap wine. So I said, "I'm not going to give you any money, but if you're really hungry, I'll buy you some lunch, O.K.?"

"Sure it is. Sure it is, Sonny. I've been on the road for weeks and I'm starving. Last three days, I ain't had nothing to eat but a can of sardines and a watermelon I picked."

About half a block away I spotted a sign that said THEO'S GRILL.

I said, "Come on. There's a place we can eat right up this street. I could use a couple of burgers myself."

The little storefront cafe was packed with a noon hour crowd of students from the library, secretaries and office workers from the insurance building across the street, and shoppers from the downtown stores. A long counter ran down one side of the room and six or eight booths lined the other wall. A big blackboard containing the menu hung above the cash register by the front window.

We squeezed into a booth about midway along the wall, and before long the waitress brought some hamburgers and potato chips and two bowls of bean soup. I asked Leroy (that was his name) to join me in a



blessing, as soon as I said “Amen”, he snatched up his bowl of soup and guzzled the whole thing down without taking it from his lips. He stuck the two packets of soda crackers that came with the soup into the pocket of his shabby coat. Then, like they say in the Bible, he set upon those hamburgers and utterly consumed them.

I watched in amazement. I’d never seen anyone eat like that before. He must have been starving. I hadn’t even started on my food before he’d finished his.

He sat there chasing down the last crumbs of his potato chips with his fingers; then he began to talk a little funny. “Look, Kid,” he said, “I gotta get outta here. Think I’m gonna be sick. Can’t eat so quick when you done without for a while.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Just need some fresh air. Thanks a lot, Kid.”

With that he got up and left the restaurant, and I sat there finishing my meal. I was disappointed that I hadn’t had a chance to witness to him more, or even give him a tract, but I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. I thought of that verse about entertaining “angels unawares” and chuckled as the thought stuck me that if Leroy were an angel then he really had a great disguise. I was still smiling about that idea when I got in line at the cash register to pay our bill.

Then I reached into my back pocket for my wallet, and my hand closed on a rusty paint scraper—nothing else.

“That’ll be \$6.56 for yours,” said the cashier, an older lady wearing a bright red wig and too much lipstick.

“Look,” I explained, “I have a little bit of a problem. I have to run home to get my wallet. It’s on the”



“HEY, THEO!” she yelled, “BETTER GET OUT HERE! GOT A BUM WHO WON’T PAY!”

Abruptly, all the happy chatter in the diner ceased.

Every face in the place turned to stare at me.

The guy behind me in line took two quick steps backward to put distance between us. And the swinging doors to the kitchen burst open.

Theo stalked out.

He was a huge fat man with tattoos covering both arms. I think he was a Greek or Syrian or something like that. He wore an ankle-length, greasy, white apron and faded T-shirt. And in his big right hand, brandishing it like an Indian war club, he swung a long handled soup ladle still dripping with bean soup.

“WON’T PAY!” he bellowed, “WON’T PAY! WHO’S THE BUM THAT WON’T PAY?”

Several people at the counter pointed at me. Some of them even stood up to point. Theo advanced on me like an angry rhinoceros. The people around the cash register scattered. I think they expected him to bash my head in with that menacing soup ladle.

Holding out both hands to ward off the expected clobbering, I said “Look, Sir, I can explain. I met this man on the street. He was hungry, but I didn’t want to give him any money because I thought he’d spend it on liquor; so I brought him in here to feed him. But I left my money at home. I can run get it and be right back to pay you. It will only take a few...”

“Shut up, you bum,” he roared, “You expect me to believe that garbage? Just look at you. You couldn’t buy nothing for nobody, you filthy tramp. You and that other bum travel together, don’t you? I’ll bet you two try to work this con all over, but you ain’t gonna get



away with it here. Now you pay up or you're gonna be sorry."

I was already more sorry than I can tell, but what could I do? Because of the way I was dressed to scrape paint, he thought I was just another bum. I'll have to admit that I didn't look the part of a clean-cut Christian going about doing good. All I could say was "I don't have any money to pay the bill, Sir. My billfold is at home on my dresser. I can run get it and be right back."

"You think I'm stupid? You walk out that door, and I'd never see you or my money again. You bums make me sick. Why don't you get a job? You're not going anywhere till I get my money."

About then, a bright idea struck me. I said, "Could you let me go if I gave you my father's watch to hold till I get back with the money?"

He went into a rage. He roared at me in some foreign language shaking the soup ladle in front of my eyes. Some of the soup splattered on my clothes. I thought he was going to beat me to death right there in the store window.

Finally, he calmed down enough to say to the cashier, "Vera, call the cops to come pick up the pieces."

I'd forgotten all about the phone; all I'd have to do was call home and have Dad bring down the money. I hated to do that, but I was desperate. "Can I call home and ask my dad to bring the money down?" I pleaded.

Theo considered the idea briefly and then said slyly, "You got a quarter for the phone call?"

My heart dropped.

I didn't even have a quarter for the pay phone.



Why did Jesus let me get on such a mess when I was only trying to do the right thing?

A man at the counter, a Jewish gentleman, I think, said, “Hey, Theo, go easy on the kid; I’ll stand him for a quarter to call home—if he’s got a home.”

Everybody laughed.

I was so nervous that I could hardly dial. The phone rang and rang. I’d never been so thankful for anything in my whole life as I was to hear Dad answer.

While I waited for Dad to come with the money, Theo made me sit on a tall stool beside the cash register, and he stood guard over me tapping that soup ladle in the palm of his hand. He still didn’t believe he’d get his money. All the people leaving the place stared at me as they were paying their bills.

I felt like crying.

After about 900 hours, Dad finally got there, actually I suppose it only took twenty minutes for him to drive down. Theo seemed to feel cheated even with the money in his hand. I went out to sit in the car while Dad settled the bill and talked to Theo. Honestly, I was batting back tears when Dad came out; I’m glad that the Air Force recruiter didn’t happen to see me.

“How did it happen, Jerry,” Dad asked as we started the drive home.

I explained the whole thing even about why I’d gone down toward the library and about how hungry Leroy had been and about my idea about him being a disguised angel. But I didn’t mention the girls’ Timex. Present. I kept their surprise secret.

“You did the right thing, Son, but next time you start downtown carry a little money and change to better clothes. If you look in the mirror when we get home, you can see why Theo thought you were a bum



off the street. But in spite of the trouble, you did the right thing.”

“If I was doing the right thing, then why was everyone so mad at me? Some of those people looked disappointed when Theo didn’t brain me.”

Dad thought a while then said, “What makes you think people will love you for doing good? Jesus did nothing but good, and look what we did to Him. A servant can’t expect better treatment than his master, can he?”

“I suppose not. But I’ve never been so embarrassed or humiliated. It was scary.”

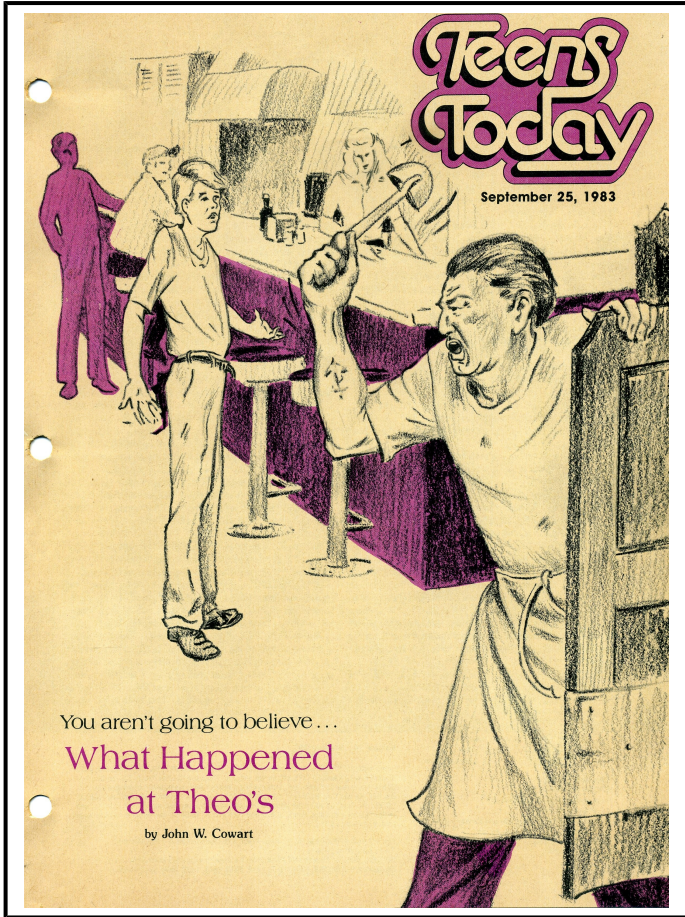
“Well, you can’t learn humility without being humiliated once in a while. I think the best cure for what ails you is some good hard work; Those eaves still need scraping.”

Just as we pulled in the drive Dad asked, “Well, Jerry, what do you think? What will you do next time you meet a disguised angel who needs your help?”

I’ve been thinking about that question all afternoon while I’m up here scraping eaves. I’m not sure, but I think I’ll do the same thing next time. After all, if Christians don’t help the Leroy’s of the world, then who will? And even if it gets us in hot water, Jesus is still worth obeying, isn’t he?

And besides that, even with all the hassle of what happened at Theo’s, it still beats scraping eaves.

—End—



Author's note:
**I wrote *What Happened At Theo's* in 1983.
It was the cover story in *Teens Today* magazine.**

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF WHAT'S-HIS-NAME



The three demons who ruled First Century Caesarea Philippi, a city of lascivious sexual passions where the dums thought they worshiped the great horny god Pan, swooped in listless arcs above the city—bickering loudly among themselves as usual.

The demons, of course, could scarcely fly as honest birds or bats do; instead, each sunset the trio crawled out of their cave beneath the city, climbed up the cliff, and to the top of a high building, and launched themselves on an updraft. Then they tilted their leathery wings to a steep angle and spiraled to catch a stronger thermal to gain height over their domain.

This evening, as usual, they had launched from their favorite spot, a fluted column rising in front of the



great temple which that old reprobate Herod had built to honor Augustus Caesar and Pan.

As usual the three had clawed their way out of the cave in the cliff a thousand feet beneath the temple and scrambled to the top of the column scratching and gouging each other in their nightly race to be first. Like crabs in a bucket, when one seemed to be getting to the top stepping on the upturned faces of the others, those others would drag him down.

This evening, their scrap did not last long because Stud and Gaylord ganged up on Longdong. One biting his tail, the other scratching his face because he had launched first for three consecutive evenings and they rebelled at his lording it over them. Of course, their team work was short lived because although, Gaylord had promised to let Stud launch first if he helped discomfort Longdong, naturally, Gaylord himself had launched as soon as he topped the pinnacle of the temple leaving the other two fighting.

“Sloppy seconds to you both,” he screeched as he flung himself from the column his wings opening with a whomp.

The others stopped clawing each other long enough to spit venom at him.

At any rate, all three finally got airborne and like hunting buzzards sniffing for carrion, they circled the city savoring the stench from the squalid night sins of the dims below.

A few sparse stars glimmered in the murky sky smudged with smoke from thousands of kitchen fires as people in the city cooked their evening meals over dried camel dung, charcoal, or wood depending on the financial status of the household.

From the air, the city appeared as an oasis of Gentile culture set in a barren Jewish setting. Unlike



other drab Jewish communities in the area, this Roman outpost sported statues, baths, race-tracks—exotic color against a plain Judean backdrop. The last few rays of sunset reflected off the white marble columns of Pan’s temple. A smattering of torches outlined the stadium where a crowd was gathering for an animal fight. There, in only a few years Romans would feed both Jews and Christians alike to the unprejudiced lions.

As the demons sailed over, none of the still waters in the 82 pools and public baths of the city reflected their images. Demons cast no shadows. They reflect no light. And they speak and live outside the scope of human perception. Outside the city limits, day’s dying heat still shimmered upward from the desert’s darkening rocks on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon.

The white tile roof of the Roman governor’s lavish palace—presently occupied by one Pontius Pilate whose vanity encouraged him to engrave his name on a plaque at the other Caesarea (found by archaeologists centuries later) as though he owned the place instead of being one in a string of official created thermal demons upward heat.



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At the top of the thermal draft, the air mushroomed out and the demons broke free to soar over Theata Alley and gaze down at the rows of multicolored banners flying in front of the brothels lined up in ranks like the legionaries who patronized them.

Caesarea Philippi boasted the area's finest R&R facilities for the Roman occupational troops and tonight just happened to be a payday, so this section of the city resembled a house to house orgy—much to the disgust of the city's three invisible rulers.

“Bleah, I loath these vermin,” Longdong said glaring at the unaware people far below him. “Look at them rut. Pleasuring in rubbing against each other. I'd line the females' insides with stinging thistles if I had my way.”

“I'd leave the females, but give the all the males organs as flexible as live eels,” Stud said. “Look, there's one at it now; let's try to make him soft, spoil his pleasure, make him think about that promotion in rank he missed getting. That ought to soften him up. Yuch, but I hate dims.”



"Dims ain't much. At least they're pretty sure to fade to black," Gaylord said. "It's the flickers I hate. You never can tell when one of them is going to blaze on you. I wish they'd all stay the way they're born instead of brightening on us."

"That's a stupid thing to say, you puke," sneered Stud. "If they stayed sparks like when they're born, we never get to see them blacken. No, if we just keep them dim long enough, they're food -- Oh, Hell and damnation! Here comes trouble."

From far away, across the foothills south of Mount Hermon, a blacker shadow flapped clumsily, lumbering through the air, propelling itself laboriously across the dark sky.

"Greetings, Tock. What the Hell do you think you're doing. This is our territory," Gaylord shouted.

Ignoring his challenge, Toxicity swooped straight in, scattering the other demons in his haste to gain the thermal.

"Get the Hell out of here. This is our air and you can't have any," snarled Longdong.

"In your eye, if you was a human you'd be a priest or a pansy—maybe both," Toxicity panted, clinging to the thermal as the others pushed him away toward dead air. "Don't do that, Damn you! I got a special mission from Capernaum. I got just as much right to be here as you guys."

"Special mission, Hell. Who'd trust you with stealing toilet sponges? Get out of my face," snapped Stud.

"Got orders straight from Capernaum Council and there ain't nothing you can do about it. So there! Nah, nah, nah."



“The CC ain’t diddle over here. No jurisdiction,” Longdong said, “You got no right coming into my space.”

“I got the right to fart in your face, you slimy afterbirth. My orders come from Lower Down, if you take my meaning—and you’d damn sure better. There’s some light creeping in under the blanket and you’d damn sure better help me squash it—or there’ll be Hell to pay.”

“No need to get nasty, Tock. We was just asking,” Stud said with a wink at his fellows. “You got a different situation there in Capernaum, here we just ... Hey, a dim bitch just snuffed out! Lets get her. Damn it, wait for me. I saw her first”!

When they’d finished with the woman’s screaming residue, the four demons resumed their patrol, and their argument.

“Damn! But I love it when they squirm like that,” Tock said licking his bloated lips. “The look in her eyes when she died and saw us swooping in, the way she pleaded when Stud clapped that first nursing worm to her tit, the way she screamed for her husband to run rescue her when her feet hit the fire, and then cursed him when he couldn’t hear her even though she could see him standing there weeping his eyes out right there beside the bed and whimpering for What’s-His-Name to bless the dear departed little woman—That’s gonna be one eternally miserable bitch—it all makes me want to sing.”

“Makes you want to piss,” Stud said. “Look, you’re dribbling already.”

“So I am. So I am. Here, let me cruise a little over to the left there, I see an evening garden party and the stupid dims ought to have a chance to curse. Bet they blame it on seagulls,” Tock said.



Longdong deliberately bumped Tock's wing as he passed and knocked him into a steep dive on his back. Tock recovered scant inches above the ground and flapped back toward the others screeching.

Gaining altitude, he yelled, "You gonna pay for that. I'm here on an official mission for the CC and you flutters had better respect my position. I ain't about to forget this. I'll laugh while you roast in Hell."

"He's on an official mission. We'd better respect him," Gaylord said. "Else, he might piss on his own leg some more."

"Now, cut that out. You just better hope you live long enough to get prostate trouble—you deserve it," Tock replied.

"What's this official mission for Capernaum? You three sots over there loosing control of your dims again? Too many flickers? More incompetence?" Longdong said with a loud belch in Tock's face.

They all knew about the recent trouble in Capernaum.

The dims of Capernaum, unlike those of Caesarea Philippi, were not given to the common sins of the flesh. No, Capernaum sported an ancient—even for Israel—synagogue. It was a hotbed of pious activity with its own colony of dim religious writers, religious lawyers, and religious insurance agents. No hanky-panky in Capernaum. The dims there refrained from fleshgrunting. They were too proud.

This character trait delighted that city's own triumvirate of demon rulers, Toxicity, Rancid and Cynthia.

"I love religious dims. Double the guilt, none of the pleasure," Rancid always said.



Oh, of course, a few sneak dims now and then played two-back in secret with like-minded folk; but they didn't even acknowledge each other in public. They had to consider their dignity. Most preferred other sins.

The varied thought atmospheres in these two rival cities called for different administrative techniques and the two competing demon triumvirates stayed at each other's throats boasting about how hard their own city was to rule and gripping about how any fool could control the other city.

Their argument had raged for centuries.

"You can keep the pride and resentment of a flicker scholar in Capernaum seething for years till he finally dims out and fades to black," Longdong often complained. "But once a man's gone soft, he goes to sleep! How the Hell are we supposed to keep the vermin sinning if they go to sleep? Now Caesarea, this place takes top demons to make it go on sinning; any gut with a goose quill can keep religious writers at it."

"Nonsense, you twit, " Cynthia always said whenever they met. "All dims worship their own bellies. Everyone of them has an oozing slime god between their legs. It's a cinch to use that god to trap them. When they're young, intrigue them with it. When they're mature, make them cheat the ones they love most with it. When they're too old to get stiff or slick, make them long for what they're missing. You can keep them dissatisfied all their feeble lives—even when sex is at its best. Then when they fade to black, the first thing I always remind them of is that the soft body parts rot first!

"So, with a city given to sins of the flesh like yours is, no wonder Boss can let boobs rule it," she always said.



“On the other hand, the dims we deal with in Capernaum ... Scripture, Scripture, Scripture. It takes real skill to make them ignore what that stuff says and think it’s written for somebody else. We labor under a cruel disadvantage. In Capernaum recently we’ve even had this bright young rabbi who has the audacity to try to twist Scripture so that it seemed to make sense. He’s a pain. Unsettles the whole place. Gets the dim scholars thinking naughty thoughts. His time is coming, you’d better believe it,” she said.

“Fortunately, we are the world’s foremost experts in pride. We ought to be. We are the best. Although, of course, Rancid and Tock are being trained by me. Apprentices, you understand,” she said.

At annual Triumvirate Of Cities conferences for centuries she had said essentially this same thing.

“Ruddy parrot,” Longdong always yelled above the other catcalls.

The Caesarea Philippi Authority (CPAs) naturally hated the Capernaum Council (CCs); so, when the CPA triumvirate learned the nature of Tock’s official mission, they screeched, whined and griped so loudly their caterwauling stirred up a dust storm which coated Caesarea Philippi with yellow grit and drove the dims indoors. But having people curse the dust brought the demons little pleasure.

Like great ungainly vultures bloated with carrion, the four demons glided down to thump into the ground breaking branches and crushing tender plants. Once on the ground, they waddled into Pan’s cave and burrowed down into crevasses to think things over.

Three sulked. One gloated.

The Jordan River runs in an almost north-south line. In the south, at its mouth, the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea, lowest and most salty of all earth’s bodies of



water. From there, the land rises steadily northward to lofty Mount Hermon 11,000 feet above sea level.

At mid-point, the river flows through the fresh water Sea of Galilee on the northeastern shore of which, right by the Jordan, sits the city of Capernaum. About ten miles north of Capernaum, the river widens to form a smaller fresh water lake called in biblical times, Lake Merom.

About 15 miles north of the reedy marshes of Merom, the city of Caesarea Philippi was built in the highlands at the source of the river.

When Alexander the Great conquered the land, his soldiers discovered that the source of the Jordan River ran out from a great cave beneath a thousand-foot-high cliff on the western side of Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi sits on top of this cliff. Alexander named the area Pnias in honor of Pan, god of sexual excess and cruel laughter.

Years later, Herod the Great built a lavish temple to Caesar Augustus and Pan at the top of the cliff above the cave.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus described the place saying, "At this spot a mountain rears its summit to an immense height aloft; at the base of the cliff is an opening into an overgrown cavern; within this, enclosing a volume of still water, the bottom of which no sounding-line has been found long enough to reach, is the pool."

Half that pool of still water lies inside the cave; the other half extends out from the base of the cliff. This water pools inside a deep crevice on the floor of the cave, but part of the cave floor, while damp and dank, remains dry enough for exploration, though it is cluttered with rocks and boulders fallen from the soaring vaulted ceiling.



Alexander's soldiers used to throw victims off the top of cliff down into the pool as a sacrifice to Pan. If the victim sank, the soldiers assumed the god was pleased; if the victim floated to the surface, archers on the cliff used the unaccepted girl for target practice.

Centuries ago, when they were young, Stud, Gaylord and Longdong used to lurk beneath the dark water and use their tails to push live victims to the surface. The ones who hit the water dead from the fall, they let sink. The dim soldiers never did figure out the game and wasted many an arrow better used in battle.

But now a better game was afoot and, because he was bigger, stronger and meaner than the resident demon triumvirate of Caesarea Philippi, only Tock of Capernaum would get to play.

"Big bully," Gaylord whimpered in his crevice in the cave wall, "Comes barging in here like he belongs."

"Quiet, he might hear you. Sound carries in here," Longdong whispered.

"Don't care if he does," Gaylord said, lowering his voice to whisper his reply. "I hope he fails. You know how Boss feels about failing."

"Shut up, Losers," Tock's voice boomed in the cavern, "Someone's coming. Aw, look. Young Love. Ain't that sweet"!

Sprawling Mount Hermon boasts three peaks rising above undulating foothills. The two highest peaks stay mostly snow-covered all year, but the runoff from snow which does melt seeps into the ground only to gush forth in springs around the mountain—the Bible's *Lower Springs of the Jordan*—making the area one of the most lush and fertile in Israel. The steep valley of the Jordan channels moisture into a narrow band along



the river while outside that verdant band dry rocky desert lies envying the valley.

Unlike the land to the south where porous, thirsty limestone drinks up even the rain of Heaven, here to the north, dark basalt rock keeps moisture near the surface. Wheat grows well and pear trees outnumber the olive. Honeysuckle, clematis and wild rose thrive among the huge basalt boulders and oleanders with red, white and pink—but poisonous—flowers grow in forest-sized clumps.

Ancient people entering the cave—where a marble plaque found by modern archaeologists still says, “Sacred to the God Pan and His Nymphs”—brought votive offerings to cast into the recesses of the dark pool. Some worshipers brought incense; some, spices; some coins. No one since the Greeks left threw living women into the pool anymore. But, from time immemorial, virtually every visitor cast a hand-picked and hand-woven garland of oleander onto the water.

Lydia, Marcus, and Flavius all cast garlands in the water; Benjamin, being Hebrew, did not.

Of course, strictly speaking, Benjamin should not have even been playing with the Gentile children and certainly the watery cavern beneath the thousand-foot cliff of Mount Hermon was no place for children of any kind to play. But in the way of children everywhere, the four disregarded the scruples and warnings of their stodgy elders and scampered together near and far over the mountainside and, in their playing, they blundered down the easy southern slope, then back around to the foot of the high cliff on the western side where the pool oozed out of Pan’s grotto.

They all knew they should not be there.

But Lydia, older by two years than the three boys, lured them on with a promise—not stated outright but



hinted—that she knew a new game she just might let them play.

Sensing a provocative wonder, the boys would have followed her anywhere. But once they gathered garlands—Lydia wove an extra one for her hair—and entered the cave, she turned coy, while they, with hot but unfamiliar yearnings, pressed her.

In the way of all mankind, the louder their passions grew, the softer their voices.

“Come on; no body can see us here,” Marcus said.

“There’s too much light. We have to get back further in,” she said.

“This is a good place right here,” Flavius said.

“The ground’s too wet. We have to get back away from the water where it’s dryer,” she said.

Misty blue light filtered from the cavern’s huge entrance. Green lichen-coated boulders had dropped in ancient days from the cave’s high ceiling. Black shadows loomed far back in the cave as the children skirted the edge of the still, silent pool.

“This is back far enough, isn’t it,” Benjamin said.

“No it isn’t,” Lydia said. “What if someone—like one of our dads—followed us down the hill from town. If they came in the front there, they could see what we’re going to do. We have to go back just a little bit more. What’s the matter, scared of ghosts?”

“I ain’t ascaired of no ghost,” Benjamin said.

The boys followed Lydia’s pale figure deeper and deeper, darker and darker, into the cave.

That was the whole point of the older girl’s strategy: she intended to lead them down deep into the dark, then flit way leaving them to find their own way out. She had played this game before with other boys



and thought it great—after all, Pan is the god of fun and games, and somebody has to be his goat.

Feeling her way to the rock ledge she recognized as her turn-around point, she began to pout, confusing the boys more.

“I don’t want you to watch,” she said toying with the bronze pin fastening on her robe.

“We won’t,” they said in one voice.

“You’d peek,” she accused. “I’ll tell you what. Marcus, you go behind that rock, the one that looks like a kneeling camel. Flavius, you go on along the path. No more than ten paces, mind you. Ben, you stay right here. I’m going to go over there behind that clump of cave fern and take something off. When I’m ready, I’ll come out and come to each of you in turn. Be real quiet and no peeking. I’m nervous about this already.”

The three boys separated.

They were real still.

They were real quiet.

Nobody peeked.

Ben could hear the girl moving around in the darkness.

He thought he could hear her breathe.

Ben felt something soft and smooth press against his arm. The aroma of oleander flowers floated softly in the darkness.

“Wow! She picked me first,” he thought.

He opened his arms to receive his visitor and drew the warm flesh close to his own.

Hot moist breath pulsated against his neck.

“Do you want me,” someone whispered.

Ben nodded rapidly.



“Do you really want me,” the voice asked.

“Yes! Yes, you know I want you,” Ben cried. He felt a soft tongue nuzzling and probing his ear—deeper and deeper, probing for his very brain.

Ben shuttered groping in the dark for some familiar texture of flesh. “Do you think we should? I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered.

“Don’t you worry about hurting me, little boy. Don’t listen to anyone but me. Hush. Not another word. Ever,” Tock softly cackled in the dark.

Lydia sat on a rock outside the cave combing her hair and laughing at the clumsy sounds the boys made scrambling out. When Marcus and Flavius broke out into full sunlight, she tossed a pebble in their direction.

“What’s the matter, Get lonely in there,” she teased.

“You cheated. That’s not fair,” Flavius yelled.

“Tough. What are you going to do about it,” she said.

“We’ll show you!” Marcus yelled. And the three began a chase in and out among the strewn boulders in front of the cave until at last they collapsed exhausted and breathless on a grassy bank. Lydia dipped the hem of her tunic into a pool of water trapped in a shallow hollow atop a rock and pressed it to her sweaty forehead. Marcus and Flavius scooped up handfuls of water and drank greedily.

“Where’s Ben?” Flavius asked idly stirring the water.

“Bet he’s still waiting in the dark with his horn up, dumber than you guys,” Lydia said.

“Probably playing with himself,” Marcus said.



“And wishing they hadn’t clipped his foreskin. He’s going to need every inch he can get,” Lydia laughed.

“Hey, Ben! Come on Out!” Flavius shouted. “She tricked us! Come home free!”

No sound came from the cave.

Marcus walked back just inside the entrance. “Hey, Heb. Everybody in. I’m the only one she let do it.”

“Liar!” Lydia screamed. “You never touched me and you never will,” she shouted.

“Wanta bet!”

And the chase began again. Up and down ravine sides, splashing across little brooks, round and round trees—and back to the cave entrance.

“Ben,” Flavius yelled. “Time to head home. Come on out.”

Nothing.

The afternoon sun sank lower in the west. Long slanting beams probed further back into the cavern illuminating places which never saw light except for two hours on late summer afternoons.

The three children ventured back into the cave. Skirting the pool. Calling Ben’s name. Growing apprehensive.

Marcus saw him first.

On a ledge in the cavern wall high above the dark pool of Pan, Benjamin stood silently gazing down at the water. He did not move. When they called, he did not appear to hear them.

“What’s the matter with him?” Lydia whispered.

“Bet the sissy got scared out of his wits,” Marcus said. “Hey, Ben. Nothing to be scared of. It was only a joke. Come on down.”



“Don’t be a baby. Come on down from there,” Flavius called.

Ben took no notice of his friends. He only stared off into space.

“He’s froze up there. We’d better get help,” Lydia said. “You two stay and keep an eye on him in case he falls. I’ll run get his dad. Look, we were down her playing. Got that. *Playing*. If anybody tells, I’ll... You better not tell! You’d just better not.”

She turned and ran.

She ran from the cave entrance, along the bank of the pool, and across a wooden bridge that crossed the infant Jordan. She picked her way over the shale fallen from the cliff’s heights in ages past, then panted up the southern slope of Hermon’s spur.

An exhausting climb. But she did not pause for breath. She ran as though a demon snapped at her heels. Racing through the closest city gate, she pounded to the Jewish quarter where Ben’s father worked in a foundry.

“Sir! Sir. come quick,” she panted. “Ben’s down in Pan’s cave and he won’t answer. There’s something wrong with him.”

“God, help us,” Ezra said, dropping a ladle of molten bronze right on top of the sand mold where he had been pouring the two matching parts of an ornate door hinge.

Stripping off his leather apron, he yelled to the foreman and the other two molders still in the shop that late, “Help! My boy’s trapped down in the cave. Help me rescue him. Help. Hurry.”

The slender Roman girl and the four burly Jewish men dashed back down the path to the cave.



Marcus and Flavius met them at the entrance. Flavius was crying.

“He’s still up there and he won’t come down,” Marcus said. “He acts like he can’t hear us and he won’t say anything.”

“What the hell were you kids doing down here. You know you ain’t supposed to be down here. There’s rock falls and snakes. I’ll swear!” the foreman grumbled.

“Stay out here. We don’t need any more kids to get hurt in there,” Ezra said as he and the other men entered the cave picking their way and stumbling over rocks on the littered cavern floor.

“Look, there he is. How the Hell did he get way up there,” the foreman said. “We gonna need ropes to get him down and some lamps to see by if it gets much darker. Sun’s setting. Obed, go tell them kids out there to run get rope and lamps from the shop.”

“Ben,” Ezra called, “Ben, can you hear me. Don’t be afraid. Hang on. I’ll get you down. Hang on, I’m coming. Hold tight.”

Ezra worked his way toward the cave wall. The cold of the cave after the heat of the foundry and the run down the mountain caused goosebumps to rise on his sweaty back, shoulders and arms.

Reaching the side wall of the cave, the father groped here and there on the surface for some toehold he could use to climb up to the ledge his son stood on. When he found it, the irregularity in the stone wall proved too narrow to afford him purchase. He unlaced his sandals and inched along the crevice barefooted. He faced the wall and groped above his head with calloused fingers, pulling and straining and feeling his way up the unyielding stone. The men below shouted useless directions and encouragement.



Thirty feet up, the ledge widened enough so the man could turn his face from the wall to look up at his son. Ben appeared unconcerned with his father's progress.

"Son? Ben? What are you doing here? What's the matter? Reach over this way. Take my hand. Try not to look down."

Benjamin turned slowly, then spit at his father's outstretched hand.

"Ben!"

The boy scooted sidewise along the ledge, stuck his tongue out at his shocked father, then deliberately stepped off into empty air.

The falling boy's tunic caught on a projection of rock for a moment twisting him in the air. His head, elbow, hip, knee—banged against the wall as he bounced down the hard rock from spur to spur.

He did not make a sound as he tumbled. Nor when he smashed into the dark water.

His body disappeared beneath the pool and the water swirled from some mighty subterranean force swallowing him.

Without hesitation, Ezra leaped from the rock ledge to save his son. In a flat clean dive, he arched far out from the stone wall and plunged into Pan's pool. Forging through the water with powerful strokes, he swam toward the place where he'd seen his son sink.

Ezra dove deep beneath the cold stagnant water groping frantically for the boy. Lack of air forced him to the surface. He gasped, then dove again. And again. And again.

"For God's sake! He's drowning. Help me," he shouted breaking the surface.



“To the right more. He’s more to your right!” someone shouted from the dark poolside.

The father moved right and dove again. His hand brushed hair in the water and he clung to it. Kicking toward the surface, he pulled the boy up after him.

Ben twisted and kicked and clawed. He wrapped his legs around his father’s. He gouged his father’s eyes. He bit.

“Help! He’s got me,” Ezra screamed as the foreman and Obed swam to join the thrashing. “Stop struggling, Ben; you’ll drown all three of us.”

The three men pulled the little boy up on the poolside where without making a single sound, he hit and clawed and scratched and bit.

The three men tried to restrain him without hurting him.

The ten-year-old, small for his age, frazzled them.

When helpers arrived with lamps and rope, they had to use the rope to bind Ben hand and foot. Even then, he fought them all the way up the mountain back into the city.

Ezra and Sarah had called a Greek doctor to see their son. The former slave picked and probed at the boy, looking in his ears, forcing his mouth open with a stick and peering down his throat, examining his urine, palpitating his liver, and asking questions. Ben struggled and writhed and snapped at the doctor’s ankles as the man edged out of reach around the boy’s straw pallet.

Motioning the worried parents outside the hut, the doctor made his pronouncement.



“A mad dog has bitten him sometime in the past few weeks, I’m afraid he has rabies. Or perhaps, he has inhaled bad air and malarial humors have settled in his brain. On the other hand, this could be the early stages of encephalitis or perhaps the final stages of syphilis. I’ll need to run some tests to be sure. Sometimes polio strikes like this or... Or -- well, never mind.”

“Or what, Doctor,” Sarah said wringing her hands as though she hadn’t already heard enough bad news, “We want to know everything.”

“Well, perhaps it is not a disease at all; perhaps the god has claimed your son as his own.”

“Never!” Ezra snapped. “My son is a good boy. He keeps the Sabbath. He’d have no traffic with heathen gods—no disrespect intended, Doctor. Ben’s as smart as can be. He makes good grades in school. He’s tops in his class. He helps me in the shop. He reads the Torah and is just about ready for his manhood ceremony. Wouldn’t surprise me if he grows up to be a rabbi, or gets a good government job, Maybe steward in a rich house. It can’t be Pan. Decent people like us aren’t subject to the superstitions of the heathen.”

The physician sighed.

Why is it people will call in expert medical help, then deny the expert’s diagnosis?

“Yes. Yes, I know you folks are Jews,” the doctor said. “Perhaps, if it comforts you, think of it as just rabies. There’s little difference in the outcome. But there are some therapeutic steps you can take: I want you to keep him tied and don’t let him bite anyone. Keep him quiet and I want you to dose him down good with witchbane and oil—fish, not olive. We’ll know more in a few hours. Now, about my bill...”

The foreman had let Ezra off work for the time it took to see the doctor But he had to go back as soon as



the doctor left, leaving Benjamin still tied and snapping at his mother's hand when she tried to bathe his head with a cool damp cloth.

Thus, Ezra was working at the foundry, a few hundred yards down the street from his home, when Ben snapped his ropes and broke free.

Heat shimmered in the air above the three huge charcoal pits where the molders melted bronze or sometimes even iron. Vast piles of slag—waste metal fused with burned charcoal and sand into glassy sharp-edged rock-like chunks—surrounded the work yard. A bricked-in spring formed a small pool of dirty water, where hot metal pieces could be dipped for tempering; a vat of oil stood beside that for tempering finer tools which would need to hold a sharp edge.

In a lean-to shed in back, four old slaves polished finished metal products on sparking grindstones. A more substantial shed at the front of the yard housed the foreman's desk cluttered with papyrus rolls containing the business's financial records. Another shed to the side housed the pattern shop where two Syrian artists shaped wooden or clay patterns in the form of whatever needed to be cast in metal.

Today's job was a huge bronze bell destined to hang in the hilltop fort near Abila to call Roman soldiers to muster.

Ezra muscled the two halves of the wooden bell pattern into place in two identical large wooden boxes called a flasks. His helper shoveled fine sand into the hollow insides of the wooden bell halves while Ezra inserted cores, small cone-shaped spacers made of sand and glue, at strategic places in the wooden form.

High above the workers, cruising unseen on the thermal created by the furnaces, Longdong, Gaylord and Stud, watched the dims sweat.



“Is that all he’s going to do; pester little boys. I could do better than that,” Longdong said.

“Can he hear us while he’s in the dim?” Gaylord asked.

“I’ve never actually been inside one. I don’t know. But we’d better be quiet just in case he can,” Stud said.

Like vultures waiting in the sky for some sick beast to die, the three circled on silent, near motionless, wings.

Once the wooden patterns were wedged in place with the sand cores, Ezra and his apprentice, packed the heavy wooden flasks with damp sand using heavy mallets to tamp the sand tight over the wood bell patterns.

That done, they called other workmen over to help them separate the two flasks and turn them over. Heaving together, they lifted the wooden patterns free and removed the patterns and cores. This left the exact imprint of the bell inverted in the sand. Ezra cut gates and risers into the sand of the flask; the gates formed holes where the molten metal would be poured into the hollow mold, the risers formed holes which allowed the liquid metal to flow all the way around the bell shape and out the other side. When the metal cooled, the gates and risers would be cut off and their scars polished smooth.

Ezra dusted the inside of the mold with talc to glaze the metal’s surface, gave the mold one final check for imperfections, then called the other men to help him gently move the two flasks together again using pins to line the halves up exactly.

Now came the most exacting and dangerous part of the process.

While Ezra had been preparing the molds, the furnace tenders had been feeding bronze ingots into



heavy ceramic pots blazing red in the midst of the charcoal fires. Four slaves pumped frantically at the huge leather bellows that forced air over the coals. The metal smoked, then glowed, then pooled, ran, and melted in the pots.

A lattice work of stubby posts, timbers, chains and pulleys filled the air above the workyard. The workers swung a metal hook over the flames and latched into the clasps of the first melting pot. The men threw their weight against the chains lifting the sizzling red pot full of molten metal free from its bed in the charcoal. One man guided, while every free worker in the yard strained at the chains.

The crew moved the steaming metal over the empty flasks.

Ezra tilted the pot with a long pole, tipping it gently so that the liquid metal could pour from the lip slowly enough for him to skim off slag to keep the bell free from impurities. The metal needed to be poured fast enough to keep it flowing into every hollow space inside the mold, but slow enough to keep it from clogging in some narrow place and ruining the pour.

As soon as one pot of metal emptied, the crew raced for another; if one layer of metal had a chance to cool before the next was poured in hot, the two would not fuse into a single piece.

“This is getting boring,” Stud said.

“Industrious little vermin. Like dung beetles in a warm pile,” Longdong said.

“Dims don’t have any idea what hot is—not until they fade to black,” Gaylord said. “Speaking of which, that old slave in the pattern shop. Don’t look at him too close. He’s a flicker now, but he’s thinking about going bright on us. See if you can’t take his mind off that. Remind him of his granddaughter’s boyfriend, that



ought to keep him from thinking about What's-His-Name."

"There. That worked for now," Stud said. "But if we don't keep an eye on him, he's going to be eternally lost."

"Don't you just hate it when they flare bright. I remember an old dim whore once who... Well, well, well. What have we here? Here comes Tock riding on his dim; let's see what happens now."

At Ezra's home, Ben snapped his ropes, shoved his mother aside and lumbered out into the street. Without a sound, he paused and sniffed the air. An animal seeking prey. He began running toward the foundry.

A block down the street, he knocked over a little girl herding a flock of geese to market. He kicked the child then charged through the squawking flock of birds, stirring up a cloud of gray feathers.

Entering the workyard, the silent boy spied the crew straining at the chains as a pot of steaming liquid death bobbed in the air above their heads.

Benjamin grinned.

He crouched down on all fours and started creeping toward the sweating men.

Weaving in and out among barrels.

Moving closer.

Staying low.

Stalking.

In the finishing shed, Omar shifted the flat bronze oval to his left hand. His arthritis was cramping his right, but he had to polish his daily quota or there would be no supper. He grasped the mirror blank by its vine-ornamented handle and held it up to the light.



The old man ignored the ordered confusion of the metal pour; his gnarled fingers would be no good on the chains. His hands circled and circled in his routine work, done so long that he performed it without paying attention. He thought about his own problems.

I hope she doesn't fool around and get pregnant, he thought picking up another hand full of grit and rubbing it on the surface of the oval, scrubbing it in with a thick leather glove. Once polished to a gleaming finish, the hand mirror would grace some lady's dressing table where she could brush her hair, apply ointment to her eyes, and indulge her vanity.

She's so pretty and so smart except when it comes to boys, Omar thought. *But how can you tell a young girl about the traps of life. He has no trade. He has no ambition. He has no honor. I wish...*

The old slave rinsed the muddy grit off the mirror and lifted it to the light once more checking for imperfections or irregularities on the shiny surface.

A low shadow moved on the polished bronze.

The old slave, still clutching the mirror, turned from his workbench. A person, silent, menacing, sinister, evil, crept up behind the preoccupied work crew. "Danger! Danger!" Omar screamed just as Ben launched his attack.

The boy leaped clawing and biting onto the naked back of a man right in the middle of the chain-pulling crew. The workman shrieked in surprise and let go of the chain reaching back over his head to pry off his small attacker. His action knocked the hands of the man behind him.

The men remaining could not hang onto the pot of 800 pounds of boiling metal in the air.

"Ease it down! Ease it down," the foreman screamed. But as the weight of the swinging pot tugged



the work crew toward it, the men let go and ran for safety.

The ceramic pot smashed into the ground showering the workers with glowing droplets. The rim of the pot hit a corner of the wooden flask and cracked. Scalding metal poured from the pot casting up smoke and clouds of steam from the ground. Searing metal droplets splattered the flask and the leather-booted feet of men. Rivulets of red hot metal seemed to chase men through the dust, filling in footprints almost before a man's foot left his track.

Like actors high stepping in a comic frantic dance, the workmen ran screaming on smoking feet toward the bricked-in tempering spring. Strong men cried as they stood crowded shoulder to sweaty shoulder huddled together in the little puddle. Their tears cut tracks of white down their smoke-grimed dirty faces.

They looked back in horror at Ben.

"Don't do it, Son! Don't do it," Ezra screamed from his place in the crowd.

Ben had let go of the man he'd first attacked and was now walking slowly, purposely, deliberately toward the pool of scalding metal puddled at the broken pot.

He skirted the edge of the red pulsing puddle and climbed to the top of the big wooden flask where he stood amid the swirling steam and smoke.

Above the pool of liquid metal, Benjamin poised to dive.

"For God's sake. Stop!" old Omar shouted, hobbling forward from the polishing shed. "For God's sake, little boy, don't jump."

Tock froze.



Maddened at the old man, he turned his steed and glared venom at the interfering old fool scurrying across the work yard towards him.

Omar hurried forward with his gnarled hands outstretched pleading. He still clutched the bronze mirror he had been polishing. "Don't move! Don't move. I'll help you down," he shouted.

The metal on the ground began to set; a red and black crust smoked over the liquid heart of smaller puddles. The bigger pools still quivered and jelled, then moved and flowed again from internal heat.

Ezra and the work crew moved cautiously out of the water and edged toward where Omar confronted Ben atop the flask. The old man stood to one side below the boy with his arms outstretched. "Come this way. Come this way, little boy. Take my hand. I'll help you down."

Ben glared down at him with a soundless snarl.

Ezra and the work crew surrounded the pile of metal, charred wood, sand, slag and rubble where Ben perched, still poised to dive into the glowing mass at his feet.

A military police patrol, Unit XII of the Roman Occupational Peacekeepers, known locally as the *Bulls of Bashan*, burst into the work yard. The commotion at the foundry had drawn a crowd and the patrol, ever alert to civil disturbance, had responded immediately.

"Out of the way, slave. I'll take charge here," shouted the officer.

"What's the matter with you people? Can't you even whip a little boy causing trouble?" He stomped up to the place Omar had stood and commanded, "Get down from there right now, boy."



. “Without a word, Ben clenched his hand into a fist and slammed the Roman on top of the helmet.

The Roman staggered back dazed.

His men drew swords. Some faced Ben on his smoking mountain; most faced the crowd of civilian workmen, slaves, and bystanders.

With the violent act accomplished, the boy’s face grew calm. He surveyed the tense scene with a pleased smirk on his face.

Ezra pushed to the forefront and called to the scowling officer, “Thank you, Sir. Thank you for rescuing my little boy. We just didn’t know what to do. The doctor says he has rabies.”

The Romans dropped back a step. Quick glances darted from man to man.

Shaking his ringing head and taking in the size of the little boy who poled him—and thinking of how a report on this incident would read—the officer said, “The kid’s sick? Why don’t you people get him down from there then? He could get hurt. Move back men. Let these citizens get their child.”

“I’ll distract him,” Omar said. “Grab him from behind.”

Omar began moving the mirror in his hand so its surface caught the sun and reflected the light directly into Ben’s eyes.

The boy twisted his head back and forth dodging the light but the slave moved the bronze mirror to keep the beam full on his face.

“It’s not rabies; it’s brain fever. Stupid bulls,” Ezra whispered to his friends. “Help me get Ben down.”

The work crew moved into position as Omar played the mirror in Ben’s eyes.



“Now!” the foreman yelled.

All the men grabbed at once.

At the first touch, Ben sprang into a frenzy. He threw burly men right and left. He kicked. He prodded and shoved and wrestled before finally succumbing and being subdued beneath the pile of workers who sweated and strained and hopped to avoid his snapping jaws, his clawing, scratching nails—and the clumps of hot metal underfoot. They finally lashed him down, arms and ankles, and stood in a panting circle.

“Child care Jewish style,” muttered one of the observing policemen.

Dipping a wing to catch the current, Gaylord yawned. “A tacky display. Amusing but tacky.”

“Better watch what you say. Are you sure he can’t hear you while inside a dim?” Stud asked.

They gazed down far below at Tock trussed up on the ground.

Tock looked up. He winked.

The crowd of people watched the boy to see what would happen next.

Omar knelt in the dust and patted Ben on the soldier. His gnarled hand wiped grime from the boy’s silent scowling face.

“Thanks for your help, old timer,” Ezra said.

“It’s so hard when it’s a child suffering,” Omar said. “I hear there’s a traveling rabbi at Capernaum who can...”

“Yeah! I’ve heard about that guy,” the Roman officer interrupted. “What’s his name? One of the Centurions over there in Capernaum has this valuable slave that got real sick, took him to What’s-his-name, and presto! Good as ever. You could sell him as brand



new now. You take your kid over to Capernaum. That guy can fix him up in no time... Well, it looks as though you people have got things under control here... “

“Sir, I can’t thank you and your brave men enough for rescuing my little boy,” Ezra said. “If you’ll give me the name of your commander, I’ll write him a ... “

“Now. Now, none of that. Just doing our job. Keeping peace and order is what we Romans are here for,” the officer said. “Hope your kid... Well, you know.”

The Romans formed up and marched briskly away.

“Filthy, pig-eating...” Ezra said.

“Hush. They might hear,” Omar said.

The foreman picked his way through the mess in the workyard to where Ezra and Omar tended Ben. He twisted his leather apron in his hands and cleared his throat. “Look, Ezra, I’m sorry about your son and you’re a good craftsman but... I’m afraid I have to let you go. Yesterday the water. Today, the fire. Who knows what tomorrow. Omar will help you tote the boy home. But you stay there for a couple of days or a week until he... Well, stay away for as long as it takes. Then come see me. The boss doesn’t want you back. It’s gonna cost over a thousand dracmas just to get that bronze cut back up small enough to melt again. And the order date on that bell don’t cut the shop any slack... Well, you understand. You’re fired until... then we’ll see,” he said.

Omar carried Ben’s feet; Ezra, his soldiers.

People stood well aside as they moved down the street back towards Ezra’s home.

“About that traveling rabbi from Capernaum,” Omar said. “I hear tell that him and his friends is moved from there and is headed up river. They was



camped over towards Lake Merom. They may be coming right here to Caesarea Philippi.”

“Greek doctors. Witchbane. Fish oil. What good is some itinerate rabbi going to do? I don’t believe he can help. I’m afraid it’s hopeless. Just hopeless,” Ezra said.

After eight days of enduring their son’s violence, fits and suicide attempts, Ezra and Sarah carried Ben to meet the rabbi.

Sarah cut a hole in the center of a blanket for the boy’s head to fit through. They fought him into it and wound leather thongs around the outside of the restraining cocoon. They bundled Benjamin onto a protesting donkey and strapped him down.

Curious neighbors followed.

On the rolling plain between Mount Hermon and Lake Merom’s marsh, they met a crowd of people traveling north from Capernaum.

They asked about the rabbi.

“Sorry,” a fierce black-bearded man said, “But the Rabbi is off in a conference and can’t be disturbed. However, I’m his assistant and I’ll be glad to cast out your son’s unclean spirit.”

Ezra and Sarah glanced back and forth at each other, their eyes flashing the silent semaphore of the long married. Sarah shrugged and Ezra said, “We really wanted to see the rabbi; when will he be back?”

“Should be here tomorrow or the next day; you can never tell when he’ll show up. He’s off up the mountain with his cadre. Praying, you know. However, he keeps a competent well-trained staff. Either I or any of the other nine assistants here have full authority to ... Well, there’s just nothing we can’t handle. Oh, Bartholomew, come give me a hand with these folks



please; their little boy has an imp we need to chase off.”

Tock chuckled in anticipation.

Only one road leads from Caesarea Philippi to Mount Hermon. It passes through vine-clad hills stocked with mulberry, apricot and fig trees. It crosses grain fields studded with pear trees and oak coppice, and delves through rocky ravines cloaked with dwarf shrubs.

Intermittent ridges of snow, lying along turfy bands, decorate the upper slopes of the mountain; gravelly slopes and broad snow patches alternate right up to the summit.

Of Mount Hermon’s three peaks, the northern and southern peaks rise to 11,000 feet above sea level; the western peak, separated from the others by a narrow valley reaches 9,400 feet.

Every evening, viewed from that western summit, a glorious panorama spreads out below Hermon on all sides. To the north, the cedar forests of Lebanon lie so close that the pungent smell of the trees wafts up the mountain. The Mediterranean Sea sparkles to the west as the sun seemingly lowers itself into the blue waters. The sunset turns the shadow of Mount Hermon into a pale steel-colored shade; and that long pyramidal shadow slides down the to the eastern foot of the mountain and creeps across a plain till it covers Damascus 70 miles to the east.

To the south, the Sea of Galilee was lit up with a delicate greenish-yellow hue between its dim walls of dun colored hills.

From the flat plateau at the summit of Mount Hermon a visitor can look down the Jordan valley, over Galilee and Samaria to the Dead Sea and on to Jerusalem.



In olden days, beacon-fires burned on Hermon's flat western summit to signal Jerusalem. Now, a rapid post system took its place and the level stone platform where the signal fires used to burn stands deserted, silent, windswept, cold.

Four men stood on that platform looking southeast toward Jerusalem where, even from this distance, a gold-gilt pinnacle of the Temple caught and reflected the fading sun and glittered like a star back-dropped against the purple mountains of Moab further to the south.

The Rabbi pointed at that distant golden spark and said "There the Son of man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and priests and scribes, be slain—and be raised the third day.

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross every day and follow me," he said. "What is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world but lose himself or be cast away?"

His three closest friends exchanged puzzled glances. What in the world was he talking about?

The Rabbi often talked about mystical things like this when he was troubled. His friends had grown accustomed to this habit and paid scant attention.

One, James, opened his sack and broke out supper: dried fish steak filets, pita bread, fresh figs, olives and cheese. Cephus collected an armload of gnarled branches and built a fire, piling up rocks as a windbreak. John gathered thick clumps of green rock moss and lichen and piled it up as a makeshift bed. From the Rabbi's mood, it was obvious this was going to be another all-night affair. They had seen him like this before.

As the sun sank lower and lower into the Mediterranean, the land around the mountain's base



turned darker and darker but light still bathed the summit. The sunset clouds above the mountain rouged from orange to red against patches of pale blue.

At last, full of good supper, wearied by the climb up the mountain, warmed by the snug bed and crackling fire, the Rabbi's assistants drew their robes tight around them and prepared to doze while the Rabbi retired to a boulder off to the side to pray like he did every night.

As he prayed, slanting rays of sunlight touched him. The fashion of his countenance was altered and his raiment became glistening white. His robe, tunic, sash, and cloak became shining, exceeding white, as snow, so as no fuller on earth can whiten them.

The assistants propped up in bed; they had never seen anything like this before.

Something remarkable was going on. The unusual was happening right before their eyes:

Contrails.

Two of them.

Two lines of white steam, high in the air streaking straight as two arrows in parallel flight high above the Judean desert, moved from the south due north.

The two white lines in the sky were aerodynamic condensation trails caused by saturated air being cooled as it passed over the surfaces of warm, rapidly moving objects and creating water vapor.

The Rabbi, intent on his prayers, did not appear to notice this phenomena, but his friends certainly did. They sat up staring—too amazed to feel frightened—as the white lines in the sky raced toward Mount Hermon.

At first, all the assistants could see was the majestic boil of water vapor scribing lines in the sky—and those lines moved straight this way. Then, at the



point of each line, a black dot could be discerned moving ever closer. Those two black dots in the sky suddenly defined themselves as men!

Human beings moving through air as smooth as a ship cuts through water or a child slides across a sheet of winter ice.

None other than Moses and Elijah stepped from the air onto the mountain top!

They stopped with such control that their halting did not even raise a puff of dust. The Rabbi stepped forward to meet the prophets and they embraced, greeting each other gladly as familiar friends.

Shreds of conversation drifted from the glowing party to the stunned assistants. The dazzling trio talked about, "The way he must take and the end he must fulfill in Jerusalem."

"It is inevitable that the Son of man should suffer, be utterly repudiated at Jerusalem," someone said.

"He must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and of the chief priests and scribes and be killed and after three days rise again," said another voice.

Utterly flustered at what was going on, Cephus blurted, "Master, it is good for us to be here. We're going to pitch three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elias, and we'll..."

He didn't know what he was saying.

Things got stranger yet!

A cloud, a luminous cloud, a cloud uplit by the sun's last rays, a cloud filled with light, revealing, yet concealing the heavenly visitants—This cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son. He pleases me. Listen to him."



Then suddenly there was no voice, no cloud, no glowing clothes, no heavenly visitors on the mountain.

The disciples saw one person only.

“Tell no man what you have seen here,” he said, “Not yet.”

“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and unto the scribes and they shall condemn him to death and shall deliver him to the Gentiles and they shall mock him and shall scourge him and shall spit upon him and shall kill him—and the third day, he shall rise again,” he said.

How could anyone sleep after that?

The group started slowly back down the slope of Hermon to where the other assistants waited camping in a field with a crowd of other people including Ezra, Sarah and Benjamin—with Tock still astride his soul.

And of what they had seen and heard on the mountain, Cephus, James and John never breathed a word—not in those days.

After the tranquility of the mountain top, the scene at the foot of Mount Hermon seethed with boiling chaos.

The Rabbi’s trip from Capernaum the week before had drawn a crowd of seekers; some sought spiritual enlightenment, others sought thrills. In addition to people from Capernaum, a large group had come out of Caesarea Philippi. These joined a sizable contingent of people who followed the Rabbi all over the country side on a regular basis.

This latter group—including his inner circle of assistants—had pitched tents in an orchard of pear trees to the side of the Mount Hermon/Caesarea Philippi road. Travelers in the early days usually carried tents, a



heritage of their Bedouin ancestry, to save the expense of staying in inns, which were not to be found except at main intersections anyhow. The more affluent among the travelers sported carpeted pavilions, Bedouin tents of several rooms, capped by colored banners; poorer people draped blankets over tree branches and tied them down to break the wind and provide a little privacy.

A number of vendors from the city also had set up tents in the orchard. Knowing that the crowds would be hungry had attracted these businessmen and various hawkers yelled the virtues of their products from their tent doors. The aroma of fish frying in olive oil permeated the air around the camp.

Women strolled through the milling crowd selling sugarfigs and other candied fruit from baskets balanced on their heads. Two jugglers tossed handfuls of colored disks back and forth while a third gathered up coins the crowds threw in appreciation. Legless beggars—army veterans mutilated in some forgotten war—crawled about seeking alms. Children darted about among the legs of the adults chasing round and round in a game of screaming tag. Clumps of graybearded old men clustered at tent doors sipping spiced wine, munching hot pita bread and discussing Roman taxes, annoying wives, ungrateful children, sports, and theology.

Permanent followers of the Rabbi circulated in the crowd giving blessings to sick and crippled pilgrims, answering questions, accepting donations, settling disputes, and telling interested folks about the Rabbi's exploits.

They were followed by gaggles of scribes, religious writers who with iron pens jotted notes on wax-coated wooden tablets. These reporters pushed into every conversation and shouted their own questions drowning out the voices of seekers in the crowd.



“What about that demon boy last night?” some shouted. “Why couldn’t you cure him?”

“What about the money you collect in the baskets? That’s not tax free is it?” shouted others.

“What’s the real story about those pigs in Gennesaret? Is it true that you people butchered them and ate the forbidden meat?”

“Why does the Rabbi advocate tearing down the Temple and rebuilding it; that doesn’t make sense?”

“Is it true that this supposed demon boy travels with your troop all the time? I heard that your Rabbi put on this same show in Bethsaida last month—blind shills seeing; lame walking; deaf hearing; demons fleeing. How come the trick didn’t work last night?”

Crowd noised drowned out the flustered replies as the harried assistants tried to answer this volley of questions.

Far above this carnival scene, unseen by the dims, the brights, or the flickers alike, Longdong, Gaylord and Stud circled relishing the discomfort of the assistants. The three demons envied Tock for the way he had thwarted the prayers, incantations, and rituals of the frustrated men, yet that same envy made them want to see their rival from Capernaum get his comeuppance.

These conflicting emotions peppered their conversation as they surveyed the crowd, hovering on the thermal created by the field full of white tents.

“I almost croaked when Tock made the little boy grab that fat one’s beard,” Gaylord said. “Big oaf didn’t expect the strength we have when we get a toehold. If it had been me riding the boy, I’d have twisted that religious prig’s head off—made him look like John the Baptist’s twin brother.”



"I liked it when the kid clawed his dear mother's robe," Longdong said. "Old Bartholomew's eyes almost popped out when he saw that flash of tit; couldn't keep his mind on his whine for What's-His-Name to exorcise Tock. I've noticed that a lot of pious frauds step so high that they stumble over tits all the time."

The thermal weakened as the morning sun grew hotter and the air stiller; the three demons had to flap energetically just to maintain altitude. Scalding sweat dripped from their armpits, so they maneuvered east a bit so that the drops would fall to pollute a stone cistern where most of the crowd drew water that day.

"I thought Tock had had it, when that nerd Thaddaeus anointed the boy with oil and laid hands on him. If I hadn't reminded Thad about that soldier who shoved him at the festival last year, I think he would have cast Tock out on his ass. Tock owes me ... Ut-Oh, get ready for the grand finale; here come's Ol' What's-His-Name's bright-eyed boy. You can bet our side is going to nail this one too."

The crowd surged forward when they spotted the Rabbi and his three friends walking down the slope of the ridge. A group of assistants ran toward him. People shouted one thing and then another.

Ezra had been watching the slope all morning hoping against hope that the main man might be able to do something his assistants had failed to do. He raced ahead of the mob, outrunning even the fleetest assistant and threw himself at the Rabbi's feet clutching the hem of his robe.

"Lord, have mercy on my son for he is a lunatic and sore vexed," Ezra panted out of breath. "He has a dumb spirit and it's tearing him up. He foams at the mouth. His jaws lock, he gnashes his teeth, he can't eat, and he's pinning away. His teeth grind till they crack. Then he freezes ridged."



“Look,” Ezra cried, “We brought him to your assistants. We begged them, but they couldn’t do anything for him. Can you? He’s our only child.”

The rabbi sighed.

His shoulders sagged. “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?,” he said.

The assistant’s looked a bit sheepish at this remark and backed off a bit.

“Bring the boy to me,” the Rabbi said.

Two of the assistants helped Sarah bustle Benjamin to the forefront. They began loosening the thongs from around his blanket cocoon. Benjamin looked at the Rabbi and as soon as his hands were loose he began to tear gnashes in his own face and wallowed on the ground rolling over and over, foaming at the mouth.

The crowd backed away to watch from a safe distance.

“How long has this been going on?” asked the Rabbi.

“He’s just a little boy,” Ezra said. “Sometimes the thing inside him throws him into fire or into deep water like it’s trying to burn him or drown him...”

“If you can do anything,” Ezra sobbed, “Have compassion on us and help us, please. Please...”

“If I can do anything,” the Rabbi mused, “Anything can be done by the person who believes. All things are possible to him that believeth.”

Straightway the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!”

The Rabbi glanced around, seeming for the first time to notice the thickening crowd of curious bystanders.



Speaking softly, compellingly, he rebuked the foul spirit. "Toxic spirit, dumb and deaf, I Am the one who commands thee. Come out! Enter him no more!"

Tock locked eyes with the Rabbi.

In the demon's sight the man glowed white hot. Light, glaring light unseen by the crowd but all too visible to the demon, streamed from him. What chance has any darkness against any light?

Tock unhooked both talons from the boy's skull and swung them up to shield his own eyes. The violent motion knocked the little boy sprawling. Tock screamed and screamed as the light seared his eyes; he could not look on that face and live. The heat of the light of the world scorched Tock's wings; even if he had a high place to launch from, he would not have been able to fly.

Even his scales felt suddenly sunburned, suddenly tender.

To escape that awful light, Tock scuttered along on his belly in the dust of the ground, slithering through the unseeing crowd, fleeing for the darkness of Pan's cave. As he escaped, he yelped with his tail stinger tucked up between his legs like a stray dog kicked for foraging in a garbage heap.

No one in the crowd saw or heard the demon; all eyes were on the boy.

He twisted on the ground, snapping, foaming, contorting. Benjamin arched his back so much that at first he balanced with both the top of his head and the soles of his feet touching the ground. He began kicking in spastic circles pivoting on his head in the dust. His eyes squeezed so tight shut that drops of blood appeared on his face. Then his body locked ridged and he collapsed in a motionless, twisted heap. Totally limp. Bloodless. Pale.



Sarah began wailing.

“He’s dead!”

“Did you see that?”

“My God,” people whispered.

The Rabbi knelt down and took the boy’s hand. He lifted him up and delivered him to Ezra and Sarah.

“Mommie, I’m hungry. Can I have a sugarfig. Just one please,” Benjamin said

The crowd stood amazed at the mighty power of God and while they were still stunned with wonder, the Rabbi said, “Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the son of man shall yet be delivered into the hands of men.”

But no one understood what he was talking about.

After the turmoil had quieted down a bit, the assistants drew the Rabbi aside and asked, “Why couldn’t we do that? Why couldn’t we cast the toxic spirit out?”

“Because of your unbelief,” he said. “The truth is, if ye have faith even if it’s as little as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove. Nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit usually, this kind of demon goeth out only by prayer and fasting “.

The Rabbi told them to break camp; they would be marching directly from Mount Hermon to Jerusalem.

As they were packing things up for the trip that afternoon, some of the assistants began arguing about which one of them should be the top man in Jerusalem; they fully expected their Rabbi would be crowned king when they reached the capitol.



The Rabbi overheard the argument and called Benjamin, who had been playing leapfrog with some other boys, over to him.

The assistants and the crowd fell silent. What would the Rabbi do to the boy this time?

To everyone's surprise, the Rabbi hefted Ben onto his knee and began speaking about how his followers needed to become childlike, trusting as children.

"Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea," the Rabbi said. "Into Hell! Into the fire that never shall be quenched where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched!"

He turned from the crowd and began speaking privately with Sarah, suggesting that she might want to cook Ben some fresh chicken soup when she got him home, and to make him go back to school, and to not play in caves.

As soon as the disciples were ready, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Gaylord, Stud and Longdong were waiting at the cave mouth when Tock tried to sneak in. They clapped him on the back, swacking his sunburn, in mock good-natured greetings.

"What's the matter, feel a little... Light-headed," Stud teased.

"Out of my way, you cretins," snarled Tock, escaping their mauling and diving into the dark pool.

Not even the swamp ooze and slime of decayed vegetation at the deep bottom of the pit cooled his burning scales. Not even the sunless quiet of the cave's depths screened out the laughter, teasing and taunts of



his competitors. Not even his direct encounter with light had brightened his outlook.

Tock's hatred seethed.

Bursting from the depths and thrashing to the surface of the water, Tock howled, bared his fangs, and rushed at the three. He twisted Stud's tail, bit Longdong's neck, and gouged Gaylord's face.

The trio, the august Caesarea Philippi Authority, the dignified but sensual CPAs, ran screeching and cursing from his fury.

He chased them to the mouth of the cave.

"I'm gonna tell! I'm gonna tell the CCs," Gaylord shouted.

"Capernaum Council's got no say in this," Tock said. "That rabbi cheated; I wasn't expecting him to love that little boy. He doesn't fight fair. Look, I'm going to take this up with the JayCees; the Jerusalem Council has been squelching brights longer than any of the rest of us. The JayCees have experience with this sort of thing."

"You can't go to Jerusalem, you idiot," Longdong said. "Your wings are singed. It will take months to shed that skin and grow your next."

Tock gathered his shredded dignity and stamped out of the cave.

"There's the road, right down there," he said. "If I have to, I'm going to walk to Jerusalem! I'm gonna put out that guy's light!"

Tock stomped down the road beginning his journey mumbling.

Stud, Gaylord and Longdong watched him go.

"Looser!" Stud yelled after him.

"Failure!" shouted Longdong.



“On you a millstone necklace is going to look good. Most becoming even,” Gaylord called.

Tock didn’t even look back.

“I’m gonna see that Son of What’zit nailed down! Nailed down hand and foot,” he grumbled, “Then we’ll see just how bright he is!”

—End—

BARNEY'S SCOOP¹



Although Barney Clark was known to his colleagues at the newspaper and at his church as an upright, moral Baptist, his first thought as he struggled with the girl in the water was about an adolescent obscenity which he had not used since his Boy Scout days.

Greed for a full-time writing job made him think of that.

Barney worked three afternoons a week at the *Courier* writing obituaries called in by local funeral homes. Occasionally his duties expanded to include entering tide tables obtained from the Coast Guard station or livestock and poultry prices for the farm agate.

¹ Fiction. *Written in September, 1983. Television has changed since then.*



He also wrote *pre-obits* of important people who had not died yet. The newspaper kept confidential files of death notices of local dignitaries against the time when such obituaries might be needed.

That way when a Name died, the obituary was all ready for the fulltime reporters to fill in the blanks with details. So, again and again, Barney wrote:

Mayor or Fire Chief or State Senator, _____ (NAME), died yesterday, _____ (ADD DATE) from injuries sustained in a tragic _____ (HEART ATTACK, TRAFFIC ACCIDENT or WAS SHOT BY A JEALOUS WIFE).

He was a graduate of _____ (WHEREEVER) and had served the city for _____ years. He will be best remembered for his _____.

“He was a great civil servant and although our views differed on many important issues, he will be missed by his constituents,” said _____ (WHOEVER ANSWERS THE PHONE; THEY ALL SAY THE SAME THING).

By having obituaries already written and information ready to hand, the *Courier* could get the jump on the tv station. Scooping the tv station with any news item ranked high on the City Editor’s agenda.

Barney’s lowly job galled him. He felt his magnificent writing talents, which had earned him a B+ average in the community college writing class, were being wasted.

He prayed for a job which would utilize his writing abilities. He pestered the editors at the *Courier* on a weekly basis for an opportunity to show what he could do with a hard news story.

Only a day before the crash, he buttonholed Ralph Candel, the city editor, about a reporter’s opening on staff. Morris Williams, the court reporter, had announced he was leaving the *Courier* for a spot with



USA Today. That meant that Susan Porter, the crime reporter, would move up to his job and her old job would be up for grabs.

Barney longed for that job. If he were crime reporter, he would really have a chance to show what he could do. Sure, most of the time you'd be covering Mickey Mouse stuff like convenience store robberies or smash-ups on I-95. But suppose something big goes down, a millionaire's daughter kidnapped, or a big hostage story? You write something like that and AP or UPI picks it up nationally and overnight your byline is known and recognized to every editor in the country. *New York Times* might call. Wouldn't that be something!

"Not much chance, Kid," the City Editor said when Barney approached him in his glass cubical off the city desk. "You don't have a journalism degree yet, and you don't have hard news experience. Besides, I've got a file drawer full of resumes from talented people all over the country who want to work here. Be glad you've got a job here at all. Half the journalism students at Central would murder, put out, or both just to do what you're doing now. Give it time. You're not ready yet. I'll keep you in mind for the right opening, maybe editorial assistant. Don't worry, you'll get your break when it comes along."

Barney explained about that interview to his almost-girlfriend, Betty Jo Morrow, a member of his church who worked as a layout artist in the newspaper's Display Ads Department, as they sipped coffee from the machine in the newspaper's basement lunchroom. Barney practically cried on Betty Jo's shoulder amid the coke, snack, and cigarette vending machines.

As he popped a ham and cheese sandwich in the microwave, she said, "Remember Joseph in Egypt.



Remember he was a lowly slave in prison, but at the right time, God raised him up to an important position. Barney, be patient and wait for the Lord. Your break will come.”

“I just don’t want to bury my talent in the ground like that guy in the parable. I feel wasted here. Trapped. I doubt if God’s plan for my life involves wasting much more time in this dead-end job.”

“Don’t get puffed up,” she cautioned laying her hand on his arm. “God’s plans have been perking along fine for thousands of years without your help. He loves you and can use you, but you’re not indispensable. You just be patient and wait on the Lord. Your break will come.”

“Sure, but right now I feel like that cartoon vulture that’s ready to kill something.”

“Pray for patience.”

“Sure. Sure,” he mumbled as he wadded up the cellophane wrappers from their snacks and tossed them in the trash can.

“Can you pick me up for choir practice tomorrow night?”

“Yes. I’ll come by as soon as I get off and we’ll hit the McDonalds before prayer meeting.”

Next night, the couple never made it to prayer meeting.

Barney left the newspaper early and picked up Betty Jo, who was off on Wednesdays. And, trying to avoid the worst of rush hour traffic, he circled onto Warf Park Drive along the river front. Traffic, trying to get up on the Main Street Bridge, was backed up even down there.



A tv traffic helicopter hovered above the tall buildings of downtown gathering shots for the Six O'clock News Traffic Watch report.

"Listen! What's that?, Betty Jo shouted as a mechanical roar passed right above Barney's van.

"O Lord, it's a plane. He's not going to clear the bridge tower."

For a second it looked as though the pilot were going to make it. He nearly stalled the engine trying to pull up. But the twin-engine Beechcraft's left wingtip brushed the metal bridge tower.

The small plane cartwheeled twice in the air scattering sparks and flame. When it hit the water, it seemed to do another half cartwheel but settled belly-up and sank nose first.

Scores of motorists sat stunned in their cars for a moment. Then many abandoned their vehicles and rushed to the bridge railing in a shouting confused mass of humanity. One panicked driver pounded on his horn.

Wow! What a story this will make. Eyewitness stuff, Barney thought. But his heart sank as he saw the tv station's helicopter swooping in above the river. In his mind's eye he could see the film crew videotaping the whole thing as they scooped up his story.

"O Dear Jesus! Those poor people," Betty Jo breathed. "Help them, Lord. Help Them."

Barney stared at her. At first he thought she meant the people lining the bridge with camera cell phones pressed to their eyes to catch the action. *Be on YouTube in an hour.* Then he saw feeble splashing in the water. One of the people from the airplane had been thrown clear.



Barney slammed his car door open scraping paint from a Buick beside him in traffic. "Sorry about that," he called as he ran to the seawall kicking off his shoes and fumbling at his belt buckle.

Row. Throw. Go, he thought recalling his Boy Scout training.

No handy boat to row. No life ring to throw, too far away anyhow. Nothing left to do but go.

He stepped out of his pants and leapt from the embankment feet first, chest forward, like he'd learned in Scouts. To keep the drowning victim in sight, he snapped a scissor kick the moment he touched the water. That way his head never went under as he used a strong crawl stroke never letting the victim out of his sight as he swam.

As he approached the film of burning fuel floating on the surface, he switched to a breast stroke to push a path through debris and oil scum as he swam. He spotted a girl thrashing frantically just ahead of him.

Dear God, I'm tired and out of shape. Don't let her fight me or we'll both drown.

As though in answer to his prayer, the girl went limp just as he grabbed her.

What a set of boobs! he thought, then felt ashamed as he noticed the black crust—the residue of the woman's burnt-off clothes on her charred skin.

He grabbed her hair to tow her. A huge hank came out in his hand and she sank. He flailed to keep her from going deeper and pulled her to the surface.

He switched to a cross-arm carry and a sidestroke. That's when he noticed the tv camera.

The news helicopter had set down on the verge of the road and the crew was maneuvered a camera into



position on the Warf Drive ramp leading up onto the bridge. They had their camera trained on him.

O Lord, they're scooping me! He panted as he struggled forward in a sidestroke with the limp deadweight of the woman *This should be my story. What should I do, Lord? What should I do?*

That's when a thought came to him. *Can't be divine inspiration, he reasoned. But, it'll work.*

He acted accordingly.

Eager helpful hands of the Rescue Squad pulled him and his burden up onto the embankment. Paramedics, who had just arrived, went to work on the woman.

Betty Jo threw her arms around Barney sobbing, "I was so scared for you. So scared."

She told him that she had called the City Desk on her cell phone. Ralph would give him a byline if he could come immediately to write the story before deadline.

"What about the FAA stuff, pilot and passenger's names, and all that?"

"Ralph has a general assignment reporter gathering all that filler and background for when you get there to write the story. He's got photo on the way too."

Back in the newsroom, Ralph pounded Barney's wet back. "You're a goddamn hero kid. If you can write as good as you swim, you just may have a job here. But what about the tv? What the heck did you do? It's on the news now but they're just showing the plane hit, not the rescue."

"Yeah, they've got the crash," Barney said, "But the rescue story's ours."

"How do you figure"?



Barney hemmed and hawed in Baptist anguish before he confessed. “They can’t use that footage because every time my hand came out of the water in my sidestroke...”

“Well, what did you do”?

“They can’t air that video because every time the camera pointed at me, I flipped ‘em a bird. I gave ‘em the finger. I didn’t want ‘em to scoop my story.”

—END—

BULL !



I looked down at the corner of my bulletin sticking out from the pages of the hymnal. Without even thinking about it, I sketched a snorting bull in the margin of the bulletin. This emblem was a silent protest at what the preacher was saying—Bull!

It just didn't make any sense.

Actually the pastor is O.K. But this morning I disagreed with his main point, but what could I do? You just have to sit there and take whatever he dishes out, and you don't have a chance to say anything about it.



My way of getting around this is to doodle in the margin of the church bulletin. I don't sit with my parents so I can get away with it.

Pastor was saying that since we are Christians we should not let sin have any more dominion over us—whatever that means. It doesn't make sense to me. I wish he'd stick to telling Bible stories and stay away from this abstract stuff.

After service, Dad asked what I thought of the sermon and I said, "O.K. I guess." No sense saying what I really thought and calling up a hassle.

Monday after school Mrs. Morgan called. She's an old lady who lives down the road from us. She rents out a couple of houses and I earn a few shekels doing odd jobs for her. She wanted me to move a chicken coop. No sweat. And she always pays good. I trotted on down.

"It's over on the next block, Harry," she explained. "It's only a small cage and I want it moved over to my backyard. Put it behind the garage. It's behind the yellow house—third one from the corner. You go on over. I'll be up there in a minute."

So off I went not even suspecting the hassle that was to follow,

When I got to the backyard of the yellow house I didn't see anything that looked like a chicken coop. The only thing there was a dog house, a rickety tool shed and a couple of angle-iron poles sticking up with some chicken wire stretched between them. Nothing to it. But I supposed that was the coop. I started to rummage around the tool shed looking for something to pull up the posts with when I heard a woman yell, "Sic 'em, King."

This big old dirty white dog came tearing out of the back door and in no time at all I was on top of that tool shed with that brute yapping and jumping



all around trying to bite me. A fat woman bustled out of the house with soap suds up to her elbows. She was drying her hands on a towel and yelling at me and the dog,

“What do you think you’re doing in my yard?”, she shrieked.

I tried to tell her that Mrs. Morgan had sent me over, but the dog was making too much racket for her to hear. Then Mrs. Morgan came around the corner of the house, and the fuss really started. Between those two yelling women and that yapping dog, I was scared; Caught right in the middle.

Mrs. Morgan kept saying, “Harry, you get down from there and pull up my chicken coop. It’s mine! My Luther drove those stakes down two years ago. It’s Mine!”

The fat woman kept shouting, “This here’s my property. You two git off—Sic ‘em, King. I’ll call the Sheriff. You sold this place to me. I’m the owner and you have no right to nothing here.”

The dog kept yapping, and the roof of that shed began to creak. I ran to the back of the roof and jumped. I barely managed to clear the back fence. But I was out of it, so I left those two women squabbling.

I understand that later the Sheriff came out and made Mrs. Morgan leave. She had sold the place to the fat woman. So she has no right to anything there any more—not even that old chicken coop. That’s the law. Once there’s a new owner, then the old owner has no right to anything on the property.

I got to thinking about that ... and what the preacher said struck me. Since I’m bought with a price and Jesus is my new owner, then sin has no rights to the property at all—not even to an old chicken coop. Maybe what the preacher said isn’t



such bull after all. Sin has no more dominion over me, but just the same when the old owner comes around wanting to stake a claim there's a heck of a row.

And a lot of times I feel like I'm stuck on top of the tool shed in the middle of a fuss going on inside me.

I wish the preacher would talk about that sometime.

—End—

A CASUALTY OF THE WAR ¹



Mrs. Gowan fingered the trigger on the old flintlock musket above the mantle. Her great-great grandfather had shot British troops outside Baltimore with that musket.

When Timmy was little, sometimes she'd take off the iron bayonet and let him play soldiers with the musket. It was part of his heritage.

Today, somewhere in Viet Nam he was shooting at Charlie with an M-16 rifle, the kind that makes the bullet tumble in flight and shatter bones on contact.

And Charlie was shooting back.

¹ *Written on January 20, 1967 during the Viet Nam War.*



Mrs. Gowan worried herself sick about Timmy. He is a fine boy and could take care of himself. But those people are killers.

Mornings were hardest.

The worst part of the day came about 11:30 when she would hear the mail box rattle. Timmy's letters came almost every day, but some days there were only bills and circulars. And she lived with the fear that *that letter* would be delivered—the one from the War Department. The people down the street still got letters from their son for three weeks after they knew he had been killed in action.

That would drive her crazy.

Timmy used to play with that boy, and now Mrs. Gowan felt guilty about their play. She had let them run around the yard with their broomstick rifles shooting imaginary Japs or Indians or Germans or Martians. The two of them even built a treehouse fort over in the woods by the church. They were always playing war there.

So many little boys played war. Did that contribute to the way things are? Or perhaps—here was a thought of hope—did that war play give them some little edge on survival among all those killers in a real war?

Background music stopped and the radio announcer gave some news about only “light casualties” in some swamp across the world.

No casualties could be light when Timmy might be one of them. She listened to all the news programs with sick fascination as though the man might mention Timothy Gowan by name. The music came back on and she turned the radio off and wandered into the kitchen out of habit to fix lunch.

Mealtimes were hardest.



She lacked spirit to cook for one, and when she did cook, she always fixed too much, enough for two, and the leftovers distressed her. Even with leftovers in the frig every day, she was losing weight.

Perhaps she shouldn't have quit her job at the drug store, but when Timmy's draft notice came, she just had to clutch at every moment she could spend with him.

That had been a mistake.

The very closeness she yearned for had made him want to pull away. Made him independent. Made him quarrelsome,. It was too late to pack love into a few weeks together. When he got on the train, she cried because she could see he was relieved to get away from her.

The mail box rattled. Postman was late. She rushed out of the kitchen leaving her lamb chop to grow cold on her plate. There was only Timmy's archery magazine in the box. His magazines still came home even while he was away. That was as it should be.

She took the magazine up to his room and put it with the others. They'd all be stacked in order, unopened, when he came home.

Afternoons were hardest.

Afternoon hours lingered on and on and on with nothing on the radio but soap operas.

That afternoon she went back to the drug store to ask Doc Norris about getting back her old job at the notions counter. But there were some young men loitering at the soda fountain.

O God, she thought. She felt her contempt and hatred well up at the sight of those boys. Why should they be here at the fountain flirting with Shelly, the young waitress, and trying to peek down her white



starched uniform, while Timmy was crawling through muck in some rice paddy across the world?

She couldn't stand it.

She left without even speaking to Doc Norris.

Mrs. Gowan's evenings with the radio were hardest.

They were so long.

If Frank were still alive he could tell her what to do about their son.

She dreaded going to bed. She had the most distressing dreams about the washing machine breaking down, or about her insurance check not coming ,or about Timmy's getting married.

Night was hardest.

At last, she turned down the covers and knelt for her prayers.

"O God. Why Timmy and not those boys in the drug store? He's only been there for three months, Lord, and he's got to stay at least a year... O God... O God... O God... O God."

—End—

ANSWERED PRAYER



A bastard, according to the dictionary, is either a person whose parents were not married, or a person whose habits are offensive, disagreeable, and obnoxious.

Larry M. Lackowitz qualified under the second definition.

Not only was he a bastard, he was also a kill-joy, an uncouth, insensitive bore, and a thoroughly nasty-minded man.

For these qualities, viewers loved him.

In WTKZ-TV's six million home local viewing area, his *Catch The Company* program rated higher than many of the network shows. People delighted in seeing him expose other people as fools. Watching Larry bully consumers and companies alike brought joy to viewers



who felt they had been cheated by the same products being exposed.

Catch The Company had started, under another name, as a public service program advising consumers about the best values at local supermarkets, and warning homeowners about traveling gypsies in the roofing business. An innocuous little program at first, it aired primarily because the FGC insisted the station devote a certain number of hours per month to local programming. For two years the show pattered along just taking up space on the airways in a time spot when no one could be expected to be watching.

Then Larry M. Lackowitz took over the program.

Rumors, some of them outright obscene, varied about how he got the job. Some said he had a relative in high places; others said that he blackmailed the station owner with some pictures of his daughter. At any rate, he leapfrogged over the station's established announcers—stomping feelings right and left—moved the program to a choice time spot, destroyed the reputations of several reputable local businesses, and became an instant regional success.

The surprising nature of some of the show's consumer tests contributed to Larry's success. During his first program in the new time spot, Larry demonstrated and tested various marital aid products which most of the viewers had never heard of before. While the censors puzzled over how to handle this phenomenon (some argued that the tests were legitimate consumer advisories and others argued that the tests as well as the products were obscene) news of the program's unusual features spread by word of mouth all through the viewing area, and Larry thrived. He continued to mix an appeal to borderline purulent interest with his deep contempt for manufacturers, dealers, and especially consumers.



Larry enjoyed being a professional kill-joy. No matter what anyone bought, he gleefully pointed out enough defects to make them regret having bought the product. He even tried to intimidate one of the few local Rolls-Royce owners causing the infuriated, but proud, owner to proclaim on the air, "You Bastard! You'd complain if they hung you with a brand new rope."

The program continued to climb in the ratings.

During a daytime talk show interview, Dr. Stephen Gully, head of the psychology department at Union College, speculated on the reasons for *Catch The Company's* phenomenal success.

"The memory of the Depression", said Dr. Cully, "Influences our attitude about spending money. Because many people, or their parents, lived through the Depression when money was extremely tight, almost everyone feels a trace of guilt about buying things, especially non-essentials and luxuries. When Mr. Lackowitz exposes some fault in the product you bought and calls you a sucker for buying it, he decimates your pride of ownership and you feel less guilty about having spent the money.

"The public's self-image, envy and jealousy also figure into the show's popularity. For instance, if the Jones' install a new swimming pool, the pride of the neighborhood, and Larry exposes it as an open-air septic tank, then you can laugh at the Jones' for being cheated and you don't have to keep up with them."

After only a month in the new time spot, Larry forced the closing of the area's most popular restaurant. He set up time-lapse, infrared cameras in the kitchen and dining room every night for a week. For that segment's airing, he sped up the film so that the whole week's shooting ran in under two minutes. The result was that the entire restaurant appeared to be one solid mass of insects. Hordes of roaches seemed



to cover the tables and one striking segment of the film showed a child's highchair which looked like it was actually made of bugs.

That film clip was one of Larry's triumphs. He'd caught and released a boxful of roaches in the restaurant because the hostess had refused to go out with him months before. But he remembered and got even, forcing the restaurant to close and the hostess to lose her job.

Larry often rigged the results of his consumer tests to discredit a product or a service. Even when a product tested successfully Larry cast aspersions on it by insinuation and innuendo. When the McDonald's chain demonstrated by independent laboratory tests that their hamburger meat contained no worms, Larry reported the findings and then added, "Although these tests show there were no worms ground up in the burgers, remember their own commercial, 'There's more in the middle of an EggMuffin than an egg in the middle of a muffin.'"

The McDonald's people filed a suit which was settled out of court in their favor and the station had to air an apology and retraction. But this legal action and the program's growing popularity in the local ratings brought Larry M. Lackowitz to the attention of the network. They sent two representatives up from New York to sit in on a couple of live shows in order to determine whether or not to syndicate *Catch The Company* nationally. This opportunity elated Larry. His ambition prompted him to devise something special for this audition and his devious mind came up with the most spectacular show ever seen on WKTZ-TV.

He flattered the cheerleaders and lied to the clergymen to get them to appear on his show.



He told the high school cheerleaders they would qualify for a full-ride scholarship paid for by the tv station. The sweet young things believed him.

He told the clergymen they would be asked to express their views on a new modern speech Bible translation. Of course, this was just a come-on to get them on the show. The prospect of airing their views on something more prominent than the 2AM sermonet lured the clergymen to appear, but if they had known his real idea of a consumer test, not one of them would have showed up.

Larry's last preparation for this special show consisted of taking a needle from his wardrobe drawer and puncturing a tiny pin-prick hole through a small foil packet. He smiled as he replaced the needle, thinking of his coming success. This was sure to be one of his most talked about shows. When he smoothed the foil down, the puncture was invisible. The result pleased him.

He was ready to go on the air.

The set buzzed with purposeful activities as the crew made last minute adjustments while the guest cheerleaders and clergymen cordially greeted each other and the studio audience found their places. Larry complained because the wireless mike was out of whack and he had to use a studio microphone trailing wires behind him as he walked to and fro on the set.

The director, himself, ushered the two network representatives to their reserved seats and made sure they were comfortable. The theme music began and Larry M. Lackowitz stepped before the cameras to a burst of applause. Kicking aside electric wires with his left foot, Larry lifted his mike and began his program..

"Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. Tonight I intent to test two unusual items. And to help me with



my first experiment, I've asked several distinguished clergymen to participate."

He introduced the beaming clergymen who were seated at a long table running along the back of the set. There were two Baptist preachers, the rabbi of Beth Shalom Congregation, a Lutheran, a Congregationalist, Father Ignatius from Holy Rosary, a Presbyterian, a Pentecostal, and the president of a local Bible college who was a minister of the Plymouth Brethren.

"I've asked these gentlemen here tonight to test a precept which all their religions acknowledge—but first I want to ask them for their views on the newest Bible translation. Raise your hand if you liked it. Good. Now if you didn't like it. Good. About even.

"Now that that's out of the way, I want you gentlemen to help me with a little experiment. There is a 12 inch circle drawn on the table top in front of each of you. Samantha, my lovely assistant, is placing a little steel cube in the center of each circle.

Samantha leaned across the table giving each clergyman a good view down her low-cut dress and the audience a good view of her sung red skirt. She placed a small metal cube in each circle on the table top.

Larry explained, "Each cube in front of you weighs exactly 3 ounces. What I want you gentlemen to do is something I'm sure you do everyday—pray."

The clergymen glanced at each other puzzled.

Larry continued, "All of your religions claim that God answers prayer. For hundreds of years your faiths have collected millions of dollars from people assuring them that God will hear and answer prayer. And as consumers, we have the right to know if the product you guys are selling really works."

The studio audience tittered.



The clerics looked trapped. They glanced back and forth at each other, each one hoping that one of the others would protest first so they could escape with dignity.

Though all of them stirred and mumbled, none wanted to back out of the test first—not with six million viewers watching in delight at the clergy’s discomfort.

Without giving his surprised victims time to think, Larry continued his spiel , “For the time regaining on the program, I want each of you to pray in his own way for his cube to be moved outside the circle. Before we go off the air we’ll check to see which religion’s cube has moved the most.

“I’m sure I don’t need to remind honest men like yourselves—but, no cheating. Besides, the cameras will keep you under surveillance. And the consumers will know if they are getting what they’re paying for when it comes to prayer.”

During the last part of Larry’s talk, Father Ignatius had been nervously fingering his beads which hung down the front of his robe and the other clerics thought that perhaps he was starting to pray already so they also began.

“We’ll be right back after this”, Larry smirked.

To fill time after the commercial Larry presented two bowls of dog food, one dry and the other canned, to a mongrel that was so hungry he would have eaten sawdust. The dog gobbled up both bowls and looked for more. Then Larry checked back with the clergymen. None of the steel cubes showed any sign of moving.

“For my next consumer test, I’ve invited the head cheerleaders from our six local high schools to help.”

He introduced each of the girls. They mirrored fresh, wholesome, clean youthfulness. Each girl wore her cheerleader’s uniform displaying bright school



colors. They were pictures of innocent exuberance eager to do their part and thrilled to appear on TV. As they were introduced they waved hello to mom, dad, and their friends at home.

Following the introductions, Larry said, “Viewers, as you know, recently the local school board approved a course in sex education for the coming school year. A major part of the controversy and debate on this issue has involved contraceptive devices, my staff has examined the sales records of every drug store located within one mile of any local high school and we have here the six leading brands of condoms sold.”

Samantha, wagging her tight skirt, wheeled out a table containing a tray of six foil wrapped packets, six small funnels, and six water pitchers.

Two tall metal rods were attached at each end of the table and a wire was stretched at eye level between the rods. Six clothespins dangled from the wire.

The camera panned between the six foil-wrapped packets and the blushing faces of the embarrassed girls. The girls looked startled. One looked absolutely haunted. “Relax girls”, Larry teased, “We can’t do the kind of test you’re imagining on TV.” The studio audience chuckled.

“What we’ll do is this—you just follow my instructions. Each girl take a packet and open it.... That’s right. Use your teeth if you have to.”

Another laugh from the studio audience.

“Unroll the condom and clip it up on the line with a clothespin. Don’t pretend you don’t know how to open it, honey. That’s right. Now unroll it and clip it to the wire. Now girls, fill up the rubbers using those funnels and pitchers, and we’ll see if the advertising for these products holds water.”



The studio audience muffled giggles as the red-faced girls fumbled through Larry's step by step instruction. The girl from Western High actually trembled as she went through the motions. Larry noticed her distress and shoved his hand-mike in her face forcing her to hold her head up when she tried to lower her eyes.

"What's the matter, Honey? Explain the trouble to our audience." She just shook her head and reached for her funnel.

By now the wire sagged from the weight of the grotesque water-filled condoms jiggling before each girl's face.

Larry continued to heckle the Western High cheerleader, "What's the matter? Is that the brand you use?"

He kept poking the mike in her face t» keep her head up. "Don't hide your face; your mother wants to see you on tv."

One of the clergymen at the back table sighed aloud, "Lord, deliver us from this unmitigated prick." The panel of clerics at the table all responded with a chorused, "AMEN."

Just as Larry planned, one of the water-filled condoms sagging from the wire sprang a pinhole leak. A jet of water spurted directly into his hand-held microphone still thrust out toward the cheerleader's face. And six million viewers saw a white power surge as voltage surged through the wet microphone wires and answered the prayer.

—END—

MY DUMB BROTHERS AND SISTERS



My dumb brothers and sisters almost made it impossible for me to have my prayer time last Saturday!

I mean, you can't believe what a drag it is to baby-sit your own kid sisters and brothers. You don't even get paid a thing for it, and they are pests. They're all right sometimes, but most of the times they're strange. It won't be hard to leave this family when I get out of school and go off to college.

I'm going to be a missionary, or maybe just a pastor's wife, or maybe only a teacher in a Christian school. But I intend to be a professional Christian, so you can see why it's so important for me to have my devotions, to read my Bible, meditate, and pray, every morning.

Brother Misel—he's our youth evangelist, and I wish my hair was as pretty as his—says that we never *have* time for devotions; we must *take* time. But Saturday all sorts of stupid stuff happened. I mean, how can you have devotions with a little brother, two baby sisters and a new baby—he's a boy too—in the same house?



First off, Mom woke me up with bad news—Dad had been up all night with a toothache, and she was driving him to the dentist. So I would have to get the kids' breakfast and tend them until she got back.

Well, that's not too bad because I could set them in front of Saturday morning cartoons and forget them. Mom also told me to fix French toast for the kids and to be sure to feed Dad's dogs. Then she and Dad drove off.

The kids were already watching *Bugs Bunny*, so I let them watch while I caught a few more minutes' rest. I closed my eyes for only a second when Judy and Kim trotted into my room whining that they were hungry. Well, *Road Runner* was already on, so it was too late to fool with French toast. Besides, it's too much trouble. And if I cooked, then I would have to wash dishes, and wouldn't have time for my devotions.

So I decided to save a little time and give the kids a treat too.

We get a lot of candy at our house. There's Halloween candy left over from trick-or-treat, marshmallow bunnies and stuff from Easter baskets, and even a few little chocolate Santas wrapped in tinfoil.

We get a lot of stuff, and Mom won't let us eat it all at once. She saves holiday candy in the freezer in one of those round tin cans that fruitcakes come in, then she doles it out a little at a time. I got down the fruitcake can and let the kids snack on candy as they watched cartoons.

Peter wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He kept nagging that he was hungry. I told him that if he didn't shut up and sit down, I wouldn't let him have any breakfast at all. He finally took five marshmallow bunnies and a sugar jack-o'-lantern and sat down. Wrestling was just coming on. Since I didn't have to



worry about dishes, I went up to my room for my devotions.

Brother Misel says that devotions are best early in the morning but late is better than not at all.

My reading schedule this week is about the end of the world and all that stuff. It's kind of interesting. But by the time I got my Bible open to *Matthew*, Kim interrupted. She wanted a glass of milk. I mean, she's almost four—you'd think she could get it herself. I yelled down for Peter to get her some milk. You guessed it—he poured milk all over the table and the kitchen floor. With all these interruptions I never would get devotions in.

Well, I cleaned up the milk, and I made them sit down to watch the rest of wrestling. Mom doesn't let them watch that, but I wanted them out of my hair. While they watched bone crushers, I went back up for devotions.

But before I even found my place in the Bible again, Judy wandered in with her doll in one hand and a wad of clothes in the other. She wanted me to dress it. I have dressed that wretched doll two million times since Christmas. Still, the poor thing stays naked half the time. Judy can't snap the snaps on the dress, but she sure learned to unsnap them soon enough.

I chased her and her naked doll out of my room, but she kept whining in the hall so I couldn't concentrate.

The only place with any privacy in this house is the bathroom, so I went in there. Now I told you these kids are strange, but my little sister Kim is the strangest stranger you ever saw. She has this thing about her own potty stool. I mean, there are two bathrooms in this house, but she insists this one is hers. So she stood out there pounding on the door. I told her to go away and leave me alone, and she finally did. Then Peter



banged on the door, yelling that she had had an accident and that the baby was sick at his stomach and spitting up.

I made Peter clean up the baby and made Kim get some dry clothes. Peter started sulking, so I made him go out and feed Dad's dogs too. I never would get devotions in at this rate, but the worst was still to come.

My Dad hunts. He keeps four blue-tic hounds in a kennel behind the house. He keeps the kennel locked because these are expensive dogs—not pets. Once somebody stole one, and Dad put a hundred dollar reward notice in the paper. That's why the kennel always stays locked.



When Peter went in to feed the dogs, he locked himself in and dropped the key somewhere inside.

He rattled the fence and hollered. I heard him screaming his stupid head off, so I ran out back to see what was wrong.

He looked so funny—the way he shook the gate and yelled like a convict in an old prison movie on the late show.

I tried to calm him down enough to look for where he had dropped the key, but he was scared and just kept crying.

He's such a crybaby. Those hounds won't hurt anybody.

I suppose i could have got the ladder and climbed over the fence to get him out, but his whining made me so mad that I thought I'd teach him a lesson. I told him



I'd just make him stay in his little prison until Mom and Dad got home. Then he really set up a howl. About that time the car pulled in the drive. Dad had another key, so he let Peter out.

Things finally got settled down, and I could have any devotions.

Like I said, this week's readings are about the end of the world. So the first thing I read when I finally got my Bible open to Matthew 25 was about the sheep and the goats: "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father:

For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat.

I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink,

I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

I was naked, and ye clothed me:

I was sick, and ye visited me:

I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," Jesus said.

The passage stunned me.

When have I seen Jesus *hungry*? At breakfast this morning?

Thirsty? Peter was the one who spilled the milk.

Naked? That doll Judy wanted me to dress?

A stranger? My strange little sister I banished from her own potty stool? That couldn't be, could it?

Sick? The baby spitting up?

In prison? Peter rattling the gate of the dog pen?

Could those people who Jesus calls "the least of these my brethren" possibly be, or include, my own little brothers and sisters?



Even as I thought of that last question, I knew the answer. Looks like I may have to make some changes around here.

—End—

The Ugliest Picture In The World ¹



Ruins of Nero's Paedagogium in Rome

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the Dearest and
Best

For a world of lost sinners was slain...

Oh, that old rugged cross so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above,
To bear it to dark Calvary.

Visitors to my office say the picture of Jesus above my desk is gross, obscene, disgusting, shocking, filthy, even blasphemous.

I treasure it.

To me it is the most meaningful religious picture I have ever seen. Archaeologists discovered the original on a wall in Rome.

After the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64, the Emperor Nero built a new palace which he named

¹ Nonfiction. This picture really does exist.



Domus Aurea, “The Golden House” on Palatine Hill northeast of the Coliseum site where some say Christians, accused of setting the fire, were fed to the lions.

The Roman writer Suetonius described Nero’s magnificent palace:

“Its vestibule was large enough to contain a colossal statue of the Emperor a hundred and twenty feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long. There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities, besides tracts of country, varied by tilled fields, vineyards, pastures and woods, with great numbers of wild and domestic animals. In the rest of the house, all parts were overlaid with gold and adorned with gems and mother-of-pearl.”



When Nero saw his new palace he said, “Good! Now at last I can live like a human being”!

On Palatine Hill close to The Golden House Nero also constructed a building called the *Paedagogium*. It housed imperial offices as well a school for servants and barracks rooms where palace guards and gladiators lived while on duty.



The soldiers often scratched rough pictures and slogans, called graffiti, into the plaster walls of their barracks. In 1857, in the fourth room on the left of the entrance to the *Paedagogium*, archaeologists discovered a number of these graffiti.

One of these pictures bears the inscription, "Alexamenos worships his God."

This graffito, now housed in Rome's *Museo Kircheriano* at the *Collegion Romano*, is the earliest known portrait of the Crucifixion, the earliest known picture of Christ.

It's a cartoon.

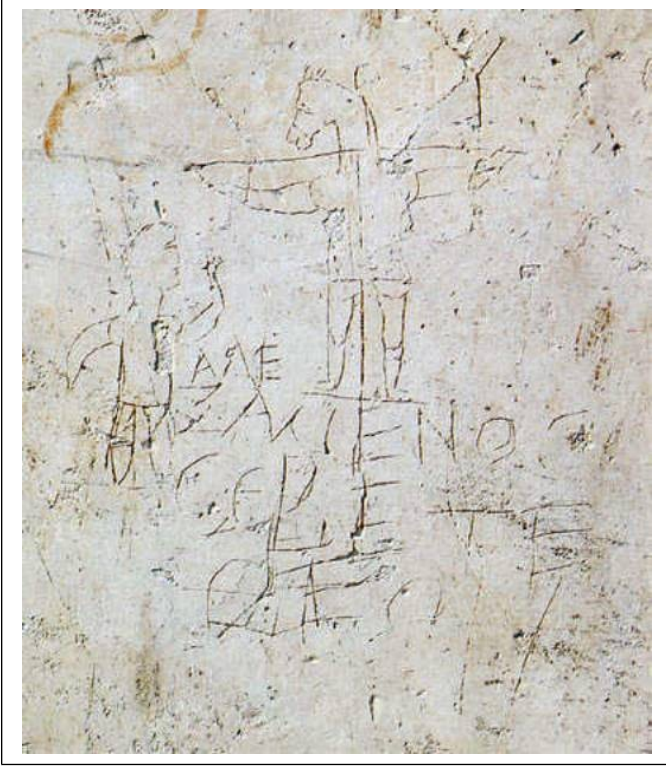
Archaeologists say it was drawn within 30 years of Christ's Resurrection.

The picture shows a small man, Alexamenos, praying with one arm extended toward our Savior suffering on the cross.

The cross appears to be a Tau Cross, one shaped like a capital T, with a title board on top.

Our Lord's feet rest on a small shelf or crossbar, his body is taut, his arms stretch out on the hard wood of the cross with the nails fastening his hands visible.

In this crude picture, scratched on the barracks wall by some pagan soldier, Jesus has the body of a crucified man—but the head of a Jackass!



Although this mocking picture offends modern Christian sensitivities, it would hold no shock for the writers of the Bible; they knew the cross as an emblem of shame.

The book of Hebrews *NIV* speaks of “crucifying the Son of God... and subjecting him to public disgrace.” . It says “Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... endured the cross, scorning its shame.”

Peter said, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you; for the spirit of glory and of





God rests on you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.”

Paul told the Galatians, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

He told the people of Corinth, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Shame! Disgrace! Foolishness! Stumbling block! Curse!—these are the words Bible writers associated with crucifixion.

The Romans reserved crucifixion as a form of execution for runaway slaves, rebels, child molesters, thieves who knocked down old ladies, abusers of their parents—the lowest criminal scum.

Roman senator Marcus Tullius Cicero, a pagan, wrote, “Let even the name ‘cross’ be kept away not only from the bodies of the citizens of Rome but also from their thought, sight and hearing... It is a grave offense even to bind a Roman citizen, a crime to flog him, almost the act of parricide to put him to death: What shall I then call crucifying him? Language worthy of such an enormity—It is impossible to find!”

Is it any wonder that the pagan soldier associated crucifixion with repugnance and ridicule and so drew his picture of Christ on the cross with the head of an ass?

Pagans often made such an association. Tertullian mentions another such picture of the God of the Christians—this one shows a man with an ass’s head; he wears a toga and carries a book.

Minucius Felix said, “Audio eos turpissime pecudis caput asini... venerari—I hear they worship the very filthiest beast with the head of an ass.”



The pagan word for the earliest Christians was *Asinarii*, which can be politely translated to mean “belonging to an ass.”

Everyone—Hebrew, Christian and pagan—knew that crucifixion was a filthy disgusting ignominious way to die.

. So naturally, the pagan artist—who wanted to tease his fellow soldier, to show repugnance and ridicule—drew that picture of Alexamenos praying to Christ crucified.

Jesus himself linked the cross with utter degradation coming before resurrection:

He told his disciples, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”

Handed over. Mocked. Insulted. Spit on. Flogged—Crucified.

Yes, Jesus knew what he was getting into; on the Mount of Transfiguration he said, “The Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Then he continued to say, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory.”

Suffering...rejection... torture... shame.



Who was Jesus to take such abuse? And why? Why, knowing what lay ahead, did he deliberately go to Jerusalem and crucifixion?

Who was this who was crucified?

Today many people seem to get hung up on the question Who Killed Jesus?

Might as well ask, Who Poisoned Socrates?

Such an esoteric question matters only to the very learned--or to the very ignorant.

If Jesus is indeed the Lord of Life who rose from the dead, then why ask who killed him? After all, the Scripture says he is the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world.

The question that matters to everybody is, Who Is It That Was Crucified?

Why does that matter to everyone?

Because Jesus once said that a time is coming when all the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live! "A time is coming," he said, "When all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Is that the truth?

I mean, if Jesus was just innocent victim of man's inhumanity to man that's too bad, but that's the way it goes.

Tough luck.

But what if he isn't just another dead guy?

What if he were something else altogether?

The author of Hebrews said, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he



appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son of God is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

The Apostle John said, "At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God and was God, and he existed with God from the beginning. All creation took place through him, and none took place without him... He came into the world—the world he had created—and the world failed to recognize him. He came into his own creation, and his own people would not accept him... So the word of God became a human being and lived among us."

Paul stated, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form!"

What?

The owner of all things? The Creator of the Universe? The shine of God's glory? The exact replica of God? The sustainer of all things? The personal expression of God. The fullness of the Deity!

The Ancient of Days. The Lord of Hosts. The Prince of Peace. Wonderful Counselor. King of kings and Lord of lords. Light of lights. Very God of Very God. The owner of all things. The Creator of the Universe. The shine of God's glory. The exact replica of God. The sustainer of all things. The personal expression of God. The fullness of the Deity!—These are the terms church and Scripture use in speaking of Jesus.

But isn't he honored today mostly for being a great teacher?

Certainly.

But what was it he taught?

"I am the light of the world," Jesus said.



“I am the door,” Jesus said.

‘I am the bread of life,” Jesus said.

‘I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus said.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus said.

He said that he saw Satan fall from heaven before earth’s creation. He said he existed before Abraham. He said that he had the authority to forgive sin. He said he was Lord of the Sabbath. He said that he and the Father are one and the same...

The Ancient of Days. The Lord of Hosts. The Prince of Peace. The Wonderful Counselor. King of kings and Lord of lords. Light of lights. Very God of Very God, begotten not made...

The night before Jesus was crucified, Caiaphas, the high priest, asked him:

“I charge you under oath by the Living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied, “But I say to all of you: In the future, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Now, when Jesus walked around saying he was God, the Mighty One, the light of the world—stuff like that—Was he telling lies? Was he crazy? Was he telling the truth? Are these the only three possibilities?

We know that Jesus is the Son of God because of the things he said and because of the things he did.

So, what did he do?

Jesus once withered a fig tree. Jesus calmed a storm. Jesus walked on water. Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He fed the hungry, cured the sick, taught the ignorant, confused the proud—whatever was wrong, Jesus made it right.



So, what did we do?

One of us betrayed him. One of us smashed a thorny crown on his head. One of us whipped him. One of us whacked him on the head with a stick. One of us stripped him naked. One of us held his arm down while another hammered a nail through his hand—We crucified him.

And then, while he hung on the cross in agony, we mocked him:

“He ‘saved’ others but he can’t save himself,” one said.

“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross,”“ shouted another.

“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself,” mocked one.

If you’re such a Hot Shot, why don’t you do something, they teased.

So Jesus did something...

He forgave them.

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” he said.

Yes indeed, the cross demonstrates God’s forgiveness and love as well as Man’s cruelty and shame.

Writing to the Philippians the Apostle Paul explained what had happened at Calvary:

“He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God’s equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.”

Why?



Why did all this awful stuff happen?

Why did he suffer all this mockery, this humiliation, this shameful treatment?

If Jesus really was the Lord God Almighty come in the flesh and if he really had the power to call legions of angels to his rescue, why did he stay on the cross?

He'd have to be crazy to put up with all this if he didn't have to!

That's right!

You hit the nail on the head.

God is crazy about us.

He endured all this for love of you and me.

Paul told the Romans why the Lord Christ endured the shame and mockery of the cross: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But how could mere men kill the Almighty God, the Prince and Source of All Life?

The God we pray to, The High and Holy One Who Inhabits Eternity, Who Dwells between the cherubim, Who has His throne in the heavens and the earth as his footstool, Who holds the entire universe, small as a hazel nut, in the hollow of His hand, The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Bright and Morning Star, Emmanuel, God with us— Jesus. He somehow lowered himself, emptied himself, reduced himself to enter the world he had created:

Remember what Paul said? "He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience,



even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.”

In the early days of computer technology, the machinery for a mainframe filled a whole floor in a building; then came the microprocessors with microchips so small that the same power can be found in a laptop... Well, God’s love motivated him to sort of micro-process himself, to condensed himself down so he could squeeze into this world to get to where the problem was—that’s us.

In his essay *“The Grand Miracle”* C.S. Lewis uses the analogy of a diver to illustrate the idea of God’s entering the world to save sinners -what theologians call the Incarnation:

“One has the picture of a diver, stripping off garment after garment, making himself naked, then flashing for a moment in the air, and then down through the green, and warm, and sunlit water into the pitch black, cold freezing water, down into the mud and slime, then up again in the green and warm and sunlit water, and then at last out into the sunshine, holding in his hand the dripping thing he went down to get.”

Down. Down. Down to the very bottom to get us —that’s the Incarnation; then up, up, up, back to where he came from—that’s the Resurrection!

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Yet all the shame, degradation, filth and mockery we subjected him to—like unruly, spoiled, vicious brats pounding on a sofa cushion—hardly left a dent, except for the nail prints still in his hands when he arose.



So, do you understand why I treasure the picture above my desk? Why I see such glowing beauty in the awful thing?

You see, God has no shame.

For love, there's virtually nothing he won't do.

He loves us and He wants you and me for himself, for his kingdom...

And he'll go to any lengths to get us, to make us princes and princesses in that kingdom.

Hey, we're talking here about a God who'd kiss frogs!

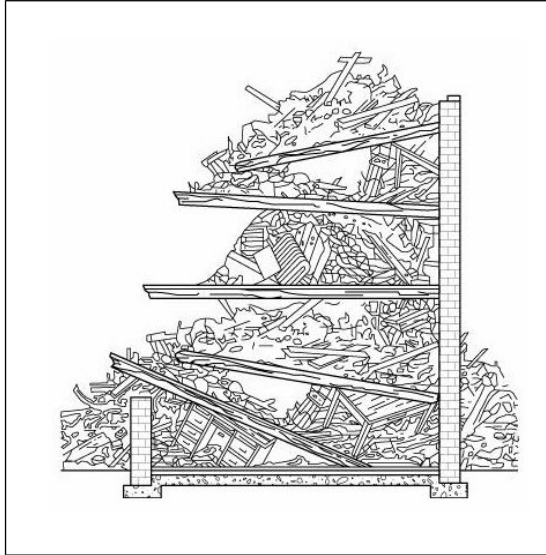
In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see;
For t'was on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down:
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.





Rubble



Cantilever Floor Collapse in a building

Charlie Boykin was sure Washington, D.C., had been atom bombed with the White House and Capital destroyed and the city in ruins.

That had not happened.

Actually, a gas main in Charlie's office building had exploded and only twelve people died.

Charlie didn't know this.

He was trapped in the rubble.

Charlie had been sitting at his desk in his cubical listening to a man in a leather jacket protest why his policy should not be canceled. Charlie hardly paid attention. He heard these stories every day.

Charlie's interest focused on the rump of Shirley Tims as she wiggled across the office to the bank of gray file cabinets. When she bent down for



something in the next to the bottom drawer, she exposed upper heights of stocking, and her skirt stretched tight across her magnificent bottom.

Charlie speculated on what combination of under things she might be wearing to create the particular pattern of lines and wrinkles beneath her skirt.

A Thong, I'll bet, Charlie thought.

"Well, mister. What do you say," asked the client interrupting Charlie's speculation.

In automatic response mode, Charlie replied, "You'll have to e-mail the home office in Cleveland about getting reinstated. There's a \$50 fee to appl..."

An angry fireball of force and fire rolled up the side of the building. Office windows became thousands of vengeful glass hornets buzzing in the air. Warping, the floor buckled and gave way..

Charlie and his desk slid backwards down the slanting floor and cracked against a wall which folded collapsing in billows of dust and debris.

"A bomb! A bomb. Terrorists!" Charlie shrieked.

Thick choking powder, once solid brick and plaster, filled the air of the Investor's Building. The building's third floor became its first in an instant. The weight of stone on crushed stone and the scraping of metal on metal drowned out all other sound. Erratic puffs of white and orange flashed as sparks, the only light in sudden pitch blackness.

The egg-gone-bad smell of gas assaulted Charlie's nose. He gagged. Breathed in more dust and powder. Gagged again. Panted for breath. Passed out.

Blood tastes salty, was his first thought as he regained consciousness. Blood trickled from a cut



somewhere above his left eye. In the blackness, he felt his scalp but could not locate the cut.

“I survived,” he said aloud. “Suitcase bomb. Weapon of mass destruction. God!”

For a long time, Charlie had expected this. Not really expected—it would happen in New York. Or if it did happen in D.C., the terrorists would target the Pentagon or some government building—not an insurance company a mile away from anyplace important.

He was sure it would never happen to him... but in the back of his mind he wondered if he would be incinerated without a thought in the blast, or whether he would be among the survivors struggling to rebuild the after-atom world.

It all depends on where you happen to be when IT falls, he'd often thought.

Now, in darkness, dust and devastation, he was sobered by the thought of all those people out there, poor bastards, who had been stamped out without time to die decently. All those who must be out there burned, mangled, exposed to radiation.

Radiation! A bell clanged in Charlie's brain. *I saw the fireball! God, I was exposed!* Visions of scars and burns and cancers and twisted Japanese kids flickered before him.

“I've got to get out. Find a doctor—there's an office up on Seven. Get decontaminated!”

Tried to stand. Cracked his head on projecting rock. Sank to hands and knees. Tried to get oriented. He could see nothing. Utter, utter blackness, a total absence of light, blacker, more bitter than blindness because he could see, nothing wrong with his eyes, but no light, not even a reflection. Blackness.

Panic. He scrambled wildly on all fours around his little pocket in the rubble. Bumping against



invisible hard things, scraping his head on invisible obstacles.

“My lighter,” he laughed. He dug in his pants pocket. Kleenex. Car keys. “It’s on the desk,” he moaned. He crawled forward. Hit something. “Where is my desk? Where is the damn desk? Where is anything?.”

He touched something in the dark. A vinyl chair back? No. Leather. Something leather. With zippers. *That man. That guy at my desk. He’s not moving. Maybe he has a cigarette lighter.*

Charlie felt around trying to find a pocket. Moving his hands one way, he felt a slab of cement. The other way, stickiness and something hard and wet and smooth and lumpy... *My God! His neckbone! The guy’s head is gone! Blood. What if he has AIDS or something. Got to wash my hands.*

There had not been much fire. Firemen picked through the steaming rubble. They aimed a thermal imaging camera at the pile of trash seeking an anomaly, a hot spot, a difference in temperature indicating a living person trapped out of sight. The camera picked up no image. They brought out lumpy rubber sacks and lined them up on a clear space on the pavement. They found no injured.

Red lights revolved above fire trucks and ambulances. Chief was proud of those gleaming trucks; made the privates keep that chrome polished daily. Blue lights flashed above police cars. Cops pushed curious rubbernecks back. Yet kids on skateboards and bikes challenged the yellow CAUTION tapes, every once in a while snagging a bit of brick or rebar as a souvenir.

TV trucks with telescopic cameras perched above the onlookers while a second-string girl reporter combed her hair as she prepared to report the incident on the 11 o’clock news.



Firemen began to roll up hoses. The school kids hurried away worried about the scolding they'd get for getting home late. The tv mobile unit rushed off to the airport—a beauty queen was landing to promote her latest movie.

The coroner's guys loaded body bags for transport to the morgue; once loaded, the unmarked white truck drove majestically away. Sniffed dogs jumped into the back of their van. A Public Works crew erected barricades with flashing yellow lights on the sawhorses. "God, what a mess," one of them remarked.

Charlie Boykin's world was made of stone, brick, jagged rebar, twisted office furniture—unseen points of rock jabbed his head from above. Rough slabs of concrete blocked his way forward. Crumbled bricks and sharp points of—he could not tell what it was—punched his ribs. Grit crunches between his teeth while plaster dust burned his eyes and irritated his lungs. Harsh edges of debris scraped the skin off knuckles and knees. Jagged entanglements of wire that had been computer cables, electric lines inside the walls, telephone cords—they all snared him when he tried to move.

The upper floors of the building had crashed down on lower floors, crushing, flattening, killing. A fluke of sewerage pipes from the ladies rooms—stacked one atop the other in the same configuration on all floors—formed the tiny air pocket that was now Charlie's world. Sewer pipes caught the weight of falling floors, skewed the weight to the side, propping the floor against a standpipe creating Charlie's world, saving his life.

Yet, Charlie found nothing familiar. Only impossible angles. A every inch of space hostile.



He groped in the rubble trying to make sense of what he was feeling, trying to find a way out. He couldn't.

He crawled over shards of debris, wiggling in and out of the chaotic mess, squeezing between unfriendly megaliths. Lost. Scared. Buried.

Suddenly there was nothing before him in the darkness—a chasm in the rubble.

He lay flat reaching downward with fingers outstretched, but he could not touch bottom. Was it four feet deep? Six? Twenty? He tossed a chunk of something into the hole. Rock hit rock in the blackness telling him nothing. How can you tell how deep a black hole is by listening without seeing. Charlie edged away from the hole of uncertain depth.

He hesitated. Should he chance going down? Could it lead to a way out. Was any way a way out?

Charlie's sister had been to the morgue. She was not sure if one of the bodies there was his. Row on row of mangled people lay on gurneys for relatives to try to identify. Crushed billfolds, singed papers—identified a few victims. But most remains bore no semblance to anyone who had ever lived. Charlie's sister thought of road kill on an interstate highway.

Charlie Boykin prayed, chose a random spot, and started digging with his bear hands. Tore off fingernails. He had to get out. Had to! He felt weak. Radiation sickness, he thought.

God, I'm thirsty. Dry grit. Dust. Powder. Need water. Can't even spit.

He ripped and pulled at concrete chunks indiscriminately. He worked frantically. *Got to get decontaminated.* Every time he'd move one rock, a dozen others, raising dust, slid down the pile to replace it.



Once on summer vacation from high school in Minnesota, Charlie and some buddies dug in a hillside where his uncle said they'd find a Viking treasure. They worked digging that hill all summer and found only one iron spear point. When they finally had to leave, Charlie felt sure that if they had dug only a few more feet, they would have uncovered the treasure. Maybe one more shovel full of dirt would turn it up... That's the way he felt now... *If I just dig a few more inches, just a few more. Move one more rock. Just one more. One more...*

After four days, Charlie Boykin expired a bitter man.

To die in The Blast or the noble struggle for survival afterwards... that would seem fair. But to be stuck here, a by-product of the whole thing, that disturbed him. He lay back on the brick pile in the rubble and thought of what it must be like outside, melted skyscrapers, mutated babies, rejuvenated cavemen...

Charlie thought it was the radiation from seeing the fireball. Actually it was exposure, thirst, bad air, rubble.

Bulldozers clearing the site plowed up his body.

The Police Chaplain told his sister he'd been crushed instantly.

Written in March, 1966--jwc

—End—

UNCLE HERB'S SECRET PICTURE



After Uncle Herb died Aunt Margaret gave away a lot of his things. She called the Salvation Army to pick up his clothes to give to poor families. She and Uncle Herb always did support the poor. They were always giving to missionaries and charities and things like that. All his tools she gave to the Scout Camp for their woodshop, and most of his books she donated to their church library, but she pulled out enough of them to fill a big cardboard box for me. That's how I got Uncle Herb's secret picture.

It was stuck in the pages of *A Boy's Life Of The Great Reformers*.

And although this all happened twenty years ago, that picture was the most exciting thing I've ever found in ay life.

Uncle Herb died suddenly so he never had a chance to destroy the snapshot. And I suppose Aunt Margaret didn't know where he'd hidden it. Maybe she'd forgotten about it. I'm sure they never meant anyone else, especially a twelve year old boy, to see it.

Getting the box of books excited me, but it also disappointed me. I'd hoped to get his pistol, it was a



real one but Mom said NO! Or I'd like to have gotten some of his tools or his fishing tackle. I felt uneasy about wanting anything of his because wanting his things seemed like being glad he was dead and I wasn't glad at all. I liked him.

He was my favorite uncle and he and Aunt Margaret seemed like such happy people even though they were religious. When my brother and I spent a weekend at their house, they said grace before eating and took us to Sunday School. Then we'd picnic in the afternoon or, if it was raining, Aunt Margaret would pop popcorn, and we'd all lay on the living room rug listening to radio programs and reading the Sunday funnies.

Sometimes they'd take us fishing, and we all teased Uncle Herb and laughed because Aunt Margaret always caught the biggest fish and she was only a girl. They were nice people. Complete people. Happy people. It's a shame he died.

I'm afraid that if a boy today were to find the photograph it would not have the same impact on him that it did on me. Over-exposed—not the photograph—the boy. Kids today are let in on the secret too early, so for them there is no secret. They don't live with the painful, delicious mystery that surrounded us when I was a boy.

Television teaches them that the most important things in life must be sweet breath, white teeth and dry underarms. But we knew that the most important thing in the world was "doing it"—and that was the wonderful, mysterious, shameful, beautiful secret. We didn't know exactly what "doing it" was and finding out was, for our generation, the adventure of a lifetime.

I recall picking up tantalizing bits of information from overheard adult conversations which would abruptly stop the moment they realized I was paying



attention. I remember late night discussions in Scout camp where I eagerly listened to older, more knowledgeable boys dissemble information which, even for them, was composed of hear-say and utter mythology.

Girls at school tempted me to stare and wonder, "Can that possibly be true?" Like all my contemporaries, I spent hours ruminating, analyzing, fantasizing, longing to be let in on the secret.

There was no one you could ask about things like that; you assumed that your parents or teachers had never heard of "doing it" because they were respectable. And among boys there was the unspoken assumption that nice people never did it or even talk about it. You couldn't outright ask the older boys because they seemed to think you already knew, and to ask would expose you as ignorant, so you had to figure things out for yourself, and that was a delight and a horror. Every boy was on his own, left to his own ingenuity to figure out a way to find out, and we all chose different routes, with many side trails to that knowledge.

Once my friend Paul brought a French book to school. The local school authorities, in one of their rare acts of mercy, allowed us to congregate in the auditorium before the bell on mornings when it was too cold to stay outside. A gang of us boys customarily huddled in a back corner waiting for classes to start. We all knew the reputation of French books, and Paul claimed that this was one of those kind of books.

The binding was loose and cracked with the dull red cover stamped in black cryptic letters. We furtively passed it around our circle; each boy touching it reverently, thrilled with the knowledge that this book possibly told straight out the things we yearned to know. Every one of us strained our



eyes, intently looking at the foreign letters, anguishing to pick out a familiar, understandable word. It was both exquisite and frustrating to realize that all the information was there in your hands if you could only read it.

To this day I regard that French book as one of the most provocatively sensual things I've ever touched.

My own search for knowledge took me to the magazine stacks of the public library with a razor blade.

The library kept some back issues of *Life*, *Esquire*, and *The Police Gazette*. These magazines sometimes had pictures of girls in bathing suits. Some even wore revealing two-piece bathing suits! I pretended to be looking at books on the ancient Maya civilization; they were across the aisle from the magazines. But when I was sure no one could see me, I sliced out whole pages of *Life* with my razor and hid the pictures in my coat. I felt that this was incredibly dangerous. There must have been some unimaginable punishment for defiling any library book, but if they had caught me cutting out pictures of girls.... For me, even now the sight of a Mayan idol in a museum stirs up feelings of intrigue, danger, and forbidden passions.

By today's standards the exciting magazine pictures of my boyhood were pathetically tame. For one thing, those pictures were impersonal, clinical in their portrayal of the female body. They didn't actual depict any secret portion of the women, but by means of suggestion, lighting, and diaphanous draperies (I thought of first-aid gauze) they hinted at mysterious swells and secret folds of skin.

Most of the women posed with their faces turned away, or if they were facing the camera their eyes were downcast—as modest as if they were unaware



of being photographed. Others were intimidating, challenging, daring you to look at them. There may have been other magazines with more blatant pictures in that antique age before the advent of the centerfold, but our town's library didn't subscribe to them.

At that time, a considerable body of mythology surrounded "doing it." I recall one conversation outside the Scout hut where our troop met. We were practicing tripod lashings when Spider Davis said, "I heard something about Andy."

"What you hear?"

"He did it to a girl!"

"Who? Who? Who?", piped a crowd of eager boys.

"Don't know her name. She's in high school."

"What's so special about that", asked China Boy, a tenderfoot new to the troop.

"I heard she was a nice girl. Now she'll be a whore."

"How come?", asked China Boy further revealing his ignorance of the mystery.

"Well", said Spider with superior knowledge, "The first time you do it to a girl, it hurts her something awful. She struggles and screams and cries and even faints. But the second time, she likes it so much that she never wants to do anything else. She's ruined. Goes around begging guys to do it."

"Golly," we all chorused, dreaming of meeting such a girl, "What happens if...."

"Time to start, Men," shouted Andy, the Senior Patrol Leader, the very guy who "did it", and he stood up in front of the troop just like a normal person, leading us in saying, "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal... clean and reverent."



In spite of our understanding about the disastrous consequences of such an endeavor, one of our most consistent speculations involved how to trick a girl into letting you “do it.” One school of thought declared that the only hope for us was to stumble across a young lady asleep in the woods.

Some of the boys placed their hopes in a report about a sure-fire, home-made aphrodisiac. According to this spurious myth, an enterprising seducer could achieve his aim by sprinkling cigarette ashes in a girl’s fountain coke. The resulting mixture when ingested by the target was supposed to act like the legendary “Spanish fly” driving her wild with indiscriminate desire. Who knows, perhaps it might work; I never tried it because my father would have beat me if he ever saw me with a cigarette.

A thing that may be difficult for a modern person to grasp is that in my young mind “doing it” was in no way associated with reproduction. I had that all figured out I knew that mothers had babies. But, of course, mothers were a different species from girls. I knew that fathers had once been boys. My own father told me he had once been a Scout, but the idea of any mother I knew once having been a girl seemed far-fetched.

Anyhow, mothers had babies; they carried them inside close to their hearts until a doctor cut the mother’s chest open and delivered the baby. I figured that having babies was as inevitable for all women as growing a beard was for all men—when you got old enough, it just happened.

The main drawback in this train of thought was that I’d heard people say, “The baby looks just like his father.” I decided that the father’s contribution to the baby’s features must come about by association. The baby was intrinsically the mother’s and only acquired the father’s characteristics because the



mother picked up these characteristics in much the same way she might acquire his manner of speech or his taste for oysters.

I should have known better because my father tried to teach me the rudiments of reproduction. He presented me with a pamphlet entitled *Dr. Bristol's Facts For Boys* and said, "Read this."

Dr. Bristol began his book telling me that boys grew to have beards, deep voices, and glands. I knew that glands were something that made fat people fat. He went on to tell about *coupling*. The only coupling I could imagine was when the engines in the switch yard banged into boxcars to couple. He lost me there, but I caught on again when I read the magic phrase, "the male superior position." I knew males were superior—everyone knows that boys are better than girls. Dr. Bristol concluded with dire warnings about some loathsome, unnamed disease which left me guilty, frightened and bewildered.

When my father retrieved the pamphlet he demanded, "You don't have any questions, do you?"

"No, Sir", I mumbled.

"Good. Stay out of trouble."

That encounter completed my formal education on the matter, so when one of the older scouts made the ridiculous statement that babies were caused by "doing it", I completely dismissed the idea.

Because if, if babies are the result of a mother and father doing it (and I have 2 brothers and a sister) then at least four times in the past my parents

Impossible!

The afternoon Aunt Margaret brought the cardboard box full of books over to our house I was listening to *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy* on the radio. She wore a stylish navy-blue suit and a little



pillbox hat with just a trace of a veil. She looked fresh and smelled nice. The strain of Uncle Herb's death left her with a few crow's feet around her eyes and a gray tint to her hair, but she was regaining her sparkle and pleasantness. She was on her way to a Ladies Missionary Society dinner at her church so she only came in for a few minutes. I unloaded the box from the back seat of her Nash and, thanking her, took it up to my room and went back downstairs to hear the rest of my program.

After supper, I went up to sort through the box and put the books on the shelf beside my bed. Most of them were the sort of thing an older person thinks a boy might be interested in, but a few of them were real treasures: one of General Zachary Taylor's books about fighting Seminole Indians, a copy of *Divine Comedy* with Dore' engravings showing souls writhing in torment, *Bomba, The Jungle Boy*, a book by some guy who blew up Indian mounds with dynamite to get the stuff out of them, and *A Boy's Life Of The Great Reformers*. I didn't know what a reformer was; I thought the book might be about electricity or model trains.

I never did read that book but it's the one I remember best because thumbing through it, in a chapter called, "Zwingli in Zurich", I found the photograph used as a place-marker.

It must have been in the book for years because when I removed it, it left a light-colored square on the yellowing pages. The snapshot itself was brown with age but was still sharp. Distinct. It was a picture of a woman from the waist up. She faced the camera at a slight angle, her hair tumbling over her shoulder in a Jeannette McDonald cascade. I think there may have been a band or ribbon in her hair, and that's all she wore. She had... nipples.



Although the picture must have been taken before I was born, I recognized her. It was Aunt Margaret.

She held her hands on her hips, elbows back, thrusting out her breasts as though she were offering them for someone to enjoy. And she was smiling. That smile haunted me. It combined genuine enjoyment, triumphant pride, welcome invitation, and giving love. Her pose and expression, declared a deliberate presentation of herself to someone greatly beloved.

Shocked, confused, unbelieving, I felt as though I had stumbled upon something so intensely personal, so unspeakably intimate, that it bordered on holiness. Her smile, her bearing, her portrait, her offering was obviously meant for the eyes of only one person, and I, though inadvertently, was an unauthorized intruder. Embarrassment, curiosity, and lust naturally stirred inside me, but a different kind of yearning also surged. Her expression caused this bitter-sweet yearning.

I longed for someone to look at me the way she was looking at her beloved. Full of joy, giving, and unidirectional



From this revelation of herself it was obvious that my aunt had been a willing, joyous, active participant in whatever she and her husband did together. This facet of their marriage dovetailed with all the other things they did together; the way they teased each other about fishing, the way they held hands on a picnic, the way they prayed together in church.

As the facts of life began to unfold for me, as hinted-at ideas suddenly snapped into place, as things I'd read or been told took on a different meaning, my snickering little-boy ideas disintegrated. I felt the cheapness of tricking a girl rather than winning her exclusive, life-long devotion. I caught a glimpse of what a complete marriage my uncle and aunt must have had, and I determined to settle for nothing less for myself.

Searching, I went through every page of the other books. I found a newspaper clipping about Lindbergh and an embroidered cross book mark, but no other photographs. I kept staring at the picture all that sleepless night, pondering meanings and morals. My imagination reconstructed the playful romp which resulted in this indiscreet photo. I was tempted to think they may have been drinking, but I knew that neither of them drank. I concluded they must just have been having private fun enjoying each other.

I also worried over what to do with the photograph. Adolescent lust tempted me to keep it. But what if someone else saw it? My sense of chivalry dictated that I should return it to Aunt Margaret. But how could I go about that?

The taunting phrase, "plain brown wrapper" kept peppering into my mind, and I realized how ridiculous, teasing even, it would be to drop it in her mail box. And I certainly couldn't just hand it to her; what would I say? I burned the picture.



Years later, Aunt Margaret caught Consumption, what we now call tuberculosis or T.B. She entered a church-sponsored sanatorium. By that time I was in the army, and I visited her while I was home on leave. I found her in the garden dozing with her worn Bible open on her lap. She was happy to see me, and we strolled down to the pond to feed the ducks and talk about family and old times.

She was a slender, silver-haired ghost of the girl in the picture. I kept wondering if I might have been mistaken. Could the two really be the same person?

As we tossed bread crumbs to the blustering ducks she reminisced telling me about how she had once been suspended from her church for awhile for going to a dance as a young girl. "They were more strict back then. Now they even hold dances for the young people in the fellowship hall. I think that's a good thing."

I was afraid to say anything about Uncle Herb. I didn't want to upset her, but she began talking about him herself. He had been a railroad man and she worked as a telegraph operator when they met.

"He was the kindest, gentlest person," she said, "A Christian and a gentleman. Of course, he was a rounder sometimes. I wish we'd been able to have children. He'd have been such a good father. He enjoyed you boys so much."

I thought of asking her about the picture then. I'd never before felt so close to her, and although, being engaged myself, I knew a great deal more about sexual attraction by then, I still wondered about how, as a young woman, she had reconciled her faith and the sensuality of the picture. I couldn't think of her as some kind of hypocrite because, except for that picture, as far as I knew she lived her faith. There was something about these two facets of her



character that didn't seem to mesh. It was beyond my experience. I just stood there tossing bread to the ducks instead of speaking.

She asked me all about the family and about the army and if I had a sweetheart yet. I told her about Janet and our plans to marry when I got out of the service. She smiled wistfully saying, "Love is the best part of life, and it's different all the way through. There's the cuddling and smooching and passion followed by growing together. Afterwards is the remembering, and savoring. And each part is the best part while it's going on. It's all wonderful, and it's all sad."

She sank down on a white bench in the shade of a tree beside the pond and flipped through her worn Bible. "Look at this," she said, "The Book says it better than I can."

I looked over her shoulder and read:

Rejoice with the wife of thy youth
Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant
roe,
Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times,
And be thou ravished always with her love.

—Proverbs 5:18-19

"That's the way it is with love," she said, "That's the way I remember it."

And I didn't need to ask about the photograph anymore.

I think I understood.

—End—

LESLIE SNOBBS, BEAR KILLER



Leslie Snobbs wanted to kill a bear.

He needed to kill a bear because his parents named him Leslie.

The guys in school used to chant, “Leslie. Leslie. Ought to wear a dressie.”

Any man with a name like Leslie, or Beverly or Marion is sure to understand. Any man who as a kid was called Skinny or Creampuff or Sissy knows that urge to defeat something wild and vicious.

Some think that if Napoleon or Hitler had killed a bear or rode a big motorcycle, or climbed Mount Everest, then history would have been different.

A boy with a name like Fink or Blatter or Cowart, begins to think that the teasing of other kids has some real basis. He begins to search within himself and finds intrinsic faults that the teasers never



guessed at. But the boy, now a man, feels as though his debased secret nature is branded on his forehead. He thinks that even strangers look at his face and read “Sissy—Coward—Fatty—Weakling.”

The pain of a name drives some of these men to books which become cocoons against anguish. Other men are driven to excel in sports, or in seducing women, or in feats of arms to prove to their own inner doubts that they are men.

Perhaps that is over simplified but if Leslie Snobbs had been named Hank Ironrod, he may not have needed to kill a bear.

Leslie worked among 5,000 other employees at Washington, D.C.’s General Accounting Office where he correlated census figures comparing population density within Florida, Georgia and Alabama congregational districts over the previous 24 years.

At work, Leslie once tried disguising his name by shortening it. Once, in the break room, he introduced himself to a table full of girls from Procurement by saying, “Hi, I’m Les” and one of the girls said, “But we want More!” and all the girls giggled and Leslie slinked away to another table.

Actually, Leslie did not want to kill a bear as much as he wanted to fight the beast. He had an aching need to match his skill and strength against something that could kill him in return.

Obviously, shooting the beast with a high powered rifle while it fed unawares 300 yards away would not prove a man to his own hyper-critical self which constantly searches for the smallest trace of fear to pounce upon and magnify into shame.

No. The fight must be at close quarters with the lowest common denominator between man and beast—a bow and arrow.



A methodical man, Leslie began his quest in the public library; what better place to learn how to hunt bears? The Main D.C. Library lay within easy walking distance from his apartment on 19th Street just off Dupont Circle.

He read Pope's *Adventures In Hunting* with awe. He combed back issues of hunting magazines for articles on bear hunting. He carefully pondered the detailed diagrams in Bradock's *Anatomy Of North American Wildlife*. Even the Boy Scout merit badge pamphlet on archery was not neglected in his studies and winter pipe dreams.

The North American Black Bear is plantigrade, walking on the soles of its feet. There are five toes on each foot, each armed with a strong, curved, nonretractible claw. The black bear's front claws are about 1¼ inches in length, and it is the only North American bear that often climbs trees as an adult. The bear has 42 teeth: 12 incisors, 4 canines, 16 premolars and 10 molars. The canines are long and well pointed; the premolars are rudimentary or even missing; and the molars have flat crowns.

A large male black bear weighs on an average of 300 to 400 pounds (the female considerably less) stands 27 to 36 inches high at the shoulder and is 4 to 5 1/2 feet in length. This bear does not have the prominent shoulder hump which characterizes the brown-grizzly.

The black bear did not originate on this continent, however; it came over from Asia on the Bering Land Bridge about 500,000 years ago. Unlike the pugnacious grizzly which is rapidly disappearing, the furtive black bear has learned to adapt to man and has survived in many parts of the country, enhancing the hunting situation by its presence near populated areas. Though known to attack when provoked, the black generally gives humans a wide berth.

Leslie also pursued his bear hunt at the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park. Most



Sundays found him leaning against the railing at the bear enclosure watching bears.

He had never seen a bear in the wild and hoped to learn something of their habits at the zoo. One Sunday a crowd of school girls gathered at the railing and, though you were not supposed to feed the animals, they tossed peanuts to the bears.

Leslie observed every movement of the bears as they lumbered about and occasionally scampered for peanuts tossed by the girls. He constantly gauged where to place a fatal shot, and many times he drew an imaginary bead on the huge frolicking beasts.

A fat, ball-headed man with a huge gold ring on his hand stopped to watch the bears catch peanuts in the air. He flicked his burning cigar butt and roared with laughter at the painful antics of the bear which caught it.

Aghast, Leslie yelled. "Stop that you asshole!"

The fat guy looked over and balled up his fists. He took a step toward Leslie. The school girls began chanting, "Asshole. Asshole."

The chant startled the guy. He shook himself and stalked away in a huff.

"Way to go Mister," one of the girls said as she passed Leslie walking away.

Even so, Leslie left the zoo angry with himself. *What was I thinking. That guy was big enough to kill me.*

With the coming of Spring, Leslie Snobbs began to chose his weapons. His first bow was a cheap fiberglass longbow. That bow, an armguard, archery glove, a quiver, and a dozen wooden arrows with field points comprised his practice outfit.

He got up an hour earlier from then on to practice archery before work. His first morning on the range—



his first shot—painfully reminded him to wear that new armguard. As he released the first arrow, the bowstring slapped his inner arm scraping off skin. He bled. He cursed, put on the armguard and practiced some more.

That night he had sore muscles where he never before knew muscles grew.

Soon his shoulders and neck muscles firmed, his shots grew more precise, and he bought a new bow. This one was a laminated recurved hunting bow. With it he used heavy aluminum arrows equipped with vicious hunting points that used inset razorblades for a deadly edge.

Leslie practiced constantly. Hunting season was approaching and he was still deathly afraid of bears.

At work, he made the mistake of confiding in a fellow worker his plans to hunt a bear. That afternoon when they went to the snack bar for coffee, the man introduced him to a table surrounded by secretaries as *Leslie Snobbs: Bear Hunter*. He was always being humiliated.

That night he ate supper at Harry's Dugout, a dingy dinner which specialized in heavy greasy food loved by truckers and construction workers. It gave Leslie a sense of masculinity to be there surrounded by talk of bulldozers, horse racing, and heavy work. These guys went to job sites, not an office; Leslie wished he could say he worked at a job site. Somehow being in this atmosphere of hard sweaty work atoned for his own air conditioned office. His honest respect for these real men made Leslie accepted by other regulars at Harry's in spite of his college education and neat business suit.

As he sipped thick black burnt coffee after a supper of beef hash and cabbage, a bearded heavy man in greasy overalls burst in.



“Hey, Harry. Got me a bear this weekend!” he called from the door.

He clambered onto a counter stool near Leslie.

“A big bastard. Three hundred pounds at least.”

Leslie came alive with envy and interest. Other customers stopped their own conversations to listen to the man’s boast.

“Where did you take him?” Harry asked.

“Over in West Virginia, Sunday. Hell! We were after deer, but this bastard comes charging ‘cross the field. He was tough. Took five shots to stop him.... Hey, Harry, give me some franks and beans.”

The man continued, “Yeah, buddy, that mother was some kinda big. Me and my buddy was sitting on a fence taking a little drink when he comes running out of the woods right at us. Somebody musta scared him ‘cause he didn’t even see us.

“Damn! I thought he was just a baby when I first seen him... Hey, where’s them beans? Coffee too!

“Well, anyhow, I shot. Got him in the foot and he rears up on his hind legs. Jesus! He looked big. Then I got him twice in the belly.

“Then my buddy, he shoots and blew his nose clean off. Hell! I always wanted a rug, but he blew his whole damn face off. Then I shoots again and get him right in the heart. Stops him dead.”

The man used his fork to push beans onto his spoon.

Somehow Leslie’s envy faded as the man continued with unabated enthusiasm.

“That bear had the biggest nuts on him you ever seen. My buddy cut it off. Took it home to his old lady. He says she can play with that on a cold night.”

Some guys laughed.



“Boy that mother was heavy. We tied a rope around his front leg cause the head was gone and the rope kept slipping off his neck and we pulls him back to the truck. Damn near pulled his leg off when he hung up on a stump. We ought to have cleaned his guts and stuff out first, but we didn’t think of it.”

The man continued to tell with pride how they had weighted the bear and butchered it and shipped its skin off to a taxidermist to be fixed. He was still talking when Leslie slipped out.

The Noble Hunter, Leslie thought as he left.

Leslie had put in for annual leave in the fall; bear’s pelts are in prime condition then after a summer of feasting and fattening before hibernation. During the summer Leslie continued to practice in the evenings at an indoor archery range in Washington, D.C.

Northern Pennsylvania was the best bear country accessible on Leslie’s budget. November found him hiking on a section of the Appalachian Trail. He intended to set up camp in one of the log lean-tos on the trail and do his hunting in the state forest nearby.

Leslie was not an experienced outdoorsman but his inherent methodical way of doing things prepared him for camp life. He was in dead earnest. He had even given up his favorite pipe for the two weeks he had to hunt—didn’t want the aroma of smoke to give him away to a bear’s keen sense of smell.

Most new hunters would have gone to a hunting lodge and worked with a guide. Leslie did not for the same reason that compelled him to stalk a bear in the first place.

Every morning he was on the trail by five. About ten he would return to camp for breakfast and archery practice. He would take a nap in the



afternoon, then go out again just before sunset and hunt again till dark. After supper he would sharpen the broadheads and study a topographical map planning the next day's hunt.

Some days he spent most of the hunt tramping quietly through the woods. On others he would still hunt, sitting silently at a likely-looking place for hours. During these hunts he saw a family of beaver repairing their dam for winter. He once startled a herd of deer which went bounding noiselessly over fallen logs crisscrossed on the forest floor. He met two fox, numerous coons and possums, and once he saw a bobcat fleeing through the woods in the distance. He had an almost disastrous encounter with a skunk... but he saw no sign of bear as the first week passed.

Somehow his solitude here in the woods was different from the aloneness he felt in his bachelor apartment in Washington. There it was loneliness; here peace.

Tuesday evening of the second week, he saw his first bear. It was feeding in a berry patch on a ridge not a mile from his camp. The ridge had been burnt over in a forest fire a few years ago and the land was now slowly being reclaimed by the forest.

First there had been grasses, then thorn bushes and knee-high pine saplings. Now the cycle of nature had progressed to the point where the once-burnt-over land was covered by shrubs, scrub oak, and shoulder-high huckleberry bushes.

This undergrowth made a shot impossible. One twig could deflect an arrow. Leslie withdrew cautiously to the edge of the burned-over area and watched the bear through binoculars.

It methodically raked bushes with sharp claws and ate the berries. Often it paused to rise on its back legs to sniff the air before resuming feeding.



Leslie found himself taking imaginary aim just as he had done in the zoo so many months before. As darkness approached, Leslie slipped away to his camp to carefully study maps and plan his attack.

Next morning found Leslie on the ridge pushing his way through the bushes to a thick fire-blackened stump. The stump was broken off about ten feet above the ground and made a cramped precarious perch above the berry patch. Leslie climbed to the top and sat there waiting for the bear to return.

He was first excited, then cramped, then bored. Even though there was no one within miles to see him, he felt ridiculous perched there like a flagpole sitter. His legs ached. His tail hurt, but he could not squirm around to change position. The day had been warm enough when he had been hiking to the ridge, but now, sitting motionless, Leslie felt cold.

A doe and her faun passed nearby without scenting him. He was pleased.

Late in the afternoon, the bear returned. It moved through the undergrowth with a quietness Leslie would have thought impossible. He notched an arrow and waited. It was an hour before the bear ventured within range.

The wind blew in Leslie's favor so the bear did not scent him, but some innate sense told it something was wrong. It would glance up nervously from its berry feast and cautiously sniff the air.

Twang!

The bear started when it heard the arrow leave the bow. Even so, the shot was true tearing through the matted fur, shearing green bone, and lodging in a vertebra. The beast thrashed about crushing undergrowth as it scratched wildly at the protruding arrow shaft. Blood poured from the wound as the flailing animal clawed at it. The man loosed another



arrow but missed because of the animal's frantic activity. The bear crashed out of sight through the bushes leaving a trail of blood. Everything grew silent.

Don't chase it. Give it a chance to lie down and bled out. That's what all the books say, he thought

Leslie dug in his pocket for his pipe and pouch. He could smoke now. He remained quietly on his perch savoring the tobacco for the first time in days.

Finally he descended and began to track the bear, following the blood trail. Blotches marked where the bear had lay down to lick its wound before moving deeper into the forest.

About 300 yards into the undergrowth, Leslie found an area of matted bushes where the bear had lain bleeding profusely . Then the trail went on, entering the forest, leading toward the gray rock cliffs near the beaver damn. The bear made it to its cave.

By the time Leslie arrived within sight of the den, it was almost dark. He hated to leave the animal wounded overnight, but it would be foolhardy to venture in there now. The bear had lost a lot of blood. Perhaps it was already dead in that cave.

Leslie built a small fire and stayed there in the open all night. The mosquitoes were vicious.

As soon as it was light, he made a torch of sticks, loosened his hunting knife in its sheath, nocked an arrow in his bow and wiggled into the entrance of the cave. It was exceedingly awkward to manage bow and the torch while trying to see ahead. The smoke blinded him. He wasn't even sure there would be room inside the cave to draw his bow and shoot. He hoped the bear was already dead.

The cave was not large enough for the man to stand upright. Once past the entrance, he practically



had to crawl on his belly to squeeze inside. The place smelled awful. His torch was ineffective. His bow impossible to handle.

The bear had worried the arrow in its flesh all night. It broke off the feathered end of the shaft but the broadhead stayed embedded in its flesh.

It was in pain.

It was hungry.

It was mad.

The man hardly saw it before the bear was on him. He mostly saw its eyes, mad with hate and pain. He saw its yellow teeth.

The first great swipe of the bear's claws sent Leslie's bow clattering and knocked the torch sputtering to the cavern floor useless. The man started to scream but fur choked his mouth as the beast lunged on top of him. The close smell of animal gauged him. The bear's claws ripped at him and its teeth closed on his hand. Leslie struggled wildly clutching for his knife. Instead his free hand closed on the protruding six inches of arrow shaft still embedded in the bear. He frantically twisted it jarring it loose from the bone and deflecting it downward into the bear's lungs.

The bear died on top of him. It lost sphincter control. Warm pungent urine soaked Leslie.

He freed himself from the body and crawled back to the cave entrance. He sat there panting, suddenly overcome with fear.

Later, he recovered his bow and brought out the body.

Once he had read that Indians made an offering to the spirit of any animal they killed. Now it only seemed appropriate. As he skinned the bear, Leslie carefully extracted the fatal broadhead. He removed



the bear's penis, tentacles, and heart and buried these things under a rock at the cave entrance.

He almost said a prayer.

Leslie Snobbs never bragged about his rug, or even mentioned it. He was ashamed.

I shouldn't have left him wounded all night, he thought.

Should I have shot him from that tree or should I have met him at ground level?

Should I have gone in that night instead of waiting for day?

I was afraid. I was like that man in Harry's...

Next year, I think I'll buy a motorcycle.

—End—

One Crazy Lady



Ok, so I'm liberated, but I'm still old fashioned enough to come out of town to have it done.

No way am I going to tell my mother. She'll never know. Who needs that hassle?

And Mark. He's so tied up with the Tournament of Players Championship being at Sawgrass this week, he probably doesn't even know I'm gone. While I'm here in Baltimore, I'll bet he's practically living at Ponte Vedra Beach with his golfing buddies. Making contacts. Getting to the top—brown nosing is what it is. He doesn't even like golf.

A junior partnership is what he lives for. That and nights with me—or afternoons. Or mornings.

But not life.

He's not ready for a life commitment. I'm not sure I am either when it comes right down to it. He's



fun. He's more or less secure. He's healthy. And in this day of AIDS, what more can a woman expect?

My mother, of course, thinks he's ruining me.

Oh, she's over the stage of regarding me as a scarlet woman. But her tight-mouthed silences now are as bad as her hurt pouting was last year.

Being around her is like walking with a candle through a room full of little firecrackers. You never know what's going to set her off, or whether the explosion will be the big one with everything popping at the same time, or just another little annoying Pow.

I mean, when we drive over to her house, I go trying to think of a harmless subject to talk about. But what's harmless one day may be explosive the next.

Any remark can set her off.

Like that time, Mark mentioned Annapolis. How was he to know that back during World War II she'd been in the WAVES and is still touchy about what the Navy did to her?

But anyhow, my business is my own. I don't have to get anyone's permission. And I don't have to talk it over with either one of them. I have to decide what is best for me for now.

And this is the best thing...

I think.

At least I thought so till this morning.

When I visited the crazy lady.

Mama asked me to visit Mrs. Gregg while I'm here. She knows I'm in Baltimore for a week or ten days but doesn't know why. My job takes me here and there, so neither she nor Mark think it's unusual for me to be out of town.



And this trip has been scheduled for months so they don't suspect anything. I mean I was supposed to come here to present the Maxilliofacial brochure to the Johnson & Johnson people, but when I mailed them the proofs they bought the whole package right off.

I don't have to make the presentation because the contract's already signed and I really didn't have to come here—not for the company anyway.

So I had the free time. And my reservations at the Omni International and for the flight from Jacksonville were already confirmed, so I came ahead here. I phoned beforehand to make the appointment with Dr. Matlock and she can see me Thursday so I flew up Sunday night just as I was scheduled to, and then I had four days to kill.

If it were not for the extra time I had to knock around, I probably would have made some excuse to Mama for not having time to see her friend.

She always asks me to do some perfectly reasonable, but horribly inconvenient, thing every time I go off.

There was no reason for me to avoid visiting Mrs. Gregg. But I put it off just on general principal. I knew that visiting an old friend of Mama's would be a drag.

To kill time I spent Monday seeing the sights. Fort McHenry. the *Constellation*. The Walters Art Gallery.

Talk about sore feet!

But there was this little shop down on the wharf near the *Constellation* where I bought a pirate sword from the War of 1812 for Mark. It's a rusty old cutlass with deep nicks in the blade where you can tell it's been hit against another blade.

Think I'll give it to him with a card about being a gay blade, or on the cutting edge of things. Or



maybe it'll be a gag card about your blade is getting rusty.

Come to think of it a sword is a pretty phallic gift. It had better not be too long for my suitcase!

I just thought of that.

And how do you get a sword through airport security?

Damn.

Maybe I can get the thing wrapped and send it by UPS... but then he'll open it when it gets to the condo. He's like a child when it comes to packages in the mail even if they're addressed to me. Once, in the elevator, he popped open a sample pack of tampons some company had sent me.

I bought Mama another teapot for her collection. Thank God for small favors. She's easy to buy for; just pick out another teapot—one without a chipped spout.

Maybe all gifts are phallic?

Anyhow, the tea pot reminded me of Mrs. Gregg. She collects teapots too. That's how Mama got to know her. They both write letters to the editor of some teapot magazine. Then they got to writing to each other and once exchanged visits to see each other's collections.

I suspect that in the back of Mama's mind she hopes to get the old lady's collection when she dies. Mama wouldn't admit anything so mercenary, but that might have something to do with her urging me to visit the old lady while I'm here in Baltimore.

Mrs. Gregg lives in a condo on Bay Street. The place sits on a hill where you can see ships moving out in the Chesapeake.

I called from the lobby phone beside the door and she buzzed me in. She lives on the tenth floor and I



took the elevator up with an old man who clutched an aluminum walker.

“Come in. Come in, my dear. I’m so happy to see you,” she said. ‘You’re such a pretty thing. Such lovely hair.’”

Her thin nervous hands are the first thing you notice about Mrs. Gregg. They never stop moving. They flutter and twist and rub together constantly like she’s wringing them over some ancient grief. Like Lady Macbeth’s hands would have done if she’d grown old.

She wore jeans and a bright flowered apron which she kept twisting. It was clean and crisp but worn. The right corner of it was frayed from the constant twisting.

She led me through the foyer into a sunny living room which would have been spacious if it had not been crammed with floor to ceiling shelves filled with teapots. It reminded me of my mother’s place.

Right off I recognized a Worcester blue and white with the “Bamboo Root” pattern, circa 1750. A small chip marred the lid, which is a shame because in fine condition this teapot would set you back a good \$1,600 in today’s market. See, you don’t live 26 years as a collector’s daughter without some of the mania rubbing off.

I’ve picked up enough of the jargon to talk a little about lemon, flower and crown finials; about saltglaze, Bottger glaze or Rookwood standard; or about ear-handles and S-Scroll handles. In silver, I can see the difference between John and Thomas Settle’s work and R & W Wilson’s. But that’s just enough to keep a conversation going with a collector for a little while.

And I know what to admire and what’s just filler in the collection.



Of course to the true collector like Mrs. Gregg and my mother nothing is “just filler.” Each teapot has it’s own charm or memory connected to it. True collectors like Mama treasure even the little Japanese ceramic with “Souvenir of Elko, Nevada” decal on the bowl, or the novelty pieces with two spouts, or those shaped like dragons, or camels, or clusters of grapes.

But even with my background, I can only talk teapots for so just long before I flounder. And even a true enthusiast like Mrs. Gregg can only sustain a teapot conversation with a novice so long.

Eventually our conversation had to run in other channels.

That’s when I realized she was crazy.

I don’t mean wild-eyed, teapot smashing crazy. She can function in society; obviously she’s been doing so for years.

Hers is the quite crazy that you know about yourself. The kind that lives alone in an otherwise empty apartment on a Sunday afternoon when there’s nothing on TV but football. The kind of kink that only terrorizes the person who has it—and those to whom she chooses to reveal it.

She served tea (Constant Comment out of an exquisite Imari Pearl, circa 1810) frittering about her tiny kitchen.

We spoke about the view, my job (of which she hadn’t the slightest comprehension) and about Jerry Falwell, whom she ardently admires.

Then it happened.

“Are you married; any children?” she asked.

“No. That’s still far in my future,” I said.

“I was married once,” she said. “Let me show you my baby.”



She drew a velvet-covered photo album from a shelf and sitting down beside me on the sofa flipped it open with practiced ease.

“This is Gerald. Isn’t he cute?” she said.

“Just look at those rosy little cheeks,” she said turning the page.

“And that dimple,” she said, her hands fluttering from one old black-and-white snapshot to another.

Each photograph curled, yellowing with age. Little black triangular corners encased each picture of the tiny baby.

On some pages, light brown squares showed blank spaces where long ago some picture had been removed.

It was a cute baby. He lay still on a satiny cushion.

Each photograph was a close-up.

You could see the edge of the bassinet, or something, in some of the pictures.

Each photograph presented the same pose.

In each his eyes were closed.

He never changed position.

I felt uneasy. “How old is Gerald now,” I asked.

“He’s just three weeks old. Isn’t he such a big boy?” she said.

“Coochie Coochie Co,” she said, fingering a photograph. Over years of doing this, her repeated action had worn a ragged hole in the paper.

“When was he born,” I asked.

“January 15, 1939. I remember it so well. His father drove me to the hospital all in a dither. Just like a man. And Doctor Cornstern met us at the door.



It was snowing that night and he was worried that we couldn't get through the drifts.

"I hurt so bad. You wouldn't think it now, but I was a delicate little thing. Mr. Gregg could put his two hands all the way around my waist when we first married.

"I hurt so bad. If I had not been so little... I was in labor over 30 hours. The ether gagged me, so they couldn't use it. And I hurt and hurt.

"Then it was over. And I had Gerald. My own. My very own little baby." she said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Happened? Why, nothing happened," she snapped. "My baby's healthy. Nothing's the matter with my baby. We came home from the hospital. Me and Mr. Gregg and my baby; we came home. Mr. Greg died in November 22, 1963, the same day they shot the president. But I have my baby. I'll always have my baby. Nothing can happen to my baby. Nothing. Not ever. Nothing."

She patted the album.

She smoothed the cover.

She worried the frayed edge of her apron.

She poured more tea.

I made my excuses and finally got away.

Crazy old woman. Her and her pictures of the still baby, never moving all these forty years.

Tacky.

Ghoulish to take pictures of a child in its coffin.

Mother-love? Bonding?

Maybe so.

Some people can't let go.

I wish I'd never meet her.



John W. Cowart

My appointment with Dr. Matlock isn't until Thursday.

—End—

Scruffy ¹



Scruffy lived in the crawlspace under someone's house.

The homeowner didn't know he lived under there because Scruffy stayed quite and sneaked in and out during the dark hours making sure he was never seen.

Scruffy's real name was Lewis but everyone called him Scruffy— for good reason. He never bathed, or changed clothes, or combed his hair, or shaved.

When I first met Scruffy, I worked as the night janitor at a huge church, a church which sponsored, supported, and contributed to many programs to

¹ Nonfiction. This really happened. Scruffy was really my friend.



help the homeless... the homeless who didn't happen to show up in the parking lot like Scruffy did, panhandling churchgoers and scaring the hell out of blue-haired old ladies as they got out of their cars at every service.

This behavior got Scruffy barred from the church.

Orders came down from the administration that I was not to feed Scruffy anything from the church pantry or ever give him money for drink and drugs. But he kept coming by late at night when no one else was in the buildings, so I disobeyed.

Ok. I was wrong. I am an enabler; I can live with that.

Several times I offered to drive him to a homeless shelter. He refused saying he felt more comfortable living under buildings than in them. Maybe that was his legacy from Viet Nam?

I attempted to witness to him about Christ, how Jesus came to save sinners, was crucified dead and buried, rose again from the grave, and promised to return. But Scruffy dismissed my words with, "That's a crock of shit, John, and you know it."

Then for a period of weeks there was no sign of Scruffy until...

Late one night there was a knock on the church door. I opened it and there stood Lewis, clean shaven, hair combed, decently dressed. He glowed.

"I got saved, John," he said as I opened the door.

We sat in the church kitchen drinking coffee as he told me that he'd been crossing the street drunk when a car hit him breaking his leg. Fortunately a nurse and her husband in a car following saw the accident and stopped immediately to render aid.



Laying on the pavement, Lewis looked up and saw this beautiful woman leaning over him, examining his injury.

“Be still,” she said, “You’re hurt. You were nearly killed. Do you know Jesus”?

Scruffy spent a few weeks in the hospital, then joined that nurse’s church. He quit drinking and drugging. He got a job with a tire company. He moved into an apartment. He talked about Jesus. He was a new creation... for a while.

A month or two passed.

Again in the wee small hours of the night when I was alone in the huge building, there was a knock on the side church door.

There stood Scruffy. Drunk. Wild eyed. Filthy. Profane. Hungry.

Again against orders, I led him back to the kitchen and gave him coffee.

“Didn’t last,” he said. “Nothing to that religion shit. Not really. Not for guys like me.”

He stumbled out into the night looking for another fix.

Another month or two more went by when I got word that he’d been found dead under somebody’s house. He’d been hit by another car, refused medical attention, but managed to stagger away and crawl up under a house.

The homeowner never knew he was under there till he began to rot and the smell got too bad.

The church I where I janitored paid for his burial.

So, do I think Scruffy went to Heaven?

Well, it’s by grace that any of us are saved through faith . It’s not of ourselves. It is the gift of God not of works, lest any man should boast.



Scruffy was in bad shape to start with. Then, at rock bottom, he called on Jesus to save him. He believed in his heart that Jesus is the Risen Lord and he confessed that with his own lips.

For whatever my opinion is worth, I think Jesus saved him

And Jesus has the reputation of being mighty good at what He does.

But a spiritual commitment and a physical addiction are two different things. So, in so far as I can perceive such things, Scruffy made the deepest commitment he was capable of making, but was physically defeated by his addiction.

I may be entirely wrong about such a thing, but when you get to Heaven, take a look in the crawlspace under the Throne and see if there isn't somebody hiding under there.

His name is Lewis.

—End—

The Bacchus Pipe



You want any screens to go with that?" the clerk asked.

"Naw. It's for my old man's birthday; he don't smoke," Thad Mullins replied.

"That'll be thirty-eight dollars and fifty cents."

Thad shelled the money out of a thick roll and then stood tapping his fingers impatiently on the counter as the clerk bagged his gift.

Thirty-eight fifty was too damn much to spend, but Thad's mother would whine if he didn't get the old drunk something. *His Birthday*, what a bunch of crap. Some father his old man had been, deserting the family when Thad was seven, only to show up sick and needing care fifteen years later. When he moved back in the apartment with mother, Thad had moved out.

Father.! Hell! A broken rubber or a forgotten pill could make any man that, Thad thought striding out of the pawnshop to his BMW double parked at the curb.



He'd stopped at the Brass Frog to buy the gift on his way over to visit his mother. When he'd called her as he did every day, she'd reminded him about his father's birthday, dropping hints about honor and respect. How was he supposed to honor or respect that bum? The food stamp people had done more for Thad and his mom than that louse.

Thad revved his engine impatiently at the corner light. He visited his mom faithfully every Thursday. He always made it Thursday because that was her bingo night. She had to leave for the church at 7:30 so that made a definite cut-off point for the visits. Without that, she'd beg him to stay and stay.

And Thad did not want to stay. He had other women to see about. There was Veronica with the twitchy ass and Sioux City Sally and Celesta, and a new cow who was proving to be a bitch. She called herself Sister Seraphim, and her favorite costume was a sort of abbreviated nun's habit. *There's no accounting for taste though. Freaky, but she really rakes in the money,* Thad thought as his hand caressed the leather upholstered steering wheel. *Yep, she really rakes in money.*

The light changed and Thad squealed away still thinking of money. How could he slip his mother some money that that old bastard wouldn't get hold of? The prick would probably pawn the gift to buy more booze.

"I hope he dies. I hope he swallows this damn thing and chokes to death," Thad muttered as he parked his car in front of a corner hydrant.

The stairway up to the flat smelled of liver and onions cooking behind some shabby door.

His mother greeted him with an enthusiastic hug and an affectionate kiss; his dad waved from in front of the TV. The old man slouched in a recliner beside an end table littered with beer cans and an ash tray



overflowing with trash, spent matches, and the filthy litter of a pipe smoker. He ignored his son favoring *Catch The Company*, the Larry Lackowitz tv show, instead.

“Marvin, turn the set off,” Mrs. Mullins said. “Thad is here to see us.”

Marvin scowled as he lumbered out of his chair to reach the TV remote. It was a wide-screened color set Thad had given his mother for Mother’s Day.

“Did you bring him something, Dear,” Mrs. Mullins whispered to her son as Marvin collapsed again into the comfort of his chair.

“Yes, Mother. I brought a gift.”

“Good,.” she beamed with pleasure. “Come out to the kitchen. I’ve made something special for tonight.”

“If you two are going to the kitchen I’m going to watch the set,” Marvin grumbled as they crossed the dinette. “Long as you’re out here, Martha, fetch me another beer.”

“Fetch Hell.,” Thad shouted, “You fetch your own damn beer. She’s not a dog.”

“It’s O.K. It’s O.K, Son,” Mrs. Mullins said trying to soothe over the tension. “Marvin’s been having a bad spell. Thad, I don’t mind getting it for him. Now that you’re grown and moved out, I need someone to baby.”

“Smart ass kid,” Marvin said when she brought the beer. “I shoulda stayed around here to beat some respect into him.”

“Don’t be mad, Honey. The boy just needs to get used to having his father around again. You two just need to get to know each other. Spend some time together. I’ll serve up dinner.”

It was a tense, uneasy meal.



"That was. delicious, Mother. Your cooking gets better every week," Thad said.

"Yeah. Pretty good grub," his father grunted.

"There wasn't too much pepper in it? I always make it too peppery."

"No, Mother. It was just right. Perfect."

"Yeah. It was OK. Fetch me another beer."

Martha scuttled to the refrigerator saying cheerfully, "Thad's got a surprise for you, Marvin. Sunday's your birthday, and since he has to work he brought it over early. Go ahead, Thad. Show him what you got him."

Thad pulled the bag from the pocket of his sports coat and shoved it across the table toward his father. "Here. I didn't have time to get it wrapped or anything."

"Thanks." Marvin delved into the bag. His hand emerged bearing a tooled leather case with a gold crest embossed on the cover. He snapped it open, and inside, cushioned in a deep indentation of red velvet, laid a white meerschaum pipe with a slender, yellow amber stem. The bowl of the pipe was intricately carved in the shape of a man's head.

"Well, I'll be damned. Would you look at this, Martha," said Marvin as he pried the pipe from its velvet nest to examine the bowl.

"Oh, Thad. It's gorgeous," Martha exclaimed. "I've never seen such a beautiful pipe."

"I'm glad it pleases you, Mother," Thad said, taking it from his father's hand and passing it to her. "The man at the store said it's the head of Bacchus. He was the old Greek god of wine. See. You can see grapes and grape vines all tangled in his hair. It's hand carved."



Martha Mullins fondled the bowl of the pipe, running her fingers over the polished surfaces. She looked at the details of the face on the pipe. Each hair on the head and beard of the god was etched into the stone. The craftsman who made the pipe had engraved a classic profile of a Greek god with his head thrown back and his mouth open wide. The eyes of the carving crinkled, squinting because of the contortions of the face, so that as she rotated the bowl, the play of light and shadow revealed an expression of enormous, lusty hilarity as though the god enjoyed a hearty laugh.

Martha reverently handed the pipe to her husband saying, . "It's almost, too pretty to smoke."

"That's what it's made for," he declared. "All that fancy work on it don't mean a thing if it don't smoke good. Fetch me my pouch from by my chair, and we'll see if this thing is worth what he musta paid for it."

Thad stifled his resentment for his mother's sake saying, "I'll get it." He rose from the table and crossed the room to his father's chair. He found the tattered tobacco pouch laying on the littered end table and tossed it to his father, calling, "Catch."

"Don't knock the damn thing out of my hand before I get a chance to smoke it." Marvin stuffed the bowl of the pipe down into his pouch and packed tobacco in with his forefinger. "Hole's too small to get much in," he complained, "And all them vines and curlicues get in the way. Tobacco's goinga stick in all them little crevices."

"Damn, you'd complain if they hung you with a brand new rope."

"None of that mouth, Sonny. You show some respect."



“Now boys, let’s not argue. We’re all here together, and I want everything to be nice.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Marvin sucked noisily on his new pipe moving a wooden match slowly back and forth over the bowl. Finally the tobacco caught fire, and he breathed out a thick cloud of smoke. “Say, this thing, draws pretty good.” He removed the pipe from his mouth and twisted the stem from the bowl. “No wonder. It’s got no filter inside. Need to buy some.” He reassembled the pipe and sat puffing it. He was pleased with the pipe—but mad at himself for being pleased. He wanted to be grumpy.

Later, as Thad helped his mother with the dishes, she said, “Thad, I want you to do me a special favor tonight. You can see how he is, and I’m afraid to leave him alone. But I do need to get out from under for a couple of hours. Could you stay with him for a while?”

Thad wanted to get away from the tension. He wanted to check on the girls and collect the money. It wasn’t a good idea to let them accumulate too much cash at one time. But he couldn’t say this to his mother; she thought he was a car salesman. He finally gave in, and within an hour he found himself alone in the apartment with his father.

They sat at opposite sides of the room in hostile smoke-filled silence; each watched the TV to avoid the other; both ignored it.

“This here pipe wasn’t made for tobacco, was it, Boy?”

“No. Judging from the place I brought it, I’d say it wasn’t.”

“You got any of the stuff they smoke in these things?”



“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Never have, but I hear it’s better than liquor. No hangover.”

Thad dug a nickel bag out of his coat and gave it to his father thinking that he’d heard it could over-stimulate a weak heart and bring on an attack. That’s what he hoped for anyhow.

Marvin filled the pipe and lit up, inhaling deeply as he would with tobacco. The smoke boiled from the bowl and clouded the air, smelling like burning feathers. The eyes of the carved, laughing god gleamed through the smoke a stray seed was stuck amid the cluster of engraved grapes above his ear.

“I don’t feel anything. This cheap stuff?”

“That’s the best money can buy. Give it a chance to work.”

Marvin inhaled deeply, savoring the smoke. Then abruptly, he stiffened in his chair. He clutched his chest. His eyes glazed over. the Bacchus pipe toppled from his lips and slid, down between the arm and the cushion of the easy chair.

Thad rushed over to his father’s side and fished the burning pipe out of the upholstery. He didn’t want to burn the place down. He cradled the smoldering pipe in the cup of his hand, watching through the smoke for any sign of movement from his father. There was none.

Thad settled back in his own chair and began to puff gently on the pipe. “I ought to call a doctor in a few minutes. Maybe in an hour or so,” he muttered.

The smoke swirled upward and then spread out below the ceiling in a distinct layer.

Thad thought about all the things he could do for his mother now. They might move down to Miami.



He'd just leave the girls—except maybe for Celesta—and pick up some new ones down south.

The smoke seemed unusually rich and thick. It didn't dissipate in the air, but filled the room like a November river fog.

Thad looked at the god who seemed to find the whole situation hilarious. His face appeared more and more contorted by laughter. The intertwined vines encircling his head seemed to flow and mingle with the wisps of smoke rising from the bowl.

I'll get Mom one of those condominium places right on the beach, he thought. It shouldn't be too hard to move my operation South. If Sister wasn't such a valuable property I'd leave her too. Ought to open a window. This damn smoke's too thick.

The smoke saturated the room—misty columns clinging to the drapes and causing the lamp and disembodied light from the TV to glow through the haze as though they were distant.

Thad looked at the crumpled body of his father. The face was contorted in a permanent expression of agony from his final spasm. The ridiculous grin of death revealed bad, tobacco-stained teeth.

I should turn his face away, Thad thought remaining slumped in his chair. That shit-eating grin reminds me of someone. I suppose the funeral parlor can fix that. I doubt that Mom would want to go South till after the funeral. What a drag. If I called now maybe the ambulance could haul his ass away before she gets home, so she won't have to see him locking like that. That expression on his face. Damn! He must have hurt. I hope he felt the pain real good before he croaked. Looks like he did. His face looks like. His face looks just like the face on the pipe.

Thad struggled out of his chair and groped his way toward the phone. He couldn't find it; the smoke



was too thick to see. The phone hung on the kitchen wall, but he couldn't find the kitchen wall or any other wall for that matter. The smoke covered everything. He was lost on a vast plain surrounded by the swirling, clinging mist, panicking, he began to run, and he ran and ran and ran. And as he ran, his face contorted in a soundless scream.

When Martha Mullins returned from her bingo game, she discovered her husband's body slouched in his chair with his new pipe clenched firmly in his teeth.

After her husband's funeral, Mrs. Mullins told her neighbors, "The shock of his father's dying must have been just too much for Thaddeus. He just left his car parked outside and went away.

"Sgt. Harris, the policeman, told me that Thaddeus is probably hitching around the country like so many young people do nowadays. I hope he'll snap out of it and call home soon.

"It must have been a terrible shock for him. He loved his father so. He gave him a pipe with a little elf's head on it. I think he had it made special because

"I was looking at it just this morning and the face on the pipe looks just like Thad's."

—End—

A Hell Of A Thing



I really didn't want to go to Hell again.

When I was a kid, my father lugged the family there for vacation and we kids found it boring. We would have preferred going to Disneyland, but Dad insisted on touring Hell. That was just a few years after geologists discovered the entrance and everybody clambered to get to see all the great sinners in torment.

What a drag.

I think Dad especially wanted to see the Great Fornicators' Circle, but of course he couldn't tell Mom that, so he carried on about how educational it would



be for us to see and talk to important historical figures like Attila The Hun and Thomas Jefferson.

Nothing educational about it!

All Attila did was to wet himself as he writhed in a pile of stinky stuff. And Jefferson refused to talk about anything but how his brother had cheated him out of an ax handle which belonged to him.

As I recall, Hell is full of the petty bickering, that living men would be ashamed of. Dante sensationalized the whole affair. Nothing exciting ever happens in Hell.

The best action we saw was in the Great Fornicators' Circle where Casanova and Catherine The Great sat on opposite rocks picking their noses and flicking boogers at each other for hours on end. I remember Hell as being boring and I had no intention of ever going there again before my time....

Then I met Joanne. She changed my mind.

I grew up into a man and it was the old story: I wanted to and she didn't. I mean she wanted to but she wouldn't, at least until after we're married.

I tried everything short of rape. Moonlight, Mancinni, roller disco.

I reasoned with her. I petted her. I came on like Godzilla in heat. I tried gentleness. I even played on her sympathy explaining about a man's biological needs and about physical pressures and about the ill effects of frustration. I petted and titillated her body till I thought she ought to be begging me to—but nothing.

She was saving herself for marriage. Nothing seemed to shake her resolve.

So I resorted to my final play—I proposed.

Yes, I did. I proposed. I was that desperate.



Naturally, I followed my proposal with, “Now that we’re engaged...” But she wouldn’t yield until after we’re married.

I began to take my own proposal seriously. I even agreed to a date. Unless something happened, I was ready to go through with it. I wanted her that bad.

I wouldn’t want you to think that Joanna isn’t normal. I mean all her chromosomes are lined up right. When I’d be loving her up, she gets almost crazy with desire.

Almost.

It’s just that she has limits and sex outside marriage is one of them. She won’t steal either. When a sales clerk gives her too much change, she gives it back. Me, I pocket the difference.

She works for an insurance company and she won’t take more than her allotted time for lunch or coffee break. She won’t lie to cover up a mistake. She worships at St. Michael’s every Sunday, Plays tennis like a pro, likes to watch NFL football (she’s a Dallas fan). She does volunteer work a few days a week at Children’s Hospital. She likes the same music, books, and movies that I do. She dabbles at oil painting and she’s good. She listens when I talk. She even cooks. She’s Bo Derick, Mother Teresa, and Betty Crocker rolled into one.

But she won’t put out.

Yet.

I was telling my buddy Gary about her and he said, “Forget her. All that good stuff is fine when you’re soft, but when you’re hard, sex is the only thing that counts. You should say, To Hell with her.”

That’s what gave me the idea of taking her to Hell.



It seems like she's pretty religious. I mean she does go to church and all that. She's kind and honest. In her apartment—I've been there but she insists on leaving the hall door open—in her apartment there's a Bible on the nightstand beside her bed. I saw it when I helped her hang some curtains. That's the closest I've come to her bed. Damn it!

I thought, *This religious stuff has gone to her head. If I take her on one of those tours of Hell, then she'll see that it doesn't look all that bad for fornicators.*

After all the sins of the flesh seem to get the lightest treatment, and, as I recalled, after the initial shock of seeing other people in agony, Hell gets pretty poring to an observer. It's like watching a skin flick. For the viewer, the excitement of watching somebody else's passion wears off soon, but the actual participants must be feeling something which viewers can't even guess at.

Hell affects tourists like that. I mean the souls appear to be in genuine pain, but most of their suffering is internal remorse—you know, "The worm never dies" and all that. But after you've seen a couple of thousand souls writhing in agony, you get used to it. After all, it's their pain, not yours. They are the ones hurting. You're alright.

At any rate, I hoped a visit to Hell would deaden Joanna's sensitivities just a trifle. She would either get a little jaded and decide fornicating isn't so bad after all, or she would be horrified and fly to my strong arms for comfort. Either way I figured I'd get what I want.

I booked us on an A-Fleet Tour.

According to the brochure put out by the Eight Flags people, Lester A. Chitty, a volcanoest, rediscovered the entrance to Hell in 2012, the year



Mount St. Helens last erupted, the eruption that wiped out Portland. The government wanted to hush up the discovery but everyone wanted to know about that gaping, glowing crevice they saw on the Six O'clock News on the night of the eruption.

I vaguely remember that newscast, scenes of molten lava gushing over buildings in Portland. The earth cracking open and the west slope of the mountain caving into the chasm. A Toyota commercial interrupted news of fundamentalist rioting in the streets of Biblebelt cities. Then the camera showed the opening.

As glowing lava subsided, the tops of stately columns appeared. And doors. Massive carved doors with the inscription over the lintel: **Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here**. Odd optical illusion is that anybody who reads the inscription, sees it in his own native language, French, Spanish, Sanskrit, whatever.

The world went crazy at the sight. Everybody everywhere stayed up all night watching the news coverage as more and more of the entrance to Hell emerged from underneath the lava.

The discovery of Hell's entrance overshadowed the disaster at Portland. Newsman Harry Reasnor interviewed bishops, cardinals and tv evangelists and they all rejoiced saying that this find proved all the theology they'd expounded for years. Barbara Walters interviewed various famous atheists who said the discovery did not prove the existence of a god; it only proved the existence of a Hell. And that a Hell without god was not at variance with their beliefs. Mike Wallace interviewed professors of literature about Dante.

The red lava seeped lower and lower until we could see the heads of the first sinners in the line. That's when all hell broke loose among the living



because almost everybody could see someone they knew standing in the line of sinners waiting to pass through the gates of Hell.

But souls in the line were soon ignored as we watched tv coverage of new arrivals.

It seems as though when each sinner dies, his soul rockets up toward the sky, then bends toward Hell in a curving arc like a shooting star, only to splat against the iron walls like an egg rolled off a table. He oozes down the door, puddles at the bottom, then slowly reforms into a recognizable human shape. Then he marches inside between the wide open doors, like a lemming in line with hundreds or even thousands of other recently dead souls..

In the weeks that followed, Hell was always in the news. There were congregational investigations. Newsmen swarmed around the entrance. People went hysterical. Some relatives of the newly dead marched inside on tv...

National Geographic's Col. Lester Chitty lead the first exploration in and out again proving what mythology has said from time immemorial—that the living could visit Hell and return. His report startled the world. Essentially the geography of Hell is just like Dante described it. Seven concentric circles inhabited by sinners in varying degrees of torment according to the severity of their sin.

Of course, the Chitty expedition, and all subsequent ones, stayed near the entrance. When explorers tried to plumb the deeper regions, they returned insane—something about poison gas deeper inside, I guess.

Scholars still debate how Dante, a 12th-Century Italian, found his way through a gate located in North America which wasn't discovered yet. Some say the mouth of Hell moves. Others say there are many



identical gates all over the world. Others argue that Dante saw it in a vision not in real experience.

Nobody knows and Dante's not here to tell.

It wasn't widely publicized but the exploration team also discovered that Dante lied. He sensationalized the things he saw making Hell sound like a spectacular place full of interesting people. But in reality the place is as bland as oatmeal without salt. But modern day journalists collaborated with their 12th Century counterpart and tried to out sensationalize Dante.

About six weeks after that first expedition, Hell faded out of the news. Cuba annexed Florida and Cuban troops moved as far north as Brunswick. TV coverage switched to the treaty negotiations, and by the time the US Government conceded all the land south of Orlando, Hell was almost forgotten.

The next time anyone saw the mouth of Hell on tv was in a commercial. The people who run the Eight Flags amusement parks had bought up all the property around the entrance and they were promoting tours. My father took our family that first year and the I hated the place—but, here I am again ten years later.

I had a time convincing Joanna to go. She was reluctant but she'd never been and I believe she found the idea of the tour a titillating. I felt my quest was nearing its inevitable conclusion.

But, she insisted on separate rooms at the Hell House Hilton, built on the edge of the crater where the pool is heated by the geo-physical energy—Hell Fire. And where, according to the brochure, "You can have a devilishly good time."

I didn't.



We checked in late Friday afternoon and spent the evening dancing in the Inferno Room. Then went to bed –separately....

Next morning Joanne and I loaded into tram cars pulled by a golf-cart. The Tour Leader warned us to stay seated, keep arms and legs inside, and not to try to feed the shades (For public relations purposes, they are always referred to as *Shades* never as sinners, souls, or people.) The tram rolled on a paved cart way past various interesting sights—at least they were supposed to be interesting.

In the Hall Of Corruption, we saw Nixon and all these former presidents, Republicans mostly. They pontificated about prayer in schools, abortion, and people’s right to own automatic weapons—as though that stuff hadn’t been settled decades ago. Nothing is more boring that politicians, living or dead, saying the same things again and again when you know they don’t mean a word of it.

Things perked up when our tram car entered the Great Fornicators’ Circle. A mighty wind, Dante called it “The Wind of Driving Lust”, swept clouds of dust and desire around the poor bastards there.

Lathario ran along side the slow-moving tram cars trying to cop a feel of the women, even the ugly ones. I noticed that the mighty rushing wind blew his hand aside whenever he got close. Though they try, the Shades mostly can’t touch anything from our world. I also noticed that when that wind blew his shroud aside, his dick was shriveled up, soft and tiny—like a baby’s. All the male shades were like that. Made me shudder.

Our car passed a female spirit, an actress I recognized from a late, late show but I couldn’t remember her name. She trotted after the car begging for a tube of KY Jelly. A few girls dug in their purses and, in spite of the conductor’s warning,



tossed her some. She lathered it on but pled for more, "I'm dry. I'm dry. I'm too dry," she screamed as the car moved into the next circle.

Joanne leaned against my shoulder and whispered so no one else could hear, "What is KY Jelly? What's it for?"

I explained it is a personal lubricant and I described it's use.

Joanne blushed. "I'll never need any of that," she said. "I'm lubricated enough all the time already."

Well, let me tell you! When she said that, I felt all my systems perk up. All Systems GO! I mean, her words excited me so, I thought I'd die. I had to have this woman.

"Let's not wait till June," I heard myself say. "Let's get married right now. There's got to be a JP somewhere around here!"

'Yes" she said. "There's a 24-hour wedding chapel right here in the hotel; when we checked in I saw it just off the hotel lobby behind that big ficus tree. I read about it in the brochure."

I had not read that part.

But as soon as we got off the tram car, I rushed her to the lobby and to the wedding chapel off to the side.

And would you believe it! There were so many other couples ahead of us in line that we had to wait our turn.

Ain't that a Hell of a thing!

—End—

The Kid Reads Chaucer ¹



When I first saw the kid I didn't like him even a little bit.

For one thing his name was Vernon. Now isn't that a sissy name for a man. Besides that, he was going to college in the daytime. Not a trade school, mind you. He was too uppity to learn how to make a living as a machinist or a truck driver or something like that.

Right off, he told me and Willy that he was an English major.

Now I don't know a whole lot about English, but I do know that you can't make a living at it unless you're a school teacher and you got to be a woman to be that. So I didn't like the kid when he first came to the dump.

But later on .Well, later on is what I want to tell you about.

Here at the dump we have the best job in the whole city, so I think that the kid must have some relatives at city hall to land this job while he was still in school.

I wouldn't want to work on the first shift cause there's too many bosses around. But our shift don't

¹ Yes. I really did once work in a city dump. Best job I ever had!



start work until four o'clock, and our boss goes home at five, so the three night workers have the dump to ourselves till midnight. There are only a few late garbage trucks that come in that late, so all we really have to do is push up the trash with the dozer and keep watch out for fires. The air pollution people are real picky about fires in the dump.

So, from the time the boss goes home till it gets too dark to see, we go through the stuff the trucks brought in and pick up all sorts of stuff that's worth a lot of money. Aluminum sells for 70 cents a pound and coke bottles go for a dime apiece, We really clean up on those. Then we get toys and furniture and TV sets.

Willy's brother-in-law fixes up TV sets and he pays us for the old ones for parts.

This dump is a gold mine.

A literal gold mine.

And it was gold that got us in trouble.

And no, we didn't find any gold in the trash. People throw out all kinds of good stuff but I've never heard of anybody finding any gold in a dump anywhere,

Don't get the idea that there's not plenty of work to do around the dump 'cause there is. One of our big jobs is lawnchairs. The aluminum company won't take lawnchairs if they still have the steel rivets holding them together, so we bend the tubes back and forth till they break, then we stack them up beside the shack in a big pile till we get a truck load, then we take them to the recycling plant.

Remember that, it's important to what happens later.

The kid, Vernon, used them to get our money back. That made him an alright guy in my book even if I didn't like him at first.



One of the things / didn't like about him—besides the sissy way he talked—was the stuff he read.

Don't get me wrong, I like to read. In fact that's one of the things I like about the dump. We get plenty to read. We save a lot of money that way. We never have to buy any of the good kind of magazines. In fact, if you could come out to our guard shack you would see that the walls, and in winter time even the windows, are papered with centerfolds.

It makes the place colorful and it doesn't cost us a penny. And after it gets too dark to look for stuff in the dump and we push up the day's trash collection with the dozer, then we sit around in the guard shack and read and drink coffee and shoot the bull till time to go home.

But on his first night on the job Vernon didn't get a magazine like Willy and me. No, he goes out to his car and brings in this real thick book and settles in at the table and doesn't even hardly talk to us all night. I asked him what it was so interesting and he said it was *Beowulf* and I looked at it and it didn't make any sense. It wasn't in big words. The words were short like regular words, but they were all spelled funny. Vernon said it was old time English, but I've known a lot of real old people and none of them talked like that.

And when I told Vernon that, he laughed and said that he would tell his English professor what I said. So you can see why I didn't like him till later on.

When he first started working with us, Vernon made like he was too good to go picking through trash with me and Willy. But then one evening Willy found a bank. It was one of those old cast-iron banks shaped like an elephant. You would put a penny in its trunk and lift its tail and it would toss the penny over its shoulder into a slot on its back. We had a big time playing with it and Vernon asked Willy where he had found it. Willy said it



was in an old chest of drawers that had come in that afternoon. We all three drove down to that end of the dump to look at some other stuff that came in on the same truck, must have been that some old lady died and her relatives didn't want to take the trouble to go through all her things, so they just put it all out for the trash men.

That's kind of sad; a person spends all their lives keeping things that means a lot to them, then they up and die and all of a sudden the things they cherished are just trash.

You'd be surprised how many old wedding and baby pictures and nick-knacks come our way.

This old lady's clothes were still in the chests and there were a lot of boxes of old papers, tax returns, and all that. In one box we found all kinds of school papers and drawings made by some little kid named Janice. The first papers were dated in 1938, And they were all there, all the way up to when she must have left high school in 1950 when the school papers were mixed in with dance programs and football schedules. The old lady had saved them all and somebody just threw out the whole history of her daughter's life like it was ordinary garbage.

We talked about that for awhile as we went through the stuff.

The kid found a big Kewpie doll that had a ribbon across her chest with words printed in spangles that said "Best Couple on the Floor: JAX BEACH: 1927."

And I said what I just said and he said that he thought the same thing—about people's lives and all. And right then I started to think that maybe he wasn't so bad after all. Cause to work in a dump you got to have some respect, like maybe sometimes the place is



almost holy. That's what he said and that's what I said and maybe he wasn't so faggy after all.

But I still had my doubts.

Anyhow, after that night he was right out there with us going through the things till it got too dark to see.

Before long the three of us had a regular system going. First off, when we got to work, we'd cut open the arms of all the couches and overstuffed chairs to come in that day. Money and stuff from peoples' pockets fall down in the crack between the cushion and the arm. I'm surprised that those dodos on the trash trucks never caught on to that simple fact of life. They get first pick of all the good stuff, and I wish they'd leave the Coke bottles alone, but they never caught on to the money in the chair arms. You can't see it unless you cut the arms open. But we've found as much as eighty-four cents in change in a single chair.

And Willy found a dollar bill once.

The night the old man who cheated us, showed up the first time, the kid found a solid brass letter opener shaped like a swordfish in the arm of an old horsehair sofa.

While the kid would do the chair arms, I would be collecting all the aluminum I could get. And Willy would collect all the copper. He can strip a refrigerator or any kind of motor in nothing flat. But we didn't get much copper because the day crew gets most of it. Copper sells for 2.80 a pound, but it takes a lot of wire to make a pound. And it's a lot of trouble to burn off the insulation and clean it up. We worked it out that we would go shares on the aluminum, cash, copper, and bottles. But anything else belongs to the guy who finds it.

Not everything we find is valuable or nice. We find some things that are not nice at all, like that time one



of the guys on the day crew found all those babies. One of the undertakers in the city has a contract with the county to bury all the poor kids that die. He gets a flat rate for each one. Well, he would embalm them, but instead of burying them, he saved them up in a crate; then bring it out here to the dump. It's just luck that one of the guys checked out that crate before he plowed it under. There was a hell of a stink about that, and the undertaker lost his license. I think they ought to have put him under the jail because almost everybody should have a decent burial.

I said almost everybody because I know of one guy that's buried here who ought to be right where he is.

See, old Pop Summers had these three boys. Teenagers. I shouldn't be telling this but I suppose it's OK since Pop's retired now and moved away. Anyhow, Pop noticed that his boys weren't acting right so he called them down and found out that they was taking drugs. He didn't do anything to the boys but give them a licking. But he did find out the name of the fellow who sold them the drugs. That same night Pop went after him with a tire iron and bashed his head in. Then he brought him out here in the back of his pickup. Pop was still mad when he got here and he told me about the whole thing. He said that the law wouldn't condemn him for protecting his children from a man who was trying to kill them with a gun, so why should he be condemned for protecting them from this man who was trying to poison them.

I think Pop was right, and I know that the pinkco courts would just fine the man or give him a year or two in jail.

If every daddy would do the same thing Pop did, then we wouldn't have a drug problem in this country. So, me and Pop plowed the son of a bitch under a couple of tons of garbage where he belongs.



Doesn't bother me a bit that we did that.

Sleep like a baby.

Now I want to tell you about the old man who cheated us about the gold and how the kid and his book about Chaucer got our money back.

One of our main problems here at the dump is keeping people out unless they have a letter from City Hall saying they can scavenge in the dump. Almost every day someone comes here wanting to go through the trash to get things for garage sales or flea markets or things like that. But because they might get hurt out here and sue the city, we are supposed to keep them out. The city has insurance to cover us if we get hurt on the job but it doesn't cover outsiders. The day crew is very strict about this, but at night we let a lot of scavengers in. Most of them don't have any other way to make a living and I figure that at least they're trying to do what work they can instead of just drawing welfare. As long as they don't fool with the copper or aluminum and stick to scrap iron metal and rags and paper, we let them plunder to make what they can. Live and let live. Besides, the dump covers over fifty acres of ground and we can't go through the whole thing every night.

This old man drove a beat up old red and white Chevy pickup with the sides of the bed built up with used lumber so he could carry a good load of scrap. He drove down to the south end of the pile to plunder and got his truck stuck. He walked up to the guard shack to ask us to help.

It was cold that night so we had a charcoal fire in a fifty gallon drum cut in half lengthwise. We kept that fire going all winter. Besides keeping warm, we used one end of the drum to burn the insulation off copper wire and the other end to cook supper and perk coffee.



Our shack is made of old lumber off the dump just thrown together so there's no problem about ventilation inside. The old man had a cup of coffee with us before we went down to get his truck out of the mire. The kid was starting a new book that night. It was Chaucer. But he left off reading and eased down to help us get the truck out. We ended up having to pull it out with the dozer and when we got it free, the left rear tire was flat. Of course, the old man didn't have a spare, so to get rid of him I loaned him one of mine. I'd found it on the pile anyhow and I have several. The old man—he said his name was Joe—seemed really grateful for our help and he sat around drinking coffee with us for awhile before he finally left.

I thought that I would never see that spare tire again but the next night he was back with his own tire on the truck and he returned my spare. That night before he left, he borrowed a set of jumper cables from Willy, but he returned them the following night. For two weeks he came out to scrounge every night, and every night he borrowed something or the other from us and he always returned it.

Was that any way for a crook to act?

All this time the kid was reading his book. That was the only thing I didn't like about him! He was always in that book. One night Willy asked him, "What is that book about that keeps you so interested"?

"It's a book of stories, Willy, This book was the forerunner of modern short stories and novels. You should try it sometime. Some of the stories are really funny."

For all his education, the kid had not caught on to the fact that Willy can't read or write. He signs his checks with an X and his wife cashes them for him, but he doesn't want other people to know that. So Willy



said, "Maybe I'll do that sometime. What kind of stories are they?"

So the kid got to telling us one of those stories about this girl and her boyfriend and this other guy who was after her. One dark night this other guy came to her window wanting a kiss and she stuck her ass out the window and he kissed her right "there." Then he started yelling "A beard! A beard! My God she's grown a beard."

When the kid told that I fell right out of my chair laughing and Willy did too. Then Willy and I started telling stories too, but somehow the dirty jokes we knew weren't as funny as that guy Chaucer. Maybe it's how the kid told them. It was the best night we had in the shack for a long time because after that the kid was off for a week with the flu and Old Joe showed Willy and me how to make gold and cheated us out of all that money.

The way it happened was this:

The very night the kid called in sick, Old Joe came out to the dump early. By this time he knew our routine pretty good and he knew just when to show up. It was cold and raining so we were just sitting around in the shack keeping dry and warm by that charcoal fire in the oil drum. In a way what happened was the city's fault because, even though they know that we have plenty of firewood available, they supply us with bags of charcoal briquettes to burn because of some rule about burning trash in the dump. The air pollution people have something to do with that and the boss wants us to use the charcoal instead of scrounging firewood.

So that's what we do.

This night Old Joe is acting kind of down in the dumps and he has a bottle with him which we all share. He keeps saying how we are his best friends and that



no one has ever treated him as nice as we do, loaning him things, and helping him with his truck. We think at first that it's the bottle talking because he is laying it on pretty thick even though everything he says is true; we have done all those things for him and loaned him all that stuff which he always brought back the next day.

Finally he said, "Boys, you have been so good to me that I want to do something for you." He took another drink and said, "I want to give you something which will repay in only a small way the kindness you have shown me. My grandmother was a Cherokee Indian and she showed me how to do this."

"Do what?" I asked like a fool.

"Make gold, he said. "Make gold from other things."

"You don't have to do anything like that, Joe", Willy protested. "You don't owe us nothing. We let you hang around here because we like you."

"Bless you," Joe declared. "And because I like you, my Friends, I am going to make you a gold nugget. Let's get the things I'll need."

Joe struggled up out of his chair and with a minimum of staggering he got the things together. First he took a deep cast iron skillet we use for hash. He wiped it out and buried it to the rim in a bed of coals. Then he fished a little bit of clean copper wire out of the end of the drum and put it in the skillet which was red hot by this time. He stepped outside and proceeded to piss in a cola bottle, then he brought the bottle in and poured some in the hot skillet. He really had our attention now.

The place smelled awful. In fact, I have never known the dump to smell as bad, but Joe was not through yet. He dug in his tattered old billfold which I noticed did seem to contain a good bit of cash, and pulled out a folded up worn envelope.



“This is the stuff that does the trick”, he announced as he sprinkled two tiny pinches of the powder from the envelope into the skillet. It looked like dried roach wings to me.

“Now we need to melt it down, Boys. Help me pile charcoal all over the skillet”, old Joe directed.

“You want the lid to cover it?” Willy asked. “I’m sure we got one around here somewheres.”

“That won’t be necessary, my Friend. Just pile the charcoal in a heap over the pan.”

And like damn fools we did it.

A few hours and a good many drinks later, when the pile of charcoal was only a white powder, Old Joe said, “I fear that the liquor has gotten the best of me. Would one of you retrieve the gold.”

“What?” Willy questioned.

“Take the pan off the fire and see if there’s gold in the bottom. I’m too drunk to move.”

Neither one of us was really up to handling that hot pan either, but we finally fished it out of the fire and blew away the ashes and there in the bottom of the pan were two tiny dots of bright yellow metal and one small strand of melted copper wire.

“It’s yours, my Friends”, Joe declared. “I only wish it could be more but I only have a small amount of Grandmother’s powder left until I can make some more.”

It was quitting time, but before we left, Willy and I had a hurried conference. We didn’t think the stuff we had was gold, but then you never can tell. Will said his brother-in-law could check it out to see if it was really gold. And we agreed that if anybody asked us, we’d say we found it in the dump but we weren’t gonna say anything about it to anybody. For the first time in years



I went off without any coke bottles and the day crew got them. But I didn't mind.

Next morning Willy called me at home.

It was real gold.

His brother-in-law checked it out and Willy sold his flake for forty-five dollars!

Can you imagine that!

Forty-Five cash dollars for a little thin flake of metal not as big as a fingernail clipping!

I was tempted to sell mine but the thing was so pretty. My wife has a blue saucer that I found and I put that gold flake right in the middle of it and we sat at the kitchen table and just looked at it all morning long. It was so shiny, like a little star right on our kitchen table, I loved it.

You can guess what happened next. That night at the shack Willy and I talked it over. We couldn't figure an angle to the thing at all. Old Joe had given us the gold free and clear. No strings attached. We had some questions about it, of course—the biggest one being how we could get more gold.

We also wondered why Old Joe picked the dump for a living if he could make gold?

And how did he make gold?

What was in that powder he put in the pan?

Willy figured that Joe couldn't really make gold he must have put the gold flakes in the coke bottle when he stepped outside—you know, yellow hides yellow. But why would he do that if he had the gold in the first place? Why didn't he just go ahead and give it to us? We had all these questions and Old Joe didn't even show up that night.

We went crazy expecting him.



The next night he came to scrounge, same as usual. We tried to be cagey about asking him things. All the time, you read in the newspapers about some old codger who lives poor and then when he dies they find stacks of money in his house. We figured Old Joe was a guy like that—what they call a “Miser”—and we wanted to handle this right.

We sat around the fire talking casual for a while, then every once in awhile we would ask him something about the gold. He didn’t want to talk about it much. But we found out that his grandmother was a witch of some kind with an Indian name and he promised her never to tell any one how to make the powder. He said he didn’t flash much money because gold was easier to make than to sell.

He could sell a little bit to jewelers and pawn shops and dentists and people like that; but if you tried to sell too much in the same place, people wanted to know how you got it because the government is supposed to have all the gold—except for wedding rings and things like that—in Fort Knox.

That made sense to us. Right away we realized that the way to solve that problem was to move around a little bit. Drive up to Savannah and sell some, then drive over to Tallahassee and sell some more, then come home. That way you could sell a lot of it and make quite a haul out of the operation. We didn’t mention this simple solution to Old Joe and he didn’t ask about it. He should have thought of it himself.

We persuaded him to make us just one more flake that night and this time I filled the coke bottle myself so when we found the three little dots of gold in the skillet, we were sure there was no trick to the gold-making business except for that magic powder.

It ended up that for the next two nights we begged him to let us buy some of that powder. We had to wear



him down because he didn't want to sell. And we pleaded friendship and reminded him about the spare tire and all the things he borrowed from us. Finally he agreed to sell us his envelope full of powder for only \$6,000 which was all we could raise between us.

That was the last we saw of Old Joe for awhile.

The powder didn't work.

And between the two of us, Willy and me fried so much piss that it's a wonder the air pollution people didn't come out and shut down the dump.

That's how the kid found us when he came back to work. Frying piss and powder. Trying to make more gold.

It's hard to keep what you're doing a secret when a third party sees you pouring coke bottles full of piss in a red hot frying pan, so we had to let the kid in on what we were doing.

I'll never forget the look on his face when he said, "Chaucer! My God, it's straight out of Chaucer. That dirty Bastard." —he meant Old Joe not Chaucer.

I'll give him this, he didn't laugh at us for the way we had been had. No, he got out his Chaucer book, *Them Cranberry Tales*, and read us a story about a guy called an Alchemist. That told us how Old Joe had tricked us out of our \$ 6,000.

The gold flakes were just bait to hook us. It cost Old Joe maybe \$70 worth of gold to take \$ 6,000 off of us—maybe he scraped the flakes off a pawn shop ring. But I don't know for sure where he got the gold, I imagine, now that I know more about him, that he stole it from his grandmother's teeth.

But anyhow the gold wasn't in the piss or in the powder or in the copper wire. Joe had pushed the gold flakes into a hollowed out charcoal briquette, one we



put on top of the skillet so when the charcoal burned up, the gold flake dropped down into the pan.

We keep a .22 rifle in the shack to shoot rats and I wanted to take it and go looking for Old Joe right then. Willy was more philosophical about the whole thing. He said, "Life is like the dump. Copper wire and watermelon rinds come in on the same truck."

The kid, Vernon, kept quiet and studied his Chaucer book till he came up with the plan to get our money back. He wanted us to find some more gold, but since there was no way for us to do that, he had us bring in some sterling silver spoons and some candles.

He fixed them up, and the next day the three of us went out looking for Old Joe's truck. We found it parked outside a titty bar down on Ashley Street after we had hunted all over the city. When Joe finally came out to his truck, we walked up pretending that it was coincidental meeting him.

When he saw us he looked like he wanted to run, but Willy threw his arms around him patting him on the back and shaking his hand like Joe was our best friend in all the world.

"Joe, Buddy", I said. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Look here, we found a pawn shop over on Bay Street that'll take all we can make. We're rich. We've been out looking at new cars and look at this watch I bought." I showed him a wallet full of money and a brand new watch--both of which we borrowed from Willy's brother-in-law just for that one day. "Come on. We'll buy you a drink."

He didn't want to go back to the bar with us, but we insisted, telling him it was the least we could do for the man who made us rich. Old Joe didn't understand what was going on. I almost felt sorry for him he was so bewildered.



“You guys better be careful flashing all that roll,” he warned us, “Where did you get it?”

“We made it just like you taught us”, Willy said, “You know. Out at the shed.” Willy lowered his voice like he didn’t want anybody else to hear, “Joe, the powder doesn’t work exactly right.” I could see Joe thinking that he was in for a creaming.

Then I came into the conversation, “We must be doing something wrong. We figured the fire wasn’t hot enough so we hooked an old vacuum cleaner hose to the exhaust pipe of my pickup truck and used the exhaust to blow the fire. Other than that, we did everything just like you showed us. Anyhow, we are only getting silver out of the pot. We’re not complaining, mind you, silver’s a lot easier to sell than gold. would be. It will just take us a little bit longer to get as rich as we want.”

“Silver?”, Joe repeated mumbling.

“Yes,” Vernon said, “we are making a killing with it. The guys let me in on the operation and I sure do want to thank you for making it all possible. I’ve put an order in for a new car to be delivered next week and Willy’s going to buy a new house, and we all have a brand new life ahead of us, all because of you, Sir.”

The kid sounded so sincere it was sickening. We paid for Joe’s drinks and patted his back some more and when we left Joe looked like he didn’t know whether to shit or go blind.

That night Old Joe showed up at the dump again and he watched our silver making operation like a hawk. He didn’t even take a sip of whisky. The kid had set up the operation, and he even let Joe stir the mess we had in the skillet with a tube from an lawn chair arm which Joe fetched from the pile outside.



It was a strange scene. The shack was filled with thick smoke and ash blown all over from the hose leading to the truck exhaust. There was such a breeze that the tacks came out of some of the centerfolds on the walls and the girls seemed to writhe in a passionate dance inviting us to join them.

Old Joe was about to gag from the smoke and heat as he stirred the pot of boiling piss and the rest of us rushed around like mad men piling charcoal on the fire.

The kid explained to Old Joe how our technique differed from his. The main thing was that, because of the exhaust fumes blowing on the skillet, we didn't have to pile charcoal over the open pan. So it was easier to get out the molten silver when the piss boiled away.

When Joe left that night he took a little lump of solid silver with him and I'll bet he had it analyzed the next day because he was at the shack waiting for us when we got to work that night. He had a telegram with him saying that there was an emergency at home and he was supposed to rush to North Carolina bringing some of the powder with him because his Mama needed some cash for an operation in a hurry.

Bet he'd sent that telegram to his self from right here in the city.

He wanted his powder back—but even though there was a family emergency—he wanted to go through our procedure again. Vernon showed, him how the whole thing worked again—piss and powder and copper wire in the pot, carbon monoxide from the truck exhaust, not blowing directly on the fire, but just to one side to make a strong breeze.

It's a wonder we didn't suffocate but being in the shack is damn near to being out in the open air



anyway. And keep the whole mixture well stirred till it boils dry and the silver is in the bottom of the pan.

Joe begged us to sell him back the powder and we talked it over and decided that if we made too much money, we would have trouble with the income tax people. But we would only sell him back half our powder because we might want to make some more silver.

And, we only agreed to sell him that half if he promised to make a new batch for us when he got back from North Carolina.

He bought back half the envelope of powder for \$13,000.

That was the last we ever saw of Old Joe. As far as I know he's still trying to make silver from piss and powder. But he can't do it because he doesn't read Chaucer like the kid does.

The whole thing is in Chaucer and the kid showed it to us.

It's is that same story—the one about the alchemist. The kid cut up the silver spoons in little chunks with a hack saw. And Old Joe put them in the pot himself, but he didn't know he was doing it.

They were in the end of the aluminum lawn chair tubes Joe used to stir the pot with. The kid stuffed the silver chunks up there and plugged the end with a stub of a wax candle stick. The wax melts in the heat and the silver pours into the pan. We fixed up all the tubes on the top of the pile like that, so whichever one Joe picked up would work.

Not long after that, the kid quit out here because he got a thing called a scholarship—that's where instead of him paying them to let him go to college, they pay him!



Ain't that the damnest thing!

Since the kid left I started to work *on* my high school equivalency test. It'll take another three years but it's working out fine for me. Someday I'll be able to read Chaucer myself.

Willy ain't had it so good. He decided to get educated too, so he got with this adult learn-to-read program. One of the first things they taught him was how to write his name and when he started cashing his own checks, his wife got mad and threw him out of the house and he still loves her and he's sorry he ever started to get education.

We got a Christmas card from the kid awhile back. We tacked it in the shed, right on Miss April's belly button. She was his favorite. Every time I see it, I think about him sitting over at the table reading Chaucer all night. And I'm beginning to suspect that he may be able to make a living out of English after all.

In a way that's kind of a shame, because I figure that with a couple of years experience he would have made one hell of a good dump man.

—END—

Praying For The Beer Fish



Job Matthews wanted to catch the beer fish.

He needed to catch it.

He wanted to catch it bad.

But cops barred his way. Both Florida State Troopers and Jacksonville Sheriff's Office cops might be on the road to the jetties.

They prowled out there on Main Street, on Zoo Parkway, on Heckscher Drive. Job knew that. They'd stopped him before. Gave him tickets. Tickets filled the glove box of his rusted old Ford pickup. Tickets he couldn't hope to pay. Tickets for an expired inspection sticker, for busted taillight, for bald tires, for oil smoke. For a loud hole in the muffler.



Job Matthews earned more tickets than Al Capone, who once had a home in Jacksonville, ever got in his whole lifetime.

If the cops caught Job again and ran those tickets—cops have computer things right on the dashboard of patrol cars—they'd take away his license. Might never let him drive again.

But he wanted a chance to catch the Beer Fish. He had to drive to do that. If he caught the Beer Fish, he'd never have to worry about cops again.

In the old man's mind, the Beer Fish seemed like the answer to all life's problems.

But he had to get past those cops first.

So old Job took action, the same action he always took when faced with an insurmountable problem like lurking cops—he prayed.

Job hoped the boy beside him on the passenger side wouldn't notice. So he talked under his breath, eyes wide open and on the road.

Lord, please don't let any cops see me slipping past. If I get stopped, I don't know what I'd do. I've just got to get out there to try for the beer fish. You know how bad I needs him.

Theodore Willis, Scoot to his friends, noticed the old fool's lips moving. No big deal. Plenty of guys on the street talk to themselves. No harm, long as you watch 'em.

The '86 rust red pickup lumbered north along Jacksonville's Main Street like Don Quixote riding to war but, instead of a jousting lance, two 15-foot-long cane poles tied to the bumpers front and back bobbed along sticking out in front to the truck.

The two cops at Eight and Main stood hassling a hooker. Paid no attention to Job's pickup truck.



Thank You, Lord. There's gonna be one at the Cemetery too. Watch out for him, please. Those retired cops can get mean.

The truck rattled across the old Florida East Coast railroad tracks by the cemetery. Massive old oak trees covered with beards of Spanish Moss shaded acres and acres of ancient graves. There to the front, behind Evergreen Cemetery's office, stands a giant mausoleum where the dead lie stacked one atop another in cubby holes. Every time Job saw it, he thought of those old pigeon-hole boxes lining the wall at the Main Post Office; but here the dead await their eventual delivery when Someone opens the box and picks them up.

Two motorcycle cops stood at attention at the entrance to Evergreen as the funeral procession they escorted passed between the ivy-covered brick pillars.

That's right, Lord. Thanks for keeping that pair off me. Bet they never even heard to the Beer Fish.

Job drove past dilapidated motels on Main Street where signs, paint flaking, proclaimed TOURIST REST, but no tourist has stopped there since the Interstate was constructed. At 35-miles-per-hour he crept by signs saying Finger-Licken-Good, Over One Billion sold, and Smoked Mullet.

The Trout River Bridges arches over the water beside the railroad bridge and from the top you can see where the Trout flows into the St. Johns River, the conflux marked by a pile of old junk cars awaiting loading onto a cargo ship that will take them to Japan to be turned into new junk cars and shipped back to America—many of them arriving at Jacksonville's Blunt Island Auto Terminal and distributed all over the country.



Job knew his own pickup by rights should be on that pile.

At the next traffic light—no cop there today—Job could see smoke rising from the Budweiser Plant. The rich smell of hops or yeast or something fine drifted in the air. They must be unloading hops at the plant's railroad siding.

Next cop often hung out near the Jacksonville Zoo. Lots of people killed on Heckscher Drive—they call it Zoo Parkway this close in. People died especially on Summer weekends when families worn out from a day in the sun at Huguenot Park, the North Jetties, or Talbot Island drove toward home. Driving west. Setting sun in the driver's eyes. Narrow road. Weary driver. Sometimes drinking was involved. Lot's of folks have died on Heckscher.

There was the cop.

He stood beside a silver van loaded with tourists from the zoo, FLORIDA'S FIRST MAJOR TOURIST ATTRACTION. It was a city cop in sharp blue uniform waving his arms and pointing to direct the lost yankees in a U-turn back on to Florida A1A, toward the Buccaneer Trail ferry on Fort George Island.

An animal that might have been a water buffalo scratched itself on a metal pole inside it's enclosure. Big thing. Mean looking.

"What was that thing," Scoot asked.

"Don't rightly know. Big. Gray. But it wasn't an elephant. You ever been to the zoo?"

"Sheet. Zoo's for school kids. Ain't nothing in there I need to know about."

"Maybe I can take you sometime. Don't cost too much."



The traffic light at the entrance to Blunt Island Terminal stopped them. Heavy trucks streamed across the intersection pouring into the terminal. Lots of trucks carried containers loaded with God knows what, auto carriers rattled in empty and came out with shinny new cars, flatbeds weighed down with machinery, a truck-load of bright green John Deere tractors bound for Arabia.

But with all the commerce of the world passing before him, Job worried about a cop car pulling up behind him.

Please Lord, don't let no cop come up toward me whilst I'm stuck at this here light, cause my inspection sticker on the windshield is expired. And don't let one pull up behind me either cause the tags done run out too. And, Lord, You know I ain't got no insurance. And Good Lord, make the beer fish feel powerful hungry... And come to think of it, make that Statee who hangs by Northside Generating Plant catch a hankering for a donut or something right about now so he be gone somewheres else.

“Did you say something, old man?” Scoot turned from gazing out the window at a girl buying a soda at a vendor’s cardboard sign beside the road.

“Just saying a little prayer, son. I do that now and again, not nearly as much as I should.”

Scoot nodded. If the old man wanted to talk to himself, that was ok so long as he was paying for this trip. Even living a few blocks from the St John’s River—everybody in Jacksonville lives close to some waterway—Scoot had never caught a fish. Only been fishing once before, when his dad was around. But he was just a little kid then. He would have said no if any of the guys had been around when old man Matthews asked him to come along on this trip. Just so long as nobody saw him get in that truck, it was ok. Treat it as a joke. Stringing



the old man along—he draws Social Security. Framing a scam. The guys would understand a thing like that. But going fishing to fish!

More cardboard vendor signs along the road: HAND-WOVEN SHRIMP NETS, STUFFED ANIMALS, SUN GLASSES, CANE SYRUP, SMOKED MULLET, LIVE BAIT, CRABS! HOT BOILED PEANUTS.

As the old truck ambled past them, Job said, “Smooth sailing from now on. Cops won’t be on the road this far out.”

“You wanted by the cops,” Scoot asked, a hint of respect in his voice.

“Just need to avoid ‘em. Inspection sticker’s expired.”

“Oh, is that all.”

Scoot looked at the yellow sticker in the windshield. “Why don’t you take a black magic marker and change that 3 to an 8? That would give you wiggle room.”

“Wouldn’t be honest.”

“Driving around with an expired sticker ain’t ‘sactly honest either, but you do that.”

“I know that’s right, Son. I know. But you do what you got to do to get by in this life. We’re gonna catch the beer fish for sure when we get to my spot. I sure am hankering to catch me that fish.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the truck’s front end began smoking. Radiator leak. Boiled dry again.

Job coasted to the side of the road. “Fetch that empty gallon milk jug from behind the seat,” he told Scoot. “There’s water in the ditch. Run dip us up some. Watch out for snakes.”



While Scoot walked down to the ditch gingerly looking in the grass for any snake, Job rummaged in the glove compartment for a large can of McCormick's Fine Ground Black Pepper. He always carried black pepper for his radiator.

Scoot returned with the ditch water as Job unlatched the hood. Steam billowed out. "Hadn't you better shut the motor off," Scoot asked.

"No. Got to leave it running. If you pour water in cold, it'll crack the block. Got to mix it with what hot water's left so it evens out."

Job emptied the black pepper into the radiator first then poured small amounts of ditch water in.

"The little grains of black pepper wash around inside the engine and when they come to the leak, they congregate together and plug it up—for a time. Time enough for us to get on down the road."

Sure enough. Pepper flakes clogged the radiator leak. Ditch water stayed in. The engine cooled and soon they were on the road again. On their way to catch the beer fish.

With the vendor stalls left behind, Hecksher Drive swept in gentle curves through sand dunes covered with red grass and sea oats. On the left side of the road, saltmarsh and sawgrass dotted by dry hammocks stretched away to the horizon; on the right side, homes of shrimpers bordered the river and you can see the masts and booms of shrimp boats docked behind each home.

The old truck crossed bridge after bridge—Brown's Creek, Sisters' Creek, Hanna Milles Creek, Cedar Point Creek, Shad Creek—each concrete bridge lined with fishermen in exotic attire from overalls to bikinis, all sporting straw hats against the morning sun. Aluminum



chairs and styrofoam icechests sit out in the roadway and cars have to weave past.

Job had to stop on one bridge while an old lady backed across the road pulling hard on her rod, backing, heedless of traffic, as she reeled in a heavy sheephead she'd hooked.

Dangling from the telephone wires running beside each bridge hang lengths of monofilament line with red and white corks and pyramid-shaped lead sinkers where fishermen have inadvertently cast their lines over the wires and couldn't retrieve their rigs. So the tackle swings eternally in the wind like little hung men warning fishing offenders against the same fate.

Now, Hecksher Drive runs flat parallel to the St Johns River and across the river Scoot could see the white sand scar of St Johns Bluff where the Spanish massacred the French Huguenots in the 1500s. Scoot had never heard of the Huguenots; he eyed the pleasure craft plying the river and heard an oil tanker toot angrily for smaller boats to clear the channel. Shrimpers and row boats, yachts and cargo ships, commercial fishers and kyakers—all vied for leeway in the swift current while the Mayport Ferry bearing tourists south on the Buccaneer Trail crisscrossed among them.

Across the river in the Mayport Basin, a fairy city rose above the saltmarsh with towers and turrets and masts with banners—a gigantic aircraft carrier's bulk dominated the eastern horizon.

As soon as Job crossed the Haulover Creek bridge on Fort George Island, he cut a sharp right in a hairpin turn on a shell road that doubled back almost under the bridge.



It was there at the mouth where the Haulover flows into the St Johns, he felt the beer fish must lurk in the swift tidal run.

Where else could it be?

It had been released upriver two weeks ago. Job figured it had to seek the ocean. A fish could swim this far in two weeks. Couldn't it? Job figured it would make for Haulover Creek and he would catch it and be rich for the rest of his life. Might even get his picture in the newspaper.

Budweiser, the King of Beers, had opened a new bottling plant in Jacksonville up off Dunn Avenue. As a promotion, they tagged and released two dozen fish in the St Johns. Each fish bore a metal badge on it's tail declaring the value of that particular fish. Any fisherman might catch a ten dollar fish, or a twenty dollar fish, fifty or a hundred, and they'd released five \$1,000 fish—but the king of them all was The Beer Fish, a sea bass with a tail tag worth \$10,000.

Job wanted to catch that fish. Everybody on the river wanted to catch that fish—dream of a lifetime. Food on the table. New tag for the truck. No more waiting in the Food Stamp line--\$10,000 to the man who caught the beer fish.

Job wanted to be that man.

Job's truck bumped down the sharp incline toward a clearing where he could park. An artesian well standpipe flowed sulfur water in a shallow stream across the shell road, it's faint aroma of rotten-egg smell tainted the air beneath the bridge. Job forded this flow to the hard-packed shell close to a dilapidated pier nested close to the bridge

The short pier stands on palm log pilings jutting out into Haulover Creek; it used to be longer but storms knocked off the end making it hardly larger than two



king-sized beds laid end to end. Burnt holes riddle the wooden decking of the pier where fishermen have built fires on the dock and not bothered to put them out.

In the shallow water to the right, bamboo stakes with rags tied to the tops lined the waterfront—markers showing night-time cast-net shrimpers where balls of bait lay to either side of each stake.

Tied to a dock piling, a thick rope stretched down into the dark creek for a hundred yards downstream supported by bobbing Clorox bottles used as floats—a trot line rig with dozens of baited hooks dangling a few feet below the surface.

Upstream, beneath the bridge, construction crews protected the bridge footing by piling sacks of concrete in the water and layering them to form a breakwater. They didn't even open the bags, just let them get wet so the concrete would set. When the bags rotted away, they left shapes like feather pillows piled on a bed.

It relieved Job to see no other cars or trucks parked in the hard shell lot. He wanted the peace of enjoying the dock and fishing without the interference, splashing and chatter of other people. But, he did see a yellow Caterpillar bulldozer parked in the edge of the sawgrass marsh near the artesian wellhead. No one was around now, but apparently a construction crew had been filling in a portion of marsh with fill dirt from river dredging.

Eight or ten glass Coke bottles stood spaced in the flat portions of the Caterpillar treads; workmen must have left them there while off on some other project but intended to pick them up later to cash in for the deposit. Coke bottles—glass dimes—worth ten cents apiece. That'd buy a half pound of bait shrimp.

"Look. Do you see what I see," Scoot said. "Glass dimes. There's nobody around. I'll get 'em."



Scoot jumped out of the truck and ran to collect the bottles.

“Whoa, Kid,” Job called. “Better leave those alone. They ain’t ours.”

“But they is right there for the taking.”

“They don’t belong to us and we’re here to fish, not to steal. That’s contrary to the Ten Commandments.”

“Say what?”

“You know, what God told Moses on the mountain— It it ain’t yours, leave it the hell alone. That’s one of the Commandments.”

Scoot had never heard of Moses, commandments, nor any of that stuff, but he left the Coke bottles alone. He untied the cane poles from the truck’s bumpers and lifted a battered icechest out of the bed. Job carried a galvanized iron bucket that served as his tackle box, and a soggy packet of bait shrimp wrapped in newspaper.

As they walked to the dock, Scoot heard the roar of engines behind him. Looking back he saw a bunch of dune buggies surging up the massive sanddunes close to the St Johns. Giant balloon tires. Jacked up suspensions. Rollbars. Metal-flake paint glistened in the sun. Tan young men and squealing bikini-clad girls roared over the dunes kicking up rooster-tails of sand spray in their wake.

Envy ate at his heart. That’s the way to live. Not sitting on a rotting dock with a lousy cane pole—not even a real rod and reel—waiting for a dumb fish to bite and make you rich. How did those guys get money to buy sporty dune buggies like that? Life ain’t fair.

As they baited up, Job showed him how to push the barb and hook shank through the shrimp doubling it back to lock the shrimp on the hook. And he showed



the boy how to set the bobber for bottom fishing and swing the rig out away from the dock.

Out to the right, over the St John's channel, three Navy helicopters from the Air/Sea Rescue Unit practiced hovering just above the water, having a frogman jump in, rescue a practice victim, and hoist both up into the belly of the chopper.

Job pulled up two rickety and broken wooden crabtraps for them to sit on.

And there they fished. Long cane poles projected over the brown water. The red and white bobbers moved sluggishly on the ripple of incoming tide.

O God, let me catch the beer fish. Even one of the cheaper fish would joy my heart. But with the big prize money I could fix the truck, and with it running and legal, I could get a job over in Riverside. Get off Food Stamps. Buy new work boots. Catching that one big fish would solve all my problems. Wouldn't be nothing I couldn't do if I catch the beer fish.

Lord, I knows that You supply all we really need. But let's face it, sometimes You don't, least so as I can see. I does the yard work and make a bit from selling aluminum scrap. But whatever I do, it just ain't quite enough. And I'm tired. So tired. I get so weary of scrounging and making do. Lord, please make that beer fish hungry for my bait.

A commotion broke the old man's reverie. Scoot's bobber went under. He shouted as his line whipped back and forth in the water. He jerked his pole and whipped a sliver fish in the air and over his head to land flapping on the bank behind him.

Scoot whooped. He ran to chase the fish before it could flop back into the water.

"That's a whiting," Job said. "Good pan-sized whiting. They's good eating."



He showed the boy how to slide his hand down the line to cover the fish in a tight grip so the fish could not raise its fins to spike his palm. Job threaded Scoot's first fish on the stringer and dropped it in the water to keep it alive and fresh.

Scoot danced up and down as he baited his hook again and got it back out there in the tide. There just might be something to this fishing thing.

With pride, Job watched the boy's glee over catching his first fish. He'd debated whether or not to ask this street corner kid to come fishing with him. Chancy to fool with a kid like that. They can lose their cool and turn violent over nothing. Who knows what goes on in they head? At some obscure internal urging to do good, Job had pushed the apprehension in his mind down.

Lord, he'd prayed before asking Scoot to come, I don't know about this. Street kid and all. But the Good Book say, Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day—Teach him how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Well, Lord, you know as well as I do that's not really in the Bible—heard it on tv—but it ought to be. But I'm a little scared of this kid. I don't need no more trouble in my life. Got enough already. He and them boys he hang with do some bad nasty things. But Jesus, I know that you don't clean a fish till after you caught it. Help me do whatever's right...

And now here he was on the creek fishing with Scoot.

In two hours, the pair caught eight fish. Not big fish. Not the Beer Fish, but fish—three whiting, two yellowtails, a drum, two channel cats, and a toadfish—Toadfish don't count when your fishing, ugly things that swallow bait, hook and leader so deep you have to cut him open to get your rig out.



Each fish pulled out of the water Scoot whooped and preened like he was a tv star on *American Sportsman*. It pleased Job to watch him.

After a crab stole Job's bait—again—man and boy broke for lunch. They anchored their poles into cracks in the dock and ate a lunch of chicken backs and yellow rice washed down with sulpher water from the artesian well.

When they returned to fishing their hooks were bare; crabs picked off the bait.

As they baited up for another try, Scoot said, "I wonder what all lives down in that water? You can't see underneath it. I saw this movie where this creature—half man, half fish—came up in the river and grabbed this girl right out of the Lobster House downtown. It was on the late show one night. Do you suppose things like that really live in the river?"

"You never can tell what's under the water. I once caught a porcupine fish. It blew up like a balloon twice its size; it does that to get too big for some larger fish to eat it even though normal time it was just a little thing. God made all kinds of critters to live in His world and I don't think folks knows anything about half of them."

Even as he spoke there was a commotion in the water near one of the bridge pilings where something stirred the surface. Man and boy watched as different parts of some animal splashed in the water as it worked its way toward the mouth of the creek past their dock.

"Look at that. What is that thing?"

It was a large sea turtle, probably come up the creek to lay her eggs in the sand banks upstream. Two small sand sharks, circling and biting, harassed the turtle.



The turtle tried evasive maneuvers to escape its attackers in vain. The sharks wheeled about her, nipping at her exposed flutes tearing and shaking off small mouthfuls of flesh. The turtle withdrew into her shell and they circled till she had to surface to gulp air. She struck out with her flippers in a sluggish defense.

Lord, help that turtle. I know You created sharks too. But that turtle is like me. She don't hurt anybody, just goes about her own business. So give her a hand please, Lord.

The turtle, as if in answer to Job's prayer, stirred herself in renewed battle effort and one strong fluke slapped one of the sharks catching it against the barnacle-covered concrete bridge piling. The sharp shells raked open its side. Blood colored the water and the other shark attacked his bleeding fellow in a frenzy as the turtle cruised away from them. The wounded shark swirled in erratic circles of agony while its friend chased it biting its flanks. Soon the water subsided in flowing swiftness bearing no mark of the preceding struggle.

"Man! That was something!"

Thank You, Lord.

"Never can tell what you're gonna run into when you fishing," Job said.

By three o'clock the shadow of the bridge shaded the dock and the tide was at its fullest. They had not had a bite for thirty minutes but still watched their corks wobble in the current with lazy peaceful interest.

A green metal-flake van with shining mag wheels turned into the shell road and parked in the lot. A bronze young man, barefoot in shorts and shirtless got out of the driver's side and two well-built girls in bikinis pilled out of the passenger door.



One girl carried a transistor radio barking acid rock, and all three staggered in loud drunkenness. They ambled over to the dock and began to throw rocks at the coke bottles lined up on the treads of the bulldozer. No reason. Just out of sheer meanness. They broke all the bottles and two of the glass gages on the dozer's instrument panel.

"You guys want a beer," the boy slurred.

"No thanks," Job said.

"I'll have one. Say, were you guys up on the dune this morning"?

"Yeah. Damn cop chased us off and broke up the rally. None of his business. We weren't bothering anything."

One of the girls wandered over to the foot of the bridge and sat on a cement pillow. The other girl came out on the dock and spied the trotline left by some other fisherman. She hauled in the line as far as the first set. There a large sea bass thrashed on the end of the hook. The girl pulled it up on the dock where it flopped silver in the sun.

"Look what I caught," she cried.

The others gathered around her to look at the fish. "It is a trotline," Job told them. "Somebody set it out and checks it each night. That bass is somebody's supper. There are probably a lot of them strung out on the line."

"I'm pretty strung out myself," the girl said. "Look at him flap. What's the matter with him?"

The boy nudged the dying fish with his bare toe saying, "Needs to be in water to get air. Dip him back in."

The girl dangled the fish over the dock until it was just under the surface. When they could tell he was



reviving; she lifted him so his gills just cleared the water and she held him there.

“Hey, whatdaya doing that for,” Scoot said.

“He’s greedy,” the girl giggled. “I don’t want him to get too much.” The other young people laughed at her antics as she raised and lowered the struggling desperate fish.

Job said, “You kids shouldn’t tease that fish. It belongs to whoever set out the trotline and it’s not right to torment the poor creature.”

“Mind your own business, buddy,” the girl snapped. “It’s not your fish. It belongs to whoever pulls him in and I did; so he’s mine and I’ll do what I please with it.”

“Yeah, the young man chimed in, “It’s none of your business. It’s not your fish so stay out of it.”

Scoot tensed. He’d seen confrontations like this turn nasty on the street. He fingered the butterfly knife in his pocket. Just in case.

Lord, make them go away and leave me alone and stop bothering that poor fish. He’s got troubles enough as is. And I’m not sure how to handle this at all. Maybe I ought to head on home.

The three young people watched Job defiantly as the girl continued to pester the fish. It amused them to see the old man’s distress over the situation.

“look,” Job said, “Either put the fish back in the water or bring it out in the air so it can die. There’s no sense in tormenting it.”

“Whatsya gonna do? Call the cops,” the boy taunted. “There’s no law against catching fish. You do the same as her when you let those on your stringer dry out. So we can do as we please with this one.”

Scoot edged away giving himself some distance.



The girl continued to dip the fish in the water for a few seconds then lifting it clear to let it thrash gasping for oxygen, then resubmerging it. She seemed delighted with her toy, but instead of tiring of her fiendish activity, she soon thought of a new torture for her captive. She dangled the fish in the air and called to her friend, "Get me my beer."

The boy handed her the beer from the cooler in the van and she maneuvered the fish close and said, "Poor little fishy, nothing to drink but nasty old creek water. Here's something you'll like."

She poured cold beer into the fish's gaping mouth.

The cold fluid gushed from the gills and dribbled down the silver body and off the tail onto the dock. The fish went stiff as the beer passed it's gills then it spasmed in thrashing convulsions of torment as the foreign substance strangled it.

"He can't hold his liquor," the boy whooped. "He's stoned already."

"Want some more fishy," the girl said.

"Lord, how can I tolerate this? What should I do. How can I distract them from this atrocity? I know You say blessed are the peacemakers, but this can't be allowed. What should I do?"

What God said to Moses at the Burning Bush popped into Job's mind. God said, "What is that in thine hand"? and Moses said, "A rod" and God said, "Use that."

Job wound his line round and round the tip of his cane pole.

"Drop that fish," he commanded.

The boy and girl roared laughing. "Drop that fish," the boy mimicked. "You sound like the marshal in an



old western busting into the saloon yelling, 'Drop that fish'. That's so lame. Why don't you buzz off old man."

"Gimme that fish, Susie, and I'll show him how I'll drop it." The boy grabbed the trotline about three feet away from the hooked fish and swung it over his head dashing the fish against the creosote planks of the dock. "Now, give him another drink," he said handing the fish back to the girl.

She bent down to the fish and began to pour more beer...

Job lashed out with his cane pole.

The tip popped her across her bikini bottom.

She jumped up dropping the fish, grabbing her bottom, and shrieking.

"You've no right to do that," the boy shouted. "We'll call the cops on you."

"Be that as it may," Job said, "I won't let you aggravate that fish no more. You move away and leave him be."

Lord, please don't let 'em call a cop.

The boy made to step forward but Job whipped his pole toward him lashing the air so the wicked treble hook dangled inches from the boy's face.

"I set this treble hook in you flesh, they gonna have to cut it out," the old man said. "Now you three git. I means it."

The van people retreated before him scrambling backward to avoid exposing their rears to his whip. The boy scooped up an oyster shell and raised it to throw.

"I wouldn't do that mister," Scoot said, flicking open his knife.

"You going to let this old man chase us off," Tina screamed. "You gonna let him get away with this?" She



had not seen Scoot's knife. "Show some balls and take that pole away from him."

"Not me baby. That thing hurts."

"Coward," she spat. "Not even my parents ever spank me. I do as I please. You just see how far you get from now on. You just see. Some man! Letting an old guy chase you off from what you want. You're weaker than that stupid fish."

She kept up her attack on the boy as they retreated to the van and got in. The boy spun off in the loose sand and shell, throwing up a plume of dirt as he left with squealing tires. The van sped around the curve and up onto the hard road headed back toward Jacksonville. but squealed to a halt on the bridge approach above the parking area.

The girl leaped out with a bag in her arms and showered the old man with empty beer cans that had accumulated in the van floor. The boy popped open the driver's door and began throwing down empty beer and soda bottles at Job and Scoot.

A green Mountain Dew bottle splatted in the soft sand missing Scoot's head by an inch.

The trio jumped back in their van and sped away yelling, "Nigger" and extending the finger in the air.

Scoot looked at the bottles half-buried in the soft sand. "Glass dimes," he said.

"Pennies from Heaven."

"Shares?"

"What else. Scrap aluminum cans goes for seventy-three cents a pound. Must be enough for a gallon of gas."

As Scoot gathered beer cans and glass dimes, Job trudged back to the dock and pulled fish on the trotline



in close. He eased his hand over the gills and eased the hook out of the fish's mouth.

"You go free now. If you happen to see the Beer Fish, tell him old Job wants to see him."

Job unhooked one of his whiting from his own stringer and hooked it on the trotline to replace the fish he'd freed.

Well, Lord, I suppose I did right. I'm not sure, but I done what I done anyhow. Forgive me if I was wrong. I can't think of any Scripture that covers this sort of thing.

He gathered his gear and took it back to his old truck and stowed it in back. He lifted the hood and filled the radiator with water from the plastic milk jug behind the front seat. He refilled the jug with sulphur water from the artesian well. That radiator is always boiling dry.

Scoot threw the cans and bottles he'd collected in the back of the truck.

The truck started, starter only ground a bit.

It lumbered up the incline onto the hard road.

"Say, when we gonna come fishing again" Scoot asked.

"I'm thinking Saturday, if nothing don't happen."

Lord, let us get home safe without any cops seeing the tags or the inspection sticker and don't let me have no flat. And bless them kids and teach 'em to live right. And Lord, when we get that money from the recycle plant, I'm gonna buy me a Lotto ticket. Keep that in mind, please.

—End—



Thin Jesus/ Fat Jesus ¹



Yesterday, May 21, 2011, Some of my fellow fundamentalist Christians expected Jesus to appear at 6 a.m. in New Zealand.

News outlets, talk shows and cartoonists enjoyed a field day making fun of us Christians and mocking those who thought Christ would appear at that time.

I did not expect Him to return yesterday anymore than I expect Him any day, but that's neither here nor there.

Those believers who did hope for His appearance in New Zealand yesterday have been disappointed. They calculated the precise time and place from a formula factoring in Noah's Flood, the international

¹ Non fiction. This was our day; this is my diary posting for May 22, 2011.



dateline, and—can this be right?—a Mayan stone calendar.

According to the newspaper, “Some proponents predict it will all begin around 6 p.m. local time with a devastating earthquake in New Zealand and move time zone to time zone until it goes around the world.”

Jesus did promise to return, but He stipulated no one would know when.

If you’re interested, one place Jesus talked about such things is in the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew’s Gospel.

He said, “If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not...Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only....Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”

Now, I do not know what happened in New Zealand.

But I do know that Jesus Christ appeared here in my hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, yesterday.

In fact Ginny and I saw Him appear a couple of times.

As we ate breakfast at a fast food place talking about the media stir over the anticipated return, Jesus appeared at the garbage can near the door.

He was effectively disguised as a bum. He rummaged through the trash hunting leftover food scraps. He was rail thin in a way that made me think



of why they call AIDS, the Slim Disease. He wore clothes several sizes too large for him. His pants bunched at his waist.

A Christian who sat near Ginny overheard our conversation about New Zealand. As this man left the restaurant, he gave Jesus a couple of dollars and told Him to buy some breakfast. Then the guy got in his car and drove away.

For I was hungry and you gave me food...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again when we stopped to gas up our own car—we drove to Georgia to buy my brand of pipe tobacco. This time Jesus appeared as a fat guy wearing a soiled sleeveless undershirt. He drove a beat-up gray car with New Jersey tags. Imagine that! Jesus disguised as a yankee! Unthinkable!

When Jesus puts on a disguise, He really puts on a disguise. Sometimes, He's really hard to recognize

Anyhow, Jesus explained that He needed a dollar to get gas enough to get home and a Christian at a nearby pump gave him enough to buy a couple of gallons. Jesus put gas in His tank and drove away.

I was a stranger and ye took Me in...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again just before we got home. Some people had been cleaning out their yard and put at the curb some old lawn chairs we could use. We stopped to pick them out of the trash heap and Jesus appeared calling from behind the screen door of the house next door.

This time Jesus appeared as a feeble old lady wearing a thin cotton housecoat. She ask if I could move two cement flower pots up onto her porch for her. I tried to lift one but it was too heavy for me, so Ginny had to grab one side and me the other to move those pots for old lady Jesus.

I was sick and ye visited me...



We got home, exhausted after a long day's driving. We kicked our shoes off. We threw sweaty clothes in the laundry hamper and put on swimsuits ready for a cool dip in our pool. Ready to soothe away the rigors of the hottest day of the season. And...

You guessed it.

Jesus appeared again. Right there on our back porch.

This time He wore His helpless, little animal costume.

Now, not to be disrespectful, when Jesus puts on His animal disguise, He's not the smartest possum in the woods.

Yes, Jesus appeared on our deck as a possum that had blundered into an animal trap that was not even baited! And He'd been trapped in the hot sun all day without water.

Now there was no way for me to slip a water bowl into the cage. I was afraid He would bite me if I put my hand in.

Did you know that Jesus can have a nasty bite?

Immediately I filled a bucket with water and from outside the cage, I poured water over poor Jesus. He lapped it up eagerly.

But, nothing for it, we had to let Jesus out of the cage.

Tired as we were, we had to dress again. Put on hurting shoes. Unlock the gate, fold up the car seats, put the cage with Jesus in the back seat (on a plastic sheet. Jesus in His possum disguise is not housebroken), drive to a wooded area by the river to let Him go.

I was thirsty and ye gave Me drink... In prison and ye came unto Me...In as much as ye did it unto



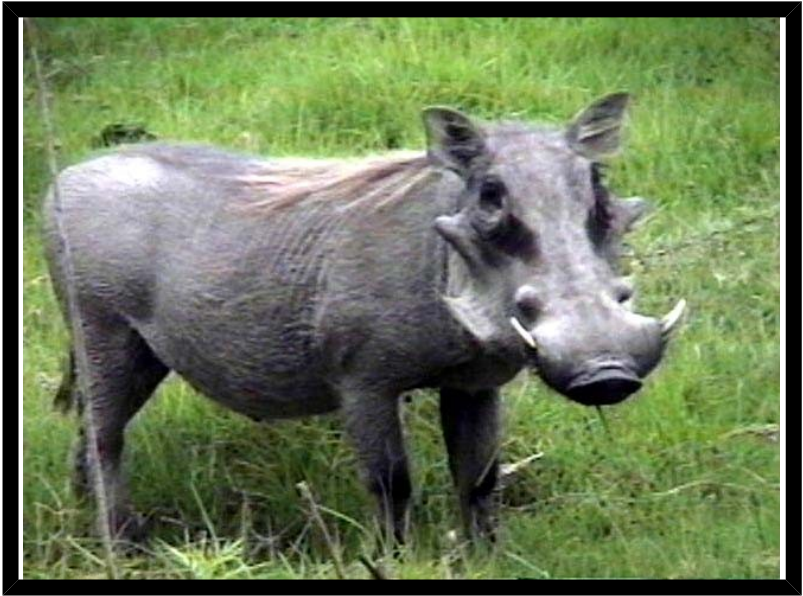
the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.

Yes, I don't know what happened in New Zealand on the other side of the world. But Jesus appeared here in Jacksonville yesterday.

Same as He does everyday.

—End—

The Last Beast



According to the announcement on TV, the last living animal on earth would probably die of old age sometime between two-thirty and three o'clock on Sunday afternoon; so the zoo parking lot was jammed and cars lined the side streets in a hot tooting mass.

Many people walked over a mile to get in the main gates and a streaming press of people crowded toward the amphitheater from all directions. Along the way, vendors sold ice cream, soda pop, and cotton candy. Their brisk trade gave the solemn occasion a carnival atmosphere.

From his glass-enclosed office on the top floor of the administration building, Dr. David Cranston looked down on the crowd hating them for what he was about to do. He noticed a mobile television unit struggle through the crowd while people waved



frantically at the camera even though it was obviously not broadcasting.

“Bunch of damned ghouls”, he muttered as he turned away from the window to his desk which was covered with newspaper clippings about the- zoo.

The tv producer had kept his promise to get the zoo first-rate publicity. “Damn him”, Cranston declared picking up the top article. Then he said to himself thinking out loud, “It’s not his fault. It’s not those people down there. I’m the one. The whole thing is up to me. Wish I’d gone ahead and retired when I had the chance last year, but it’s too late now.”

Anyhow the publicity was good. There hadn’t been an article about any zoo since Cincinnati’s possum died four years ago.

Dr. Cranston could remember when there would be newspaper articles every spring when the baby animals were born. Then people would throng to the zoo to see the new cubs, and the papers would send out photographers to take pictures of a cute baby tiger nursing from a bottle cuddled in the arras of a buxom young model who came with the photographer.

Thinking of this brought a smile to the doctor’s face as he recalled his first and only roll in the hay. He had taken one of these models into the storage shed where they frolicked on top of a stack of hay normally used to feed the elephant. That had been fifteen years ago when he had been an undergraduate in zoology. Now the girl was probably a middle aged matron, if she had survived the war and the famine. The elephant had been eaten by the mob. There were no more animal babies, and his whole profession was about to become as extinct as the animals.



The phone rang breaking his reverie. It was a security guard. There was trouble in the deer park, Cranston. called for a technician to meet him. there and hurried from the administration building.

Because of the crowds of people, he could not use the electric go-cart he usually used to get around inside the confines of the zoo so he had to walk pushing against the flow of people to get to the deer pens. As he passed the zoo's true-to-life environmental pens, animated animal figures—wonders of animatronics—moved in naturalistic motions and postures. When the real animal species started dying out, they were gradually replaced by these animated figures, until now there was only one animal left.

All the other cages were filled with mechanical imitations. Even people who had once seen the real animals which the figures imitated said that it was hard to tell the difference.

When he arrived at the deer park the trouble; was obvious. Instead of their usual fluid, timid movements the herd of deer wobbled about in erratic circles.

“What’s the hell the matter with them?” he snapped at the young technician who was waiting for him at the entrance to the enclosure.

“Computer disc’s worn out. It only catches in certain places so the appliances only get part of their motion instructions,” the technician explained without a trace of interest or concern.

“Can’t you replace the disc?”

“Don’t have anymore deer discs. We’ll have to order a new one. The only extra discs we have on file are walrus, apes, and a thing I’ve never heard, of before called a dugong. Would any of those do?”



“What would happen if you put one of those discs in the computer to move the deer?”

“Well, the mechanics are all central, so the deer figures would move around like walruses or whatever disc we feed into the computer. I can do that if you want to keep ‘em moving.”

“My God, Man, have you ever seen a walrus move?”

“No. My specialty is computer technician. I don’t pay much attention to the rest of this stuff. I just work here.”

“Never mind. Just shut the deer off for the afternoon and order some new discs for them,” the doctor directed as he started back toward the amphitheater.

He had noted the technician’s badge number. *He won’t be working here much longer, he thought. Deer that have the gait and motions of a walrus! Damn, I’d bet he’s never seen either one, but then neither has most of this crowd. They wouldn’t see anything wrong about the way the mechanical deer acted if the discs were switched. Damn them all. If it weren’t for the warthog—but then I’m the one! I suppose if I’m going through with it, I’d better get over to her cage. I hope to hell she’s already dead. Then I wouldn’t have to do anything.*

As he pushed through the crowd, he heard a loud beer-bellied man complain, “All this fuss over a damn dying pig.” The man’s two children were tugging on his arm trying to call his attention to a balloon salesman. The man ignored them and continued to gripe to a harried looking woman beside him, “What if the dam thing doesn’t die today? You won’t get me into a mess like this again.”



“Now, George”, the woman whined, “You go through this kinda crowd every time you go to a ball game and that’s neither historic nor educational. Besides, the guy on tv said it was almost sure to happen sometime this afternoon. And He was a scientist. They can tell. I hope we haven’t missed it. This is something the kids ought to see. It won’t ever happen again.”

The woman’s worries about the timing of the death were groundless. Dr. Cranston had been through the timetable with the TV producer several times earlier in the week. The producer demanded that the warhog die between 2:30 and 3 o’clock in the afternoon time slot, even though Dr. Cranston was sure its life could be prolonged for at least another few days.

The producer had persuaded him saying, “Sure, you can let it die naturally but let’s face it, if the thing dies at four in the morning, who’s going to watch? We can make, a video tape but a tape won’t have the same appeal as a live show. Sponsors ain’t gonna pay the same for a canned death as for live coverage. It’s up to you. We can’t force you, but what’s going to be the best publicity for your zoo?”

“You gonna have the same appeal once this last animal’s gone? You’d better play this thing for all its worth.”

Dr. Cranston knew the man was right. There was no doubt that the San Diego Zoo ranked tops in the country only by virtue of possessing the last living animal in the world.

For a few years Cincinnati had been competition with their live opossum. Many experts in the field had been convinced that the opossum would out live the warhog. After all, the order of marsupial had lived and thrived since the Pleistocene epoch.



At one time, gamblers made book on which would be the last animal. But since Cincinnati's opossum died, people had lost interest in zoos in spite of all the computerized animatronics and natural habitat displays that were offered.

The zoo had not received any attention for years now. Attendance was down. The city council continued to cut the budget every year. There were no funds even to keep extra discs for the computer.

There was a large endowment fund that some old lady had bequeathed to the zoo back when there were animals to feed. But her will stipulated that the money be used for animal food, and since there were no more animals to be fed except for the warthog, the council refused to release any of the cash for the zoo's other needs.

Cranston had many bitter fights with the council over the years about that money, but he had lost.

Now the news media were offering both cash and publicity to the zoo if he would give the warthog an injection which would insure that it died during prime time just before the Sunday afternoon football game. That way a premium viewing audience was guaranteed.

What was that girl's name? he questioned as he moved through the crowd. *Shirley ? Tracy? Something like that.* He remembered the smell of hay in her hair and the way she had clawed and squealed until he worried someone would investigate the commotion and discover them in the hay stack.

But now there were no more new-born cubs. No more pictures in the paper. He would never have guessed that zoology as a profession would fall victim to automation and become obsolete.



He entered the building where the warthog was kept in a temperature controlled environment and an assistant greeted him, "Afternoon, Doc."

"Afternoon. How is she doing?"

"Mean and bitchy as ever," the man replied.

Cranston smiled. He well knew the ornery nature of his star attraction. Even though the pig was almost too sick to move, it would still try to gore anyone who came into its cage to care for it.

When he entered the cage the pig opened its eyes and glared fiercely at him, but it was too feeble to attack. He took its temperature and blood pressure and made some adjustments to the the intravenous tubes which feed the senile beast.

He had already prepared the syringe containin the lethal dose he intended to give the pig. .

Since he always cared for the beast during its illness, no one would suspect that he had killed it. No one would know.

The warthog recognized the needle in his hand and tried to crawl away. It hated shots and would usually have to be restrained when it got one. It always viewed him as a mortal enemy even when he was trying to save its life.

And now its hatred of its protector was justified.

Alert that she might still work up a burst of energy, Cranston cautiously approached the pig and, as she shrank from him, he thought, *God created the first beast and here I am killing the last one. But damn, there's nothing to get sentimental about. This filthy pig is ugly, and it would kill me if it weren't so old and sick. Its death is inevitable I'm just making sure that it's also profitable. I'll bet Judas thought along these same lines.*



He plunged the needle into the pig's flank then withdrew it without injecting the poison. "To hell with all of them", he said as he ground the syringe underfoot.

"Damned if I'll be the man who does it. Let 'em close the zoo. Let 'em run the deer with walrus tapes. I'll not be the man,"

And with that he stalked out of the cage and went to the amphitheater. The pig glared at him malevolently as he left.

Shortly before air time, attendants moved the pig from its regular temperature-controlled environment to a clear plastic enclosure on the stage of the amphitheater so that the maximum number of people could witness the historic event.

TV camera units took up the best vantage points and the spectators grumbled and complained as they tried to see around the camera crews. Children squirmed and fretted on their parent's laps as they waited for something significant to happen.

The warthog's ugly form lay heaped in a corner of the pen. Occasionally a shudder caused the gray flesh to quiver. It opened its eyes and the whites of them glared a feverish yellow. It breathed in gasping snorts which couldn't be heard because of the crowd noise.

A striking man in a stylish pink coverall suit trotted to the center of the stage and began checking the microphone. The audience stirred as they recognized Prime Manley, the nation's foremost newscaster. Several people rushed forward for autographs only to be pushed back by the security guards around the stage.

"Look Mommy," a little girl squealed, "The piggy needs a hanky." Puss drained from the pig's snout.



The pig upstaged the famous newsmen by excreting a pile of droppings on the floor.

“Quick, hose that away”, the newscaster demanded.

A camera man objected because water on the floor would reflect too much light back into the camera.

After a heated discussion the director, who did not like his prima-donna news star, decided to leave the pile where it was.

Prime Manley muttered as he stalked back to his cue mark chalked on the floor, “Realism. That’s what they want. That’s what they get. I should have been assigned to the football game anyhow.”

The director remarked to Dr. Cranston, “Another first for the network—two piles of pig shit on the same stage.”

Then, he signaled for the TV coverage to begin.

“Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Prime Manley broadcasting from the amphitheater of the San Diego Zoo bringing you live coverage of a tragic and historic event.

“According to calculations made by Dr. David Cranston, Head Curator here, Winny the Warthog will probably die this afternoon. We will cover events here at the zoo right up until game time, so be sure to stay tuned. I will interview Dr. Cranston right after this important message....”

While the commercial aired, the newscaster adjusted his hair and tie. And as soon as he received his cue, he began the interview.

“Dr. Cranston, would you tell our viewing audience exactly what led up to this sad occasion.”

Dr. Cranston cleared his throat nervously and said, “Well Prime, you could say that man has finally



achieved dominion over the beasts of the field. As you know, the expansion of our cities resulted in the loss of habitat, places where wild animals could live. Some species we deliberately eradicated in order to better human life. Others were destroyed in the biological warfare tactics that prevented nuclear war back in the Twenties. Cows, domestic hogs and sheep, which used to be a major food source, were rendered extinct in this way."

"You mentioned animals as a food source", Manley interrupted "Weren't many animals dangerous and harmful?"

"Certainly they were. Rats alone ate or destroyed millions of tons of human food each year until the Chinese, in a rat killing campaign, developed a rodent virus which killed them all over the world. Unfortunately, in this country, that virus exterminated, not only rats but also beaver, squirrels, rabbits, and prairie dogs. Of course, the animals which depended on rodents in their food chain—hawks, snakes, coyotes, foxes—these soon starved when the rodents died out.

"In other parts of the world such as Africa and South America, industrial development and the subsequent wars destroyed most of their once plentiful animal life. And during the Famine which swept the world after the last war, people even broke into zoos to butcher animals to eat. That's what happened to most of our animals here in San Diego. We once had the biggest wild, animal collection in this country,"

"Dr. Cranston, how will the death of this last beast affect mankind?"

"Not much, I suppose. Now that we have synthetic proteins, there's really not much use for animals as a food source practically speaking. Long ago we killed off all the species valued for sport or



fashion. For years now they have only been curios and of scientific interest. And of course their aesthetic value.”

“Aesthetic value?” the news caster repeated as he looked with ill-disguised disgust at the warthog.

Then he asked, “Are we sure that this is the last beast and could you tell us more about it.”

“Well”, began Dr. Cranston rubbing his face, “We’re sure that all the rodents were wiped out. Then all domestic animals died in the Bio-war— no one’s reported seeing a cat or dog in years and they were once very common. In fact, as far back as 1982, popular science fiction writer Connie Willis predicted the extinction of the world’s cat population; she was right on target.

“As far as other animals went, the Smithsonian Zoological Park in the old capital at D.C. was well guarded during the famine, but the germs used in the war interrupted the breeding cycles so even their collection died off. The Smithsonian’s last animals were two giant pandas brought from China by former president Nixon way back before the war. But both of the pandas died within a few weeks of each other from eating filter tips...”

“Filter tips” the news caster repeated.

“Yes, people would throw cigarette butts to the pandas and the filter tips clogged up their digestive tracts.

“We are sure that Winny is the last beast. She is a female of the genus *Hacrocephalus Aethiopicus*, that simply means ‘big headed pig’. Her species lived in the southern part of Africa and they primarily ate...”

He broke off his talk as the warthog staggered to its feet; it took two faltering steps forward before its front legs buckled and for a few moments it posed there with its tail jutting in the air. Then it fell on its



side and began a .spastic kicking which gradually subsided and the pig lost sphincter control and let loose a stream of urine. It thrashed sluggishly in the yellow pool and then stopped,

Prime Manley pompously intoned, "There you have it, Ladies arid Gentlemen: the death of the world's last beast."

The watching crowd broke into enthusiastic applause.

Dr. Cranston entered the cage and spoke to the pig. "I'm glad I didn't inject you," he declared. "Damn 'em all. It's a shame. But we won, Pig. We won anyhow."

—End—

WARNING DEVICE:
A Horror Story For Today's family



DECEMBER

In the dark silence of Christmas Eve, one package beneath the tree jiggled slightly. The large green bow quivered. The holly-print foil paper rustled as the box vibrated insistently before the sound came.

The blinker bulbs on the tree pulsated with electronic rhythm. Their glow lit the modest living room of the suburban bungalow. Bright chrome handlebars of two new bikes parked in front of an old, sealed-off fireplace reflected the twinkling lights. The intermittent flashes revealed an artful display of toys arranged on the beige carpet; Tinker Toys, baby dolls, a microscope set, which was a bit premature for Wendy but the Brannons felt she was gifted and wanted to encourage her interest in science, a huge Tonka bulldozer earmarked for Jeff's hole in the back yard, a Playschool Noah's Ark for Tootles with two-



by-two wooden animal couples headed up the ramp seeking safety from an earlier Judgment Day. And, for all the children's amusement (more likely for Sam Brannon's own pleasure) a figure-8 slot car racing set—with a wisp of smoke rising from the defective transformer.

In the front bedroom, Shelia Brannon cuddled against her husband and dreamed of driving in Santa's sleigh. They cruised, quiet as a glider, over snow covered fields and housetops, swooping down to deliver treasures and rising again triumphantly after each descent. Santa rode beside her pointing out the sights. She zeroed in on a ghetto apartment building and was pulling to a halt when the lead reindeer crumpled.

Shelia leaped from the sleigh and scrambled to the head of the team. A twisted coil of aluminum TV antenna protruded from the writhing animal's belly. It shrieked in steady wailing agony. "I didn't see it," she cried. "I didn't see it." while Santa shook her shoulder.

It was Sam shaking her and shouting, "Shelia! Honey, wake up; Something's wrong. Get up."

Shelia struggled groggily from their warm, queen-sized bed, with the shriek of the dying reindeer still shrill in her ears.

"What's that god-awful noise?" she said, groping for her robe. She resisted the temptation to dash outside to check the roof for a writhing reindeer impaled on their own TV antenna. But clearly the hideous sound came from her living room.

The two of them padded barefoot down the hall, and Shelia flicked on the living room light. The pungent acid smell of burning electrical wiring met her nostrils.



Sam snatched the transformer plug out of the wall socket and the smoldering metal box soon stopped smoking, but the shriek continued. The gaily wrapped present from Aunt Margaret emitted the sound. Sam ripped the package open—a glittering Home Protection Smoke Alarm—*the ultimate warning device for home safety systems*, according to the label on the box.

Wendy, Jeff, and baby Tootles crowded into the doorway. “Well, Family, Merry Christmas,” Sam said.

It was 4 a.m.

In the profusion of other goodies, the children didn’t even miss the road racing set. They played first with one thing and then another, circling and lighting and moving on, happy as bees sampling a bed of spring flowers. Sam propped the smoke alarm on the mantle by the clock.

By mid-morning, Sam sprawled on an uncluttered corner of the sofa while the children swirled through the joyful debris of Christmas ignoring him. He felt good though exhausted. Shelia came in from the kitchen bearing two steaming mugs of coffee and some fresh-baked raisin buns. She treaded cautiously through the litter of little plastic parts and past the scattered ruins of a tinker toy Ferris wheel and settled beside him, nestling into the hollow of his shoulder. “Looks like we’ll survive Christmas,” she observed.

“I’m glad we skipped church this morning,” he said. “It would have been nice, but just too much on top of everything else. We’ll go Sunday.”

“We have so much to be thankful for,” Shelia said. “If that smoke alarm hadn’t gone off, the whole place could have burned down.”

“I imagine we’d have smelled the smoke or something, but it could have really made a mess.”



“I’m going to call Aunt Margaret and tell her just how handy her gift has been already.”

Shelia called Aunt Margaret, and Aunt Margaret called the TV local news. The incident was mentioned briefly on the 11 o’clock Report which was devoted mainly to the latest Russian intrusion into Poland.

Thursday, Sam’s office was open, and while he was at work, Shelia got out the step ladder and carefully, following the instructions on the box especially the part about checking the batteries, installed the smoke alarm, near the ceiling in the hall and forgot about it—for a while.

JANUARY

“Your municipal Electric Authority regrets to announce....” The card, included in the light bill, went on to explain how OPEC prices for oil had increased another \$50 a barrel and how the permits for a new coal-powered generating plant were being delayed by state and federal clean air regulations. The electric bill was for almost triple the December rate.

Sam slammed the odious document down on the hall table. “We can’t take much more of this,” he exclaimed. “They’d better lighten up. I’ve got to do something.”

“I know,, Honey,” Shelia said, “I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon, and I’ve come up with a few ideas that might help.”

“You want us to go back to kerosene. lamps like Granny used?” he laughed.

“Not quite. Not until the February bill comes in anyway. But there are a few things we can do. for one thing, we can try adding some more insulation to the attic. And perhaps we can cut the thermostat down on the hot water heater except on wash day—I need



hot water then—but we can get along with warm water the rest of the week. And I can hang the clothes out instead of using the dryer. Or if you want me to, I could always go back to work; I'd at least earn enough to cover the light bill."

"Would you want to go back?"

"No. But if we need for me to, I will."

"I think we can handle things without that. But if prices keep going up we might have to take that option or maybe I could get a part time job."

"I'd hate that. I have trouble sleeping unless you're there beside me."

"That's good to know. I kind of like to sleep with you too," he said reaching for her.

"Stop that," she said slapping his hand away. "There's another thing we might do about the electric bill, but I'm not sure I like it...."

"The fireplace?"

"Yes. We could open it up and burn a little wood, but having an open fire in the house would worry me."

The fireplace in their living room had been sealed by some previous owner of the house and the Brannons had never used it.

"It'll be perfectly safe," he assured her, "I can have somebody check out the chimney and flue. It shouldn't cost too much. We won't build any big fire, just enough to knock the chill off the place. That way we can set the thermostat down if we have to—the light bill's getting to be more than the house payment. At least we can cut down on the heating part of the bill. Beats having you hang out wash in the snow. Besides, Aunt Margaret's smoke alarm would warn us in plenty of time if anything goes wrong."



“Well... I’m reluctant about it, but I suppose so. But we can save a little by cleaning out the chimney ourselves. I’ve seen my grandfather do it. I’m not about to get up on the roof, but I can tell you how to go about it. It’s a little messy, but it doesn’t look too hard.

“You mean it doesn’t look too hard from on the ground.”

“Of course that’s what I mean, Silly.”

Saturday morning., Sam propped an aluminum extension ladder against the eaves and climbed to the roof with his equipment. Shelia had to restrain Jeff from accompanying his father.

“Are you sure this is the way your grandfather did it,” he called to the ground.

“I’m sure. You just be careful and don’t fall from there.”

“If I do, you can use the insurance money to pay the electric company.”

“Yes, but what would I do about next month’s bill?” she teased.

Sam crept along the sloop of the roof to the chimney. First, he tied a few feet of rusty chain to a length of rope, lowered it down the chimney, and flailed the inside of the flue.

Then he wrapped a chunk of cinder-block with old rags and lowered that into the opening, scraping it up and down to dislodge ancient, caked-on soot. He peered down the hole with a flashlight but couldn’t really see anything. It looked alright to him.

Back down in the living room, Shelia pried out the fireplace covering. Whoever had sealed it up had constructed a shallow plywood box with knickknack shelves which fit snugly into the opening. It came



out fairly easily and behind it lay the debris of Sam's chimney sweeping operation—soot, ashes, trash, crumbled mortar and the mummified carcass of a long dead squirrel. Shelia cleaned up the mess and vacuumed the hearth.

Then Sam and Shelia drove across town to a flea market where they picked up a set of old brass andirons and a wire mesh screen for a bargain price. They and the children also spent a few hours at a trash dump a few miles from the house where they filled the back of the station wagon with enough wood to last for at least a few nights.

Shelia was in the kitchen fixing supper when Sam first tried to light the fire. The smell of smoke told her that he wasn't being too successful at the job. She went out to the living room where he was on hands and knees before a smoldering heap of wood.

"Did you get a draft started first," she asked.

"I'm not getting a damn thing started," he said.

"Light a roll of newspaper and hold it up inside the chimney. That starts heat going in the right direction to start off with, and the rest of the smoke from the wood will follow it."

"Another thing you learned from your grandfather?"

"Yes, and it works."

"When I was a kid, and we wanted more heat, all we had to do was bang on the radiator pipes. How am I supposed to know all this 'pioneer stuff?'" Sam asked, as he made a paper torch to hold up the flue.

About that time the smoke alarm buzzed because of Sam's initial mistake. "Well, at least we know that thing still works," he said.



That night after the children were bedded down, Sam reclined in his Lazy-boy watching the blaze and the 11 o'clock news. The announcer was telling about a confrontation between the U.S. Aircraft Carrier *Forestal* and an Iranian ship in some place called the Gulf of Uranarn, when Shelia came in from the bedroom. She stripped off her robe. Underneath she wore a sheer white lace negligee. She stood, stretching languidly between him and the fire. The firelight silhouetted her figure through the smooth material. Sam got up from his recliner, flicked off the TV and kissed her. Together they sank to the carpet before the fire.

"We're going to enjoy this fireplace," she breathed. "we're going to enjoy it a lot."

FEBRUARY

"Guess what we saw in school today," Jeff announced proudly. "Sparky, the fire dog, was there. He told us what to do in case there's a big fire."

"The firemen brought their truck, and I got to ring the bell," Wendy said.

"You did not."

"Did too."

"No, you didn't. They wouldn't let us climb on the truck."

"They wouldn't let you little kids, but they let my class climb right up in it, and I got to ring the bell."

Sam stopped the brewing argument saying, "You two shut up and finish your supper."

The family was seated around the table while Shelia served her famous German chocolate cake. She interrupted her serving to rescue Tootle's milk glass from its precarious balance on the edge of the



high chair tray. "What did Smokey tell you to do?" she said.

"His name is Sparky, not Smokey. Smokey's a bear. He only works in the woods. Sparky takes care of city fires," Jeff informed her.

"Well excuse me. What did this wonder dog tell you to do in case of fire," his mother replied.

"He says 'Don't play with matches'. Ever. And he says we got to have a home safety inspection to see if there's old newspapers and oily rags in the attic.. Daddy, do we have an attic?" Jeff said.

"And we need an escape plan—like on *Mission Impossible*," Wendy added, "We'll need a rope ladder. And you have to crawl on the floor 'cause of the smoke goes up so you can't breath air 'cept down low. And if you smoke in bed..."

Jeff broke in, "And I know what to do if your clothes catch fire. You're not supposed to run. What you do is STOP, DROP AND ROLL. That way you don't burn up. (He spoke in capitals to emphasis his superiority of knowledge over his older sister.)

Wendy, not to do outdone, explained, "If you run around, that gives the fire more air, and it burns faster and all burnier. But if you lay down arid roll around on the floor, that smothers it."

Seeing that his sister was gaining preeminence in the conversation, Jeff took an opposite tack. "I'd run jump in a swimming pool," he said.

"We don't have a swimming pool, Silly. And you'd, be all burned up by the time you could run all the way over to the Morriss's."

"Not me. I run fast."

"If you—either of you—ever do catch fire," Sam instructed, "you do just what the firemen said, Stop. Drop. And Roll.."



“Yes Sir,” both children chorused.

That night as Sam and Shelia watched the 11 o'clock news, the announcer reported, “In Chicago six children died in an early morning blaze on the Eastside. Fire officials say an overloaded wood burning stove was responsible for the tragedy. Sub-zero temperature hampered...”

“God, that’s awful,” Shelia said. “Are you sure this fire place is OK?”

“It checks out perfectly. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s fine.”

The tv announcer went on to tell about renewed tension in the middle East, the Administration’s formal protest to the UN over Soviet actions in Poland, and the plummeting Dow-Jones average. After the weather report—clear and colder, record lows in the Cotton Belt—Shelia clicked off the set and said, “You know, it might be a good idea for us to teach the kids a home fire drill. I don’t think we’ll ever have any problem but, who knows, lightening could strike this place. And with their bedrooms separated from ours the way they are, it couldn’t hurt for all of us to have some kind of a plan.”

“I think you worry about it too much, but you’re right. It would be a good idea for us to work out something so they’ll know what to do. There’s no telling what could happen.”

“Even the thought of fire scares me. We want to do all we can to protect the kids. I’m going on in and get a scratch pad to work on. Make sure that thing’s safe before you come to bed.

Hours later, the smoke alarm’s shriek woke the family again.



Sam had closed the damper too much, so the smoke backed up into the house and triggered the alarm. "It scared me half to death," Jeffery said, "I didn't know what to do when I heard that thing."

After supper the following night, Sam explained to his family what to do.

"This is our escape plan. When you hear the smoke alarm, or if you wake up smelling smoke, or if you see fire in our house, the first thing you do is yell **Fire. Fire.** Two times just as loud as you can. Let's try that. Come on everybody yell **Fire! Fire!** All together now."

The family dutifully yelled, **Fire! Fire!** and the children compulsively giggled at the funny nature of what they were doing.

"Now," Sam continued, "You know that smoke hangs in the air and that the good air will be down near the floor. So if there's a lot of smoke we have to crawl out. Go to the door closest to where you are. Don't stop to get dressed and don't carry anything with you—not even one of your toys. We can always buy new toys."

"Wendy, I've loosened the screen on your window. You'll have to help Tootles out of her crib. You can stand on the toy chest and climb out the window. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Jeff, you either go out the back door or go into the girl's room. Your mother or I will either come down the hall to meet you or we'll go out the front door and meet you at the window. But don't wait for us to come get you. Yell **Fire! Fire!** Then get outside at once. Don't be scared, but get out as fast as you can."

"Where will Mama be," Wendy asked.



Sheila said, "If I'm not the one to meet you at the window, I'll be across the street on Mrs. Natter's carport. I'll call the fire department and meet you there. As soon as you get out of the house, go across the street to Mrs. Natter's carport. Don't go anywhere else. And if you ever have to get out, don't wait for anybody else. Our whole family will meet over there. Does everybody understand?"

"Sure we do," Jeff said. "That's easy. But when do we get to climb down a rope ladder? I wish we lived in a two-story house."

"Well, we don't. Now let's have a quiz about it. What do you carry with you?"

"Nothing."

"How many times do you yell fire?"

"Two," said Jeff. "Twice," said Wendy.

"Right. How where do we meet?"

"Mrs. Natter's carport."

"How do you get out?"

"Crawl out the back door or out Wendy's window," Jeff said,

"I just climb out the window with Tootles," Wendy said.

"And what do you do if your clothes were to catch fire?"

"STOP, DROP AND ROLL," the children shouted.

"Good. You know just what to do. Now I want us all to practice getting out. Go into your rooms and when I yell Fire! Fire! I want you all to act just like it was real. This is like a fire drill at school. OK?"

"Do we go over to old lady Natter's," Jeff asked.



"No. You do not go to Mrs. Natter's this time. Just go to our own front gate. Understand?"

The fire drill was a roaring success accompanied by much giggling and exaggerated crawling antics. "I feel like a fool doing this," Shelia said as she crawled down the hall. "But I'd feel worse if we hadn't prepared and something happened."

"You feel fine to me," Sam said as he reached forward to pat her up-thrust rump.

"Stop that," she said smiling over her shoulder. "I'll put out your fire later."

But she didn't; the late news was too depressing; the arms race with China and North Korea escalated. Inflation spiraled. Troop build-ups in Europe, new Soviet missies in Cuba.

After seeing the news, there was no fire in either of them to be put out.

"I don't think I'll ever watch the news again," Sam said. "It always makes me want to move to Montana. But about the time I think of moving someplace like that, they report that they have built missile silos out there which can only be knocked out by a direct hit so you know that's no safer than this place is"

They went to bed.

MARCH

Brightness and concussion from the first explosion, 23 miles away, woke the family. Heat from the blast blistered the paint off the west wall of the house and started the roof smoldering. The smoke alarm buzzed and wailed and twittered in a frenzy.

I shut the damper, Sam thought as he automatically felt for his slippers. He only found one, — *Must be something stopping up the chimney.* Aloud he said calmly, "Honey, run for Old Lady



Netter's. Call the fire department from there. I'll get the kids out."

"Tootles! I'm going for Tootles," she said.

"I'll get her. Do like I told you," he ordered. "Get out the front window. Get out now. It'll be OK. Just like we rehearsed it."

As Shelia pushed the screen out of the frame, she paused and snatched up a planter of African violets to take from the fire with her. It seemed terribly important to save those house plants. Then she lunged into the azalea bushes which grew beneath the bedroom window and started running. Midway across the street she halted abruptly and stood staring around her. Then she began to pluck leaves from the house plant cradled in her arm... and slowly eat them.

Still clutching his lone slipper in his hand, Sam scampered down the hall on hands and knees toward the children's rooms. Smoke choked him and heat singed the hair off his head and arms. High in the murk above him the smoke alarm squealed. He shoved open the door to the girls' room and struggled to the crib.

The baby was gone. Wendy's bed. was also empty. Hot air whooshed in the open window sweeping upward to feed the flaming roof.

"Good. It paid off—the drill," he muttered as he started through the window himself. Who'd have thought it would burn so quick. I'm gonna sue that damn alarm company. It ought to have gone off before things got this far. Oh hell!" He pulled up short. "I have to check Jeff's room."

Gulping air from the stream pushing through the window, he prepared to duck back inside, but he heard Shelia screaming his name. "Come on. Come on out," she cried. She was standing in the side yard



by the window. She continued to cradle the house plant in her nook of her arm. "Jeff?" he called.

"They're all outside. But everything's on fire. I came back for you. Come on! Come on!"

He toppled through the window ripping his pajama legs and staggered to his wife as he coughed and spit mucous. She supported him as they struggled toward the front lawn.

The children huddled by the front gate whining above the roar of the flames. Wendy hugged the baby and sobbed, "I forgot to yell fire, fire. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry I forgot. I'm sorry.. I'm sorry."

"Thank God, we're all safe," Sam said. "We've lost everything. But we all made it out. Did you call the fire department? They're taking their time about getting here. We could have died in there."

"Sam, look around us," his wife said gently.

Across the street Mrs. Natter's house also burned.

And the oak tree on the corner.

And the houses up and down the block flamed and crackled and danced. The roof of the Morris's house had already caved in. A person with blazing hair ran in circles on a lawn down the street.

"Sparks from my fireplace?" Sam wondered, "Sparks? How could my sparks...?"

"What should we do, Daddy," Jeff asked. "Should we stop, drop and roll?"

Inside, the heat cracked the picture tube on the warning device. The smoke alarm melted with a squeak.

Outside, Sam Brannon stared numbly at his family as the second of six missies arched down toward the city.



John W. Cowart

—End—

GRAVEDIGGER'S CHRISTMAS ¹



A pleasant surprise awaited me at the cemetery.

But I didn't know about it.

I felt depressed and frustrated as I drove to work on Christmas Eve morning. I wanted to give my three children more presents than I could afford. Their grandparents on both sides were lavishing goodies on our kids, but I only had a few dime-store trinkets and

¹ Nonfiction. This really happened to my family. As I recall it was during Christmas, 1976.



some primitive wooden toys I'd made by following the instructions in a library book.

I parked the car and someone yelled, "Hey, John, get your fat tail over here and look at this." I walked up the hill to the shed where we reported to work each morning.

This shed is a rickety, corrugated tin lean-to screened from the beautiful cemetery grounds by thick clumps of bamboo.

It's built over—and supported by—the chimney of an old brick bar-b-que pit where the labor force cooks lunch. Usually tin cans, scraps of aluminum foil wrapping, crushed paper sacks and empty bottles litter the shed's dirt floor, but, during the night, some unknown benefactor had raked the place out, cleaned the fireplace, moved in a table, and decorated a small Christmas tree trimmed with gold styrofoam balls, blue ribbons, and icicles.

Beneath the tree lay 28 individually wrapped and tagged presents, one for each of us on the labor crew.

An enormous Christmas card propped against the chimney provided the master touch—a note from Santa written in red felt-tipped pen said, "Merry Christmas this year. But if you guys don't clean out this #*&!! fireplace, I ain't coming here no more!"

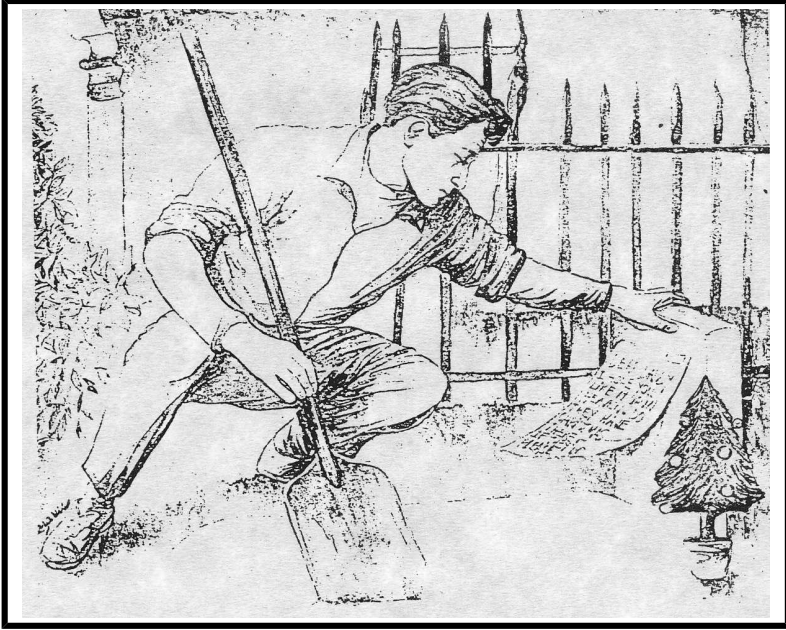
With grins on our faces, we tore into our presents. Each gift contained a candy cane, two cigars, a candy bar, and a few comic books which told various Bible stories. Laughter filled the shed as we speculated on the origin of these gifts. Several of the men remarked that this was the first real Christmas present they'd received in years. Smokers traded off candy for extra cigars, and illiterates puzzled over the simple words of the comics. We joked and teased each other as the supervisor assigned our duties for the day; then we cheered when he announced that the last funeral to be serviced would



be at 1 o'clock and we could have the rest of the day off. He teamed me with a man I thought of as a degenerate old wino, Harry Gilby. We were to serve a 10 o'clock burial, then edge stones in Section 18 till the one at 1 o'clock.

After the early funeral, Harry and I took a break before starting over to Section 18. We lounged against a fence puffing our gift cigars and looking out over the cemetery.

For over 100 years, families have erected monuments to their dead in this Florida cemetery. Gigantic angels hover on marble wings above some tombs; granite obelisks tower over others. Tiny stone lambs curl asleep atop the graves of children. Fine cast bronze markers lay flat over other resting places. And in honor of the season, thousands of poinsettias, holly wreaths, or miniature Christmas trees decorate the cemetery blending with the natural solemn beauty of the grounds. I noticed that streams of morning sunlight slanted through the branches of one ancient oak making a silver lattice-work silhouette out of the trailing beards of Spanish Moss.



A few yards away from us something fluttered against the flat bronze marker of a recent grave.

Curious, Harry and I strolled over to see what it was—a letter from a child scotch-taped to the tombstone: “Dear Daddy, I hope you like it up in Heaven. Do they have Christmas there? If they do, get me a big teddy bear and a ...” Rain had faded the rest.

The letter brought back to mind my own financial problems; how could I give good gifts to my children with this miserable minimum-wage job? I wondered why the Lord had put me in such sad straits—or was it my own mismanagement of opportunities that reduced me to grave digging?

Harry scrutinized the child’s letter; then said, “Little kids. Death’s rough on ‘em; life’s rough on ‘em—Look here, John. I wants to ask you about something. There’s this girl, see. She lives upstairs at the place I stay at. She’s got this little boy, see. And she don’t have nothing for him, see. She’s hooked on the stuff and I doubt if she even really knowed Christmas was coming till this



morning. She was gonna go down to the Welfare or someplace and get him a present, but she's been high and forgot. Then she comes and tells me this morning, but I ain't got nothing but bus fare to get to work. I mean, there's nothing for this kid. What with his mama out peddling her ass or high all the time, there ain't never gonna be nothing for him. What I was wondering—you got kids—was if you might have some li'll old something you was tending to give yours that you could slip me for him? I'm gonna give him these little comic books from this morning, but that ain't no toy. What's you say?"

I felt indignant.

If Harry were so concerned, why hadn't he saved up a few dollars to buy the kid a present instead of drinking up his paycheck? Doesn't the government have programs to help out people like her? Or the churches? Why should I share the little bit I had for my kids? After all, this unknown street walker had chosen her own lifestyle; let her live it. If she could buy dope, she could...

Even as I reasoned, I recalled the words of Jesus who said nothing about the deserving poor but who spoke of "the least of these my brethren."

Why is it that the words of the Bible come into my mind at the most inconvenient times?

Anyhow, I looked at the letter on the grave marker—at least my kids have a father who cares—then hesitatingly, I said, "Well, Harry,. I don't know what we can do. But we'll work something out. How old is this kid anyhow?"

"I don't know, 'bout three or four, maybe five, I reckon."

After the rest of the crew left for the day, Harry and I took the little Christmas tree from the tin shed and stuffed it in the back of my car. We'd decided to fix that



kid up in style. (I justified this theft by thinking somebody would just burn the tree in the fireplace after the holiday anyway). And we drove to my house.

We pulled down the box of toys squirreled away out of my kids reach in the top of the closet. Then I began the painful process of deciding which plastic trinkets to give up.

I wanted more for my kids, not less. I could think of good reasons to keep each thing: Donald needs this truck for his sand pile in the back yard; save that dot-to-dot book because Jennifer is just learning her numbers; but I bought this cute pull-toy especially for Eve Mercy. Slowly, reluctantly, I laid aside treasures to go.

Virginia, my wife, was out grocery shopping with our kids when Harry and I arrived at the house, but now she walked in the door to find me and a man she'd never seen before decimating her children's presents.

"There is need," she asked. I nodded, and she herded our children into the bedroom so they couldn't see their presents. Then she returned and began helping us select stuff without question.

Although I took it for granted, Harry was amazed at her reaction and enthusiastically told her about the situation. She said, "They'll need something for dinner. I've just come from the market and I've got a canned ham; that'll be just the thing." She rushed out to the kitchen to pack up some groceries.

I was beginning to feel good about what was happening. I snatched down some foil paper and began to wrap a little red fire engine.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," Harry said.

"Why in the world not," I demanded. "We want to fix up the best Christmas we can for this kid. He ought to have some stuff wrapped."



“Yeah, But you doin’ too much to do good, see what I mean. I mean we takes her a tree that’s all decorated and a ham that’s most already cooked and if the presents is already wrapped... then what’s for her to do for her own kid? She needs to do some of the fixen or it just ain’t hers— and she wants to give the boy something. That’s what this is all about, ain’t it?”

I felt ashamed because I suddenly recognized this woman’s desire to give good gifts to her child as the same yearning I felt about giving my three more than I could. It feels terrible not to be able to give at Christmas time. Everyone wants to be a giver; it makes you feel important. “What should we do?” I asked Harry.

“Let’s just put the paper and ribbons in the bag of stuff and let her wrap the things. A mama needs something to busy her on Christmas Eve. And this gal needs to feel like a mama.”

After we had tucked away their own presents, Ginny called our kids out and briefly told them about the little boy who wouldn’t have a Christmas unless we shared. Then we bowed around our glittering tree and she led a prayer for this child and his mother.

Looking at the groceries and toys packed to go, I was surprised at how much share-able stuff our family had. God always sees to it that we have everything we actually need and enough to share with those who don’t—why, we aren’t poor at all!

Jennifer, our seven-year-old, helped Harry and me load the stuff in the car beside the little tree. She clamored to go along. Thoughts of Christmas excited her to a near frenzy. I relented and let her go with us.

Following Harry’s directions, I wove through streets more and more desolate. We parked at the curb behind the rusted out hulk of an old Ford sitting on wheelless axles.



Harry carried the tree; Jennifer, the bag of toys; and I followed with the groceries. It was a huge, old Victorian home chopped up into one-room apartments. There was something nasty—I think it may have been a pig's skull—in the garbage littering the front yard.

We went in. Things scudded inside the walls. No bulbs in the light fixtures on the stairway. Strips of cardboard nailed over windows. Foreign music blared from somewhere. Smells reeked in the darkness. I felt uncomfortable—afraid—apprehensive—on guard. The folks who have to live here must feel that way all the time.

The woman, Sharon, disappointed me.

I guess because she looked normal. I'd expected a bombed-out, glassy-eyed zombie, or a brazen, vulgar hussy. But this was the woman in line beside you at the supermarket, the woman standing at the bus stop, the woman across the aisle in church—just a pleasant-looking normal young woman.

She greeted us with warmth and delight. She oohed and aahed over the little tree. She woke up her little boy, Kevin, to show him its wonder. She apologized for not having coffee to offer us.

"How'd you find me," she exclaimed. "I went down to the Salvation Army place, but I couldn't find the address. I didn't even fill out no application. Harry, this is all your doing!"

Harry beamed with pride and accepted all the credit.

"Oh, I got to get busy wrappen and fixen," she said. Then she paused in her excitement. "Look here Mister," she addressed me. "There's this girl, Corinthia—lives over across the way. She's got a baby boy too. Suppose you folks at the Army can get some stuff for he--they is like we was--won't have nothing tomorrow."

Harry said, “He cain’t give out no more stuff like that. He ain’t from the Army or the Welfare, Sharon. He’s just another guy, works at the cemetery like me.”

When this information soaked in, Sharon did something which amazed me.



She spread out the goodies on her kitchen table and began to divide them into two equal piles. Finished, she loaded one pile back into the bag and shoved it over to Harry. “I cain’t do nothing about a Christmas tree,” she said, “You cain’t give what you ain’t got. But I wants you to take this here over to Corinthia’s place—don’t you tell her where it come from. She and that baby ought to have a Christmas too.”

Jennifer and I slipped out while Sharon gave Harry directions to Corinthia’s place. I had climbed those steps feeling like I was a 300-pound male Mother Teresa,



swooping in to bless the poor heathen. I went down humbled. Old wino Harry knew more about giving with dignity than I did. My wife gave without hesitation, without question. The streetwalker addict Sharon gave more generously—two equal piles.

Do I need to tell you about our own Christmas Day?

The grandparents outdid themselves. Uncles sent in boxes of stuff. Our landlady came bearing gifts. Two-thirds of the gross national product of Taiwan flooded our living room. God made sure my kids were provided for. We lacked nothing—but then, when you come to think of it, His children never do.

—End—



**I know the plans I have for you,
says the Lord,
They are plans for good and not for evil,
To give you a hope — and a
future.**

— Jeremiah 29:11

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