

**Doors to Perdition**

**A Short Story Collection on the Dark Side**

**by**

**J B Bergstad**

**Smashwords Edition**

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### [Saturday Poker](#)

#### Macapa, Brazil

Saturday - July 10, 1971

3:38 a.m.

"So, bottom line, you don't know a damn thing ... right?" Jesse Bryson threw his head back and blew a lung-full of air. His hand dropped between his thighs, the phone receiver dangling from limp fingers. From the phone's earpiece, the irritating whine of his Long Beach contact's voice reminded Bryson of a frightened chicken's squawk. He raised the receiver to his ear. "Shut up," he snapped. "Can the bullshit. How much I pay you, huh, how much every month?"

An electronic crackle and hiss of a long distance line indicated no answer from his contact. "I asked you something, DC?" Bryson said.

DC's response was soft and sullen. "I'm not a dunce you can yell at anytime you feel like it, Jess."

Sunrise was hours away, but Bryson's apartment sweltered in wet heat. Sweat rolled out of his hair and through his eyebrows. He looked at the cluttered kitchen table for something to wipe away the moisture. A balled paper towel beside his dinner plate served the purpose. Bryson grabbed it and mopped rivulets of salty perspiration from his eyes. "You're fucking lucky I'm not in Long Beach," Bryson growled. "I pay you five big ones a month and all I ask you to do is buy a few papers and check them out. If the Feds are active on my case, you keep me posted. That's all I ask, right?"

"I'm human, man," DC said, "I missed the article. I swear if I looked at the L.A. Times once, I looked at it four times. I just missed it, okay?"

"No," Bryson said, "it ain't fucking okay. Every month for two years it's been cool, according to you. Now, outta the blue, I happen across a week old copy of the Times and I see it ain't cool. The F.B. fucking I. is still pushing the investigation. How could you miss an article with a headline like this? Are you fucking blind?"

Bryson didn't wait for an answer he slammed the receiver into the cradle. Each time he blinked, dull talons of fatigue scratched at his eyeballs. Gotta get some sleep, he thought. The iron chair legs screeched on the tile floor as he pushed away from the table and stood. He thought of the bottle of Cachaca cooling in the refrigerator.

*Refrigerator, that's a laugh. The freezer compartment's the only thing that keeps anything cold.*

He jerked on the old ColdSpot's door and peered into the freezer compartment. Inside the frosted cubicle a pint of Cachaca and three bottles of Brahma Beer lay side by side. He held the pint bottle up to the light. Through the condensation he could see half its contents remained. He held the cool glass container to his forehead and searched for a glass or cup amid the clutter of the kitchen counter top. He found a plastic soft drink cup crusted with something he couldn't remember and rinsed it under the kitchen faucet.

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**Saturday - July 10, 1971**

**Macapa, Brazil**

**11:32 a.m.**

In the dream, Bryson gulped and choked in search of a breath of air. He coughed, rolled over and opened his eyes. Heat and its attendant humidity smothered his face like a hot, wet pillow. He groaned and rolled his legs off the side of the bed.

Head cradled in heavy hands, he massaged his temples. His fingertips felt hot on his skin, burning like too much Tabasco on his tongue. Small rivulets of sweat tickled their way through his long, gray-dappled hair. Beads of perspiration felt like tiny centipedes scampering down the sides of his neck. Bryson noticed a faint buzz of insects circling his head. The high-pitched whine of a mosquito dive-bombed his ear. He waved the air and glared at the old GE window cooler his landlord called an air conditioner. Silent, it had quit sometime during the night and his apartment was like the inside of a damp oven. "Shit," he said and struggled upright, rolling his shoulders, straightening his back.

Bryson measured six-two when he carried himself erect and proud. He couldn't remember the last time he stood erect or proud ... that was in another life. His proud days were long gone. He'd thrown them away like pieces of rotten trash. Now, as he moved about, his head hung from hunched shoulders and he appeared no taller than five-ten.

He hobbled around the end of the bed. The hobble eased into a shuffle as his knees loosened up and he entered the kitchen. At the sink, he held his head under the faucet. The first splash of tepid water felt cold on his skin, but it soon turned warm. His head hammered like an old diesel engine with a bent pushrod ... he needed a drink.

In the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, Bryson found three bottles of Brahma. He said his thanks to the booze god in a sigh and went in search of a bottle opener.

"I used the Goddamn thing ..." He couldn't remember the last time he used it. He muttered curses and slammed one kitchen drawer after another. In desperation he turned to the kitchen table, its surface cluttered with salt and peppershakers, mustard and Tabasco bottles, cups, plastic glasses and a plate smeared with congealed fried egg. A crumpled month old L.A. Times added to the chaos. Random pages of the paper had scattered on the floor and he remembered his early morning call to Long Beach.

Bryson peered at a fold tucked under the edge of a plate. The bold lead of a two-column story at the bottom of the page was still there:

#### **FOURTH MAN SOUGHT IN SIX-YEAR-OLD UNITED TRUST BANK ROBBERY.**

He swept the folded paper to the floor, vowing to kill DC in payment for his sloppy work. The bottle opener clattered on the filthy kitchen tiles.

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The last drop from the last bottle of Brahma teased his tongue. Bryson dropped the empty on the table. "That's all," he said," a boozy smile tweaking his bearded jowls. A large drop of perspiration gathered at the tip of his nose, dangled there a moment and dropped in his lap. Sweat rolled off his forehead into his eyes ... stinging. Knuckling his wet eye sockets only exacerbated the irritation and he switched to the tail of his tee shirt, trying in a vain attempt to dry his face.

The tick-tock of a Felix the Cat clock hanging above the kitchen window sounded like the beat of a bongo drum on his eardrums. The tail and eyes of the cat clock moved back and forth marking the seconds of his life as they crawled by. The right eye and tail still worked, but the cat's left eye was stationary and cocked down, seemingly staring at the flaking paint that corroded the cat clock's wide grin.

Bryson pushed up from the table and crossed the room. "What's with the fucking air conditioner?" he muttered, stopping in the doorway of the bedroom. The rust covered swamp cooler hung in the window frame. "Gaspar, you lazy bastard," he shouted, "it's your fault, you son-of-a-bitch. You don't fix nothing right."

He glanced back at the mess on the kitchen table and the three empty Brahma bottles. He didn't remember drinking the beer. He shuffled back to the table and looked again at the headline of the folded paper on the floor.

"They're at it again ... will they ever stop?" he murmured. "How long before you bastards put it to rest ... I'm so tired ... so Goddamn tired."

Rage fought its way through his alcoholic fog. He threw open the door of his apartment. No sound disturbed the stillness of the day, a quiet born of heat and moisture laden air. Bryson staggered out onto the landing and yelled, "Gaspar .... Gaspar, you lazy bastard, get your ass up here. Fix this Goddamn piece of shit you call an air cooler. Gaspar? You hear me? Don't make

me come down there and get you, Goddamnit."

A coughing fit seized him. He ran out of breath, wheezed and bent forward resting his hands on his knees, gasping in the wet air. The world spun counter clockwise. He swayed, blinked and scuttled back into the apartment. He tried to close the door, but his fingers slipped and he didn't bother to look back. Instead, he wobbled on weakening legs toward the kitchen sink... Water... He needed water.

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3

**Saturday Evening - July 10, 1971**

**Macapa, Brazil**

**8:48 p.m.**

Bryson opened his eyes to a view of his armpit. Slobber from his gaping mouth mixed with the grime covering the kitchen floor tiles, he groaned. His stomach rolled and the smell made him look for vomit in the filth where he lay. Up on all fours, he spat salty pieces of grit and felt his tongue stick to his mouth. The copper taste of dried blood coated his lips.

He struggled to his feet using a nearby chair and his first coherent thought was of alcohol. He leaned on the refrigerator and opened the freezer compartment...empty.

"There were three bottles left," he whispered, staring at the empty chamber. He slammed the refrigerator door and a wave of nausea hit him in the gut like a doubled fist. He shook his head and his eyeballs fell out ... at least that's the way it felt.

Bryson focused on the window over the sink, a dark rectangle stared back at him. A moth beat against the screen and the burring of the cicadas sounded like a snap of electricity surging in the power lines.

*What the hell time is it?*

He could hear a television in the next apartment. A voice babbled in Portuguese, a language he barely understood or spoke. The faint smell of human waste wafted on the air. Head like a cotton ball he struggled to the toilet and checked the bowl ... empty. His head began to clear and with clarity came pain ... dull throbbing pain.

*It won't be long before the shakes start. The last thing I want is go out. It's too fucking hot.* He knew from many nights of experience he was going to be sick. His head throbbed, keeping time with his heartbeat. He pawed through the pantry thinking, maybe there's a bottle I forgot. Maybe ... maybe ....

Outside, giant hands of heat and humidity crushed the sounds of the night. He leaned over the kitchen sink and a new fist of nausea exploded in his gut. His body shook as he waited for the vile feeling to pass. He took a breath, and like mountaintop mists chased by the sun, a memory of the late morning drifted back to him through the haze of his hangover.

He raised his head and peered out at the night. Off to the northeast, the lights of Macapa winked in a shimmer of heat waves. The jangling clank of the swamp cooler's fan intruded on

his thoughts. More of the morning hours screwed into his consciousness, as if invisible fingers adjusted the focus on his brain. He'd given in to his temper, which rose in direct relation to the superheated atmosphere of the apartment. Bryson remembered cursing the dead cooler and screaming Gaspar's name. The tingling black spots that pierced his eyes like hot arrows, all of it came back. He remembered stumbling into the apartment, but after that, he couldn't remember a thing until he woke, face down on the kitchen floor. Muted night sounds took on the mantle of voices ... they whispered: *Anniversary ... it's the anniversary....*

Bryson threw up in the sink.

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Cupped hands filled with water, Bryson sloshed at his face and neck. He straightened and a breath of wind sighed over his skin chilling the water running in rills through his beard. The cooling water dripped through the matted, curling hair and onto his chest.

Gaspar must've come while I was out and the bastard let me lay in the filth.

Bryson threw more water on his face.

*I should be left on the floor in the dirt. I deserve it.*

"At least you got the fucking cooler working, you asshole," he mumbled.

There's no way he could manage another thirty minutes without alcohol and he knew it. The shakes were working their way from his empty stomach to his fingertips. Bryson pushed off the sink and shuffled into the bedroom. The sound of the old swamp cooler's clanking fan was louder, but the room was cooler and he grinned. "That's what I'm talking about, Gaspar you prick," he whispered.

Bryson opened the closet and a calendar thumbtacked to the back of the door swung left to right. He'd circled Saturday, July 10th, in red. Above the calendar a six by nine picture was held in place by another thumbtack. His face-hardened in pain and his eyes filled. Hot tears ran squiggled paths following the trails blazed by the water he'd used on his face moments earlier.

The photograph showed a small, smiling woman wearing black jeans and a bright red blouse with white trim. Her blond hair was short and her laughing eyes matched the big smile on her lips. Two girls stood to their mother's right dressed in red, black and white cheerleader outfits, one as tall as the woman, the other a head shorter. On the left two boys stood decked out in red, black and white football regalia, one a head taller than his mother, the other a close second. All four kids looked as if they'd just participated in and won the 1969 Rose Bowl.

Bryson ignored the tears flowing through his beard. He caressed each face in the photograph with a light touch. "I'm sorry," he whispered, "so sorry." His eyes dropped to the calendar and the circled date. A tight smile thinned his lips.

*Couldn't stay home if I wanted, could I? Memories pulled a sob from his throat. Gotta celebrate the good fortune I brought to the family. Don't I, honey?*

He pushed the closet door back against the wall. The cooler air moved over his face drying his tears. He stepped into the closet, pushed his clothes to one side and dropped on his knees. Bryson pulled on a section of wainscoting at the back of the closet and the panel came away from the plaster exposing a hollow in the wall. He pulled one of two suitcases from the hiding place and popped the locks. Inside were stacks of banded twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar bills. Bryson loaded a packet of each in his pockets.

Seven hundred, fifty-four thousand, eight hundred dollars remained of the money he and three Saturday poker buddies, Todd Lowenstein, Brad Romanowski, and DeJohn Plume, took in

the 1968 robbery of The United Trust Bank of Southern California, Bryson's former employer.

The four men had money problems ranging from possible loss of a home to overdue credit card bills and car payments. At a Saturday night poker game, Bryson jokingly suggested they rob his former bank employer and solve all their money worries at one time. The more they talked, drank and joked, the more plausible the idea seemed, at least to Bryson.

Over several weeks, he thought more about the bank and their procedures. He knew his way around them like he knew his way around his backyard. While enrolled in a bank officers training program, the protocols were drilled into him until they became second nature. The more he thought of pulling off the robbery, the more plausible it sounded. Six weeks later, as Bryson dealt the last poker hand of the night, he outlined his thinking. The idea he had suggested as a joke turned into a serious proposal. It didn't take much to convince his friends they had a shot.

"We're four middle-class guys without police records," Bryson said. "Hell, most of us don't even have a traffic ticket on our record. I'm telling you we can pull this off clean."

"What are we gonna do if some hero don't want to cooperate?" DeJohn asked.

"Yeah," Lowenstein said. "You pull shit like this you got to be ready to deal with resistance."

"We'll wear ski masks, use camouflage paint around our eyes and mouth, it'll look intimidating and that's the key, intimidation from the start," Bryson said. "We'll carry guns. I got that sawed-off that looks mean as hell. If an employee balks, smack them. A nose bleed or cut mouth will make the rest fall in line quick."

"You make it sound easy, Jesse," Romanowski said, "but shit happens. I couldn't shoot nobody."

"Listen guys. I've been through their training programs," Bryson said. "One of the first rules they teach in their orientation class is what to do in the event of a robbery. They teach employees not to be heroes and to follow the robber's demands to the letter. Don't risk life or injury unnecessarily, the money is insured. If we follow this plan I've laid out, we'll get the money we need with little or no risk to us or the bank employees ... trust me, guys, I know what I'm talking about."

The foolproof plan he envisioned went bad from the start. The first sign of trouble came in the form of the amount of money they found in the vault. More than three quarters of a million dollars was bagged and tagged, a lot more cash than Bryson expected. From the manager, he learned the branch had received a large money shipment the day before. Three new companies had opened manufacturing facilities in the area since his employment three years earlier. The money was shipped in every other Thursday afternoon. After cashing payroll checks on Friday and Saturday, excess cash was shipped out Monday morning.

Bryson didn't check on new businesses opened in the area. He watched armored car deliveries for a month, but failed to pay close attention to details, like the size and number of moneybags delivered on bi-weekly Thursday afternoons.

The next surprise was the arrival of a bank guard. During Bryson's tenure with United Trust, there was no need for guards. The armed private security cop let himself in with a key. Taken by surprise, Todd Lowenstein shot the man as he went for his holstered gun. The roar of Lowenstein's magnum set off a screaming fit by a female bank employee. Bryson reacted reflexively, clubbing the woman with the pistol gripped riot gun he carried.

After dragging the moneybags from the vault and collecting the loose cash, Bryson's "gang" locked the bank employees in the safe, loaded their stolen van and drove away. A little over a mile from the bank, they parked the van behind an abandoned strip mall, transferred the money

to Bryson's station wagon and covered the bags with blankets and his kid's detritus brought along for the occasion. They quickly doused the inside of the van with gasoline, tossed a burning rag inside and headed back to Long Beach.

"Foolproof, huh?" DeJohn said as they cruised south on the Long Beach freeway. "Nobody get's hurt. Ain't that what you said, Jesse?"

"That's what I said, DJ," Bryson shouted. "We took our chances and it's done so fuck off."

A week following the robbery the woman Bryson clubbed was reported in a coma with severe brain damage. At the following Saturday poker game, Bryson lightened the mood of the group by announcing they'd hit the jackpot. Their take totaled seven hundred and ninety thousand dollars in cash.

Before the game broke up that night trouble, spurred by greed, had already begun. Arguments over who got how much and when escalated into shouting matches. Bills needed to be paid, some complained. Back house payments had to be caught up or their home would be foreclosed. Why did they risk their lives and freedom if they couldn't spend the money they needed?

Bryson had money problems as critical as the others, but he reminded each man of the agreements made before the robbery took place. Everyone agreed to accept small amounts and keep a low profile, giving off no indications of sudden wealth. No one, however, wanted to listen to Bryson's reminders of their pledge to each other.

A few meetings later, the shouting turned into pushing and shoving until punches were exchanged. DeJohn Plume was killed when a punch, landed by Romanowski, slammed him against the tarpaper and two by four wall of his cluttered garage. A heavy fire axe Plume had hung on a couple of nails was jarred loose. It fell and its sharp blade cleaved the skull of the former firefighter.

At Plume's funeral, Lowenstein, guilt-ridden over the murder of the guard, threatened to turn himself in, but Bryson talked him out of it, promising a better solution. "Give me a little time. Hold off, okay?"

Lowenstein nodded his agreement, but walked away shaking his head.

Fueled by alcohol, Romanowski fell into a deep depression over the freak accidental death of DeJohn Plume. Two weeks following Plume's funeral, Bryson received a hysterical call from Brad Romanowski's wife. "I can't wake him up, Jesse. He's so cold, I think he's dead," she said, sobbing into the phone.

In the space of a month the Bryson and Lowenstein families attended two funerals and this time Lowenstein wouldn't be denied. He pulled Bryson aside during the wake held at the Romanowski home. "We need to talk, Jesse," Lowenstein said.

"If this is about turning yourself in for ...."

"That's exactly what it's about," Lowenstein said, cutting Bryson off. "I'm going to do it with or without your blessing, but I'll warn you, Jesse, it will be to your advantage to hear me out."

A meeting the following night was arranged at the isolated field where their Little League organization had built three diamonds and played their season games.

"I can't live with this guilt any longer. It's just Darlene and me. I want you to give her my split of the money. Make it a steady income deal if you want I don't care. In return, I'll confess to the plan and the robbery along with Plume and Romanowski. I won't mention your name at all."

"You haven't been yourself since the deal went down," Bryson said. "Darlene must've noticed your attitude. What have you told her?"

"You're right. She knew something was wrong ... bad wrong," Lowenstein said, "but I didn't



tell her anything important. I told her losing the house was on my mind and the deaths of two of my best friends. That's it ... that's what I told her. I'll keep you out of it, Jesse, I swear I will, but you've got to promise to take care of Darlene and the Plumes and Romanowskis. Give me your promise in writing and I'll take the fall for all of us. You'll be clear, okay?"

"I understand, Todd," Bryson had said. "I've got a pad and pen in the car. I'll write out the agreement and we'll both sign it."

"Thanks, Jesse. You don't know what this means to me."

Bryson had nodded and walked to his car. When he returned with the pad, he swung the sawed-off shotgun from behind his leg and blew Todd Lowenstein in half. The adhesive that held them together from childhood through more than twenty-five years of ups and downs had disintegrated. Hate, betrayal and Bryson were all that remained of the so called "foolproof bank robbery."

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Bryson came back from his memories with a pounding headache. He ran a hand over the banded packs of bills before closing the suitcase and returning it to its hiding place. He'd kept a meticulous record of his expenditures. That was an important part of his survival in Brazil. Here there was no extradition treaty with the U.S., but Bryson took no chances. There would be no living large, no condos overlooking the Atlantic or fancy clothes and cars. He kept his head down, staying under the radar.

He learned early in his exile, the female employee he had clubbed, survived with nothing but headaches to remind her of her ordeal. The death of the guard, however, negated the five-year statute of limitations. Murder had no such statute. Bryson knew he could never return home. The best he could hope for was a new identity one day. Then, if his luck held, he could return to California where he could watch his family start a new life without him.

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**Saturday - July 10, 1971**

**Macapa, Brazil  
8:48 p.m.**

Bryson heard the music and grumble of a crowd before he entered the alley running perpendicular to Bulevar das Rosas. Turning the corner he saw a cluster of people overflowing Sergio's Cantina Americano. Swarming bugs took turns throwing their tiny bodies at the orange colored bulb in the fixture above the cantina's door.

Raucous echoes of laughter mixed with mumbles of conversation in Portuguese, Spanish, French, and combinations thereof, reverberated off the brick and stucco buildings lining the narrow alley. The miasma of sounds filled Bryson's ears and drowned out the squeak of his

heavy boots. The hole-in-the-wall watering hole he called his own was packed. He was surprised until he remembered it was Saturday night.

He pushed through the crowd at the end of the bar and it took several minutes to get Bia's attention. At last, Bryson pointed to the glass of Cachaca being fingered by a man on his right. He pantomimed big, spreading his palms. When she looked at him again, he held up two fingers. Several minutes of drooling anticipation awaited him before the bartender delivered the drinks. Bryson groped a wad of cash from his pocket and peeled off a fifty. Bia smiled big when he shouted, "Keep the change, baby doll."

Cachaca, distilled from the juice of the sugar cane could be potent; the good stuff aged up to sixteen years in wooden casks. The juice of the cane, however, would begin to ferment twenty-four hours after it was boiled. That was how the cheap Cachaca was produced and Bryson found he could get just as drunk on the cheap stuff as he could on the aged.

He sipped his way through the throng surrounding the bar, a little from the left glass, a little from the right. He had small hope of finding a place to sit, but looked anyway. Tiny, round cocktail tables in front of the stage were all taken. Along walls pitted with the scars of too many fights, bigger tables seating four to six were jammed together. In a back corner he spotted a table of four and two of the seats were vacant. He threaded his way over and though several couples in his haste to claim one of the empty chairs.

The men at the table looked like cane farm workers, their faces and small, muscular bodies appeared as if carved from mahogany. Bryson recognized their Indian ancestry immediately. His Portuguese was minimal. He grinned, hoping one or both spoke English. "Excuse me. Do you guys speak English?"

The larger of the two shrugged. "Só um pouco," he said ... *only a little*.

Bryson nodded and choosing his words, his Portuguese rudimentary at best, he said, "Desculpe-me que a noite boa é este assento feito exame?" He spoke slowly, hoping he hadn't committed an offense by using the wrong word or phrase. *Excuse me. Good evening. Is this seat taken?*

The men looked at each other and then, as if on cue, they smiled. The heavier of the two extended his hand. Bryson nodded and gave a slight bow before sitting down. His table partners resumed their conversation in hushed Portuguese. Bryson tuned them out and concentrated on his drinks. Thirty minutes later his throbbing head was a memory and the shakes were beating a fast retreat to a dark corner of his gut.

The music beat picked up as two go-go dancers hopped and flopped on the small stage. Several waitresses, their trays held high, zigged and zagged around the crowded tables. Bryson recognized one of the girls and got her attention. He ordered drinks all around. On delivery he thumbed off another fifty and told the girl to keep the change.

He raised his glass and muttered a toast. "Here's to Saturday night and poker with you, boys. Goddamn right. Wish you were here." He took a mouthful of Cachaca and gulped it down. A hard tap on his shoulder turned him around. Bryson wiped his mouth as his table companions raised their Brahmas and the heavier man smiled, nodded and said, "Obrigado meu amigo." *Thank you my friend.*

Bryson raised his glass and laughed. "Você é bem-vindo," he said. *You're welcome.* "Inglês pesadoso somente." *Sorry, English only.* He shrugged and finished the Cachaca in one swallow.

The big cane worker rubbed his callused paw on the frosted Brahma bottle. "I speak ingles little," *Não ouvir inglês bom.* "Don't listen ingles too good. He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Well, ain't that fine?" Bryson said and offered his hand. "Comprender o meu nome,

Jesse."

The big man stared for a beat and then nodded. "Jesse," he repeated and raised his Brahma in salute. "I am Olavo," he said and pointing his bottle added, "this Lourenco."

Bryson raised his second glass of Cachaca. "To friends," he said. "Tonight we celebrate friendship."

The cane workers pounded the table and drained their bottles of Brahma while Bryson signaled another round.

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Thoughts of his three dead friends had slipped away. Bryson was pleasantly drunk. The crowd of early evening had thinned and the go-go dancers, long gone from the stage, squirreling away their tips. Bryson caught the attention of his cocktail waitress, Talita, standing at the bar and signaled another round for his table. Olavo shook Bryson's shoulder. "No ... no ... amigo. You pay too much."

Extending his hand to each man, Bryson said, "I appreciate ... *Aprecie* you giving me a chair tonight ... *cadeira hoje à noite*. Tonight is special and I want to *comemore* ... celebrate"

The cane workers smiled and nodded. Olavo belched and they all laughed. Talita arrived with a tray full of Brahma and Cachaca. "This is on Bia and the next round is on me," she said and smiled.

Bryson slapped the table. "Well damn-sam. Thank you, sweetheart and thank Bia for me, please."

Talita leaned down giving Bryson a view of her breasts and pecked him on the cheek. "Thanks for the tips, baby," she said and winked.

An agonizing sadness jumped into Bryson's eyes as he looked at her. "Welcome sweets," he said.

The men watched Talita walked away. Bryson dropped his head and drifted away to his private hell, the prison where he served a self-imposed life sentence. Olavo shook his shoulder.

"*Meu amigo*," My friend. *Comemore?* Celebrate? It is brith ... *aniversário?* It is your birthday?

Bryson rubbed his face and raised his glass. "No, my friend. No birthday. It's a .... *História longa* ... long story." He took a hard pull on his drink. The ice splashed his face and the sticky liquid dripped from his chin. Bryson grinned, "Gentlemen," he asked, "would you like to hear my *história?*" Story?

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4

**Sunday - July 11, 1971**  
**1:38 a.m.**

"...and now because of me, my best friends are dead and I can't go home. My *história*, eh?

It's our secret my friends, okay?" Bryson's question trailed off, an unintelligible slurring of words. He didn't look at his companions for agreement, but instead slumped in his chair, lost in self-pity, his eyes closed. Good judgment said it was time to go home, but good judgment couldn't awaken the liquor-addled brain it lived in.

Bryson heard a scrap of chairs and forced his eyes open. What little light coming from the ceiling of the cavernous room was blocked and he looked up. Olavo and Lourenco stood in front of him. Olavo smiled and Bryson noticed the man's gold teeth for the first time. He blinked, trying to focus, thinking he had to be seeing things.

"Bia tells us you are very rich," Olavo said. "I can see by the money you have spent, it must be true."

"We thought," Lourenco said, "since you have so much, you would like to share your riches with us, no? Bia, Talita, Olavo and Lourenco, we are all your friends, no?"

Bryson's brain struggled in its alcoholic stupor.

Didn't these men say they didn't understand English? Didn't speak English?

Olavo laughed and Lourenco joined him. "You wonder, no? Not so drunk, eh? Olavo asked and leaned down as Talita had a few moments ago. The stench of beer, garlic and rancid fish assailed Bryson's sense of smell. No breasts loose and inviting in a peasant blouse this time just stink.

"We have practiced our *eu não entendo* ... I don't understand, many times," Olavo said. "We do it well, no? Ah, I see we have lost your ... How you say ... attention? We are sorry. We have enjoyed the night and your story, but now it is time for business."

Bryson saw Olavo reach behind his back, but his next movement was too fast for his eyes to follow. He felt a deep burning sensation in the area of his throat followed by a flood of warmth. He tried to speak, to draw a breath, but nothing worked. Panic seized him, but he couldn't move. He was drunk again, but in a different way. Lightheaded, a deep cold seeped into every fiber of his body. He shivered, but only for a few seconds. Eyes dimming, he saw Bia and Talita join the two men who were suddenly covered with a strange crimson paint. The deep red color covered the overalls the two men wore.

Bia rattled off what sounded like orders in rapid Portuguese. He understood two words: *tio Gaspar* ... uncle Gaspar.

Bryson's eyes lost focus and a black tunnel closed around him. The last sensation he had was of his pockets being turned inside out. He heard the jangle of his keys before he felt his body lifted from the chair ....

~ 0000 ~

### [A Crime Well Done](#)

**Riverton, SC  
July 22, 2010**

The thoughts, desires, dreams and joys that live in my mind today are the same aspirations I lusted after as a man of thirty-five. I credit my obsessive curiosity for that gift. My intercourse with life, its mysteries and surprises, keep me grounded in my young man's frame of mind.

Yet, the face I see in the medicine cabinet mirror ... the one staring back at me now: sagging jowls and graying pouches, furrows, grooves and seams of weathered skin. They glare at me with blue-denim eyes hooded in folds of skin. "Ninety-years-old ... hogwash," I blurt out.

The young man living in my brain is railing again. It's another failed attempt to refuse acknowledgment of the reflection we see. But as far as he's concerned that image staring back at us will always be pure bullshit. Oh, I'm aware this ranting at my reflection serves little purpose. I suppose that's part of why they're coming for me soon, they being my son Glen and his wife. They're packing me off to one of those homes. You know the ones I'm talking about.

Glen and Margie claim I can't take care of myself. They always follow that rationalization with: "It's for your own good, Dad."

They mouth this shit with a straight face as they hold my hand. But that platitude is a poor excuse for love and affection in my book. My God, I'm sick of that phrase. Sick of the sound those words make dribbling off their lips like honey oozing from a honeybee's butt.

Being a reasonable man, I suppose they could be right. I have left the refrigerator door open and the burner going on the stove. I've forgotten to lock the door at night and once in awhile I walk away without flushing, but who doesn't? I don't know. Maybe they're right. Did I say that before? I forget ... it doesn't matter anyway.

"Assisted Living Facilities are Death's waiting room." That's a quote from a source I can't recall, but I think those words are close to the truth. Being a pragmatic man, I see no choice other than to pick out a magazine and take my seat. Before I cross my leg and wet a finger for page turning, however, there's something I have to say ... a story I have to tell. I'll not surrender my self-image until I've cleansed Uncle Marion's betrayal of the McAlister family from my soul. The crime he committed against my mother and me is beyond the pale.

Uncle Marion was my father figure. He meant everything to my mother and me. My silence all these many years hasn't served society or my family. I've said nothing because I share in the blame for what happened. I could've stopped my uncle's madness, but I failed the test. Like Uncle Marion, I am to blame for the farce that played out.

Today is the seventy-sixth anniversary of the event. Questions posed at the time were not answered, foremost among them: What happened to Marion Timothy Stoddard? People thought they knew, but they never came close to the truth. I want to get the mess off my chest. If only someone would've asked me at the time, that's the shame of it. Who would have guessed in the year of our Lord, 1934, a fourteen-year-old boy held the key to one of history's great mysteries.

\*\*\*

I was eight-years-old when I thought my life had ended, but as it turned out, my story had only begun. At that tender age my father, Jock Francis McAlister, was taken from our family, the victim of a freak accident. He worked as a laborer for a north Chicago construction firm and his death was catastrophic for mother and me. A year later, October 29, 1929, America's economy plunged into a depression and dad's death took on a new meaning. An insurance policy he provided paid out a one thousand dollar death benefit. A negotiated settlement with the construction company, amounting to eighteen thousand, four hundred dollars, secured the future for mom and me.

Mom chose her trusty mattress as her depository. She placed her faith in home banking, having little confidence in the First State Bank of North Chicago. That same bank closed its doors a few weeks later proving mom's intuition was on the money, so to speak. During the dark

days of the depression, the McAlister family neither went hungry nor did we lose our family home or shiver in winter for that matter.

Today the Great Depression is a footnote. Modern history books skim over the financial collapse of 1929, but the human suffering it caused is indescribable and difficult to imagine. Try to explain in written text how it feels to lose everything. How can anyone describe what it's like to go hungry or experience cold that freezes the marrow of the bone? The task is impossible. To comprehend the desperation you must feel it ... you must have lived it.

The Great Depression hit the country like a pandemic. Its sickness infected us all and people had trouble getting well. Entertainment was a luxury. I think that is the reason the name, John Dillinger, created so much excitement for those of us living in the mid west. People would part with a hard-earned penny to read about the latest stick-up Dillinger and his gang pulled off. Men out of work cheered the bad men on, thinking of them as heroes. Why? The banks closed and people lost what little they managed to save. Some were lucky and got back a portion of what they had on deposit, but most lost everything, including their homes which the banks took away without discrimination ... without mercy.

The decade of the thirties introduced true hardship to America's workingmen. Jobs did not exist and if they did, one hundred men might turn out to fill one position. For the men who failed to put food on their tables there was little cheer. For folks like those, newspaper accounts of daring and resourceful outlaws, taking from the banks what the banks took from them provided cheap entertainment.

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The McAlister family's life changed on a hot, August afternoon in 1928. A knock on the front door sent me scampering from the parlor to the vestibule. Mom labored in the kitchen at the back of the house. I beat her to the door by a mile. I had no doubt my official Lone Ranger deputy badge and decoder ring waited on the stoop in the hands of the mailman. The Lone Ranger himself promised delivery in a special envelope. To my eight-year-old mind, the arrival of my badge and ring overrode my father's hard and fast rule: "Do not open the door without an adult present. Understand me, boyo?"

Mom came up behind me as I turned the latch and pulled the heavy oaken door open. A sweating fat man in grimy overalls shifted his weight from foot to foot on the other side of the screen door. His odor squeezed through the tiny wire squares like soft Limburger cheese and smelled of old mud and sour socks. Two red-faced policemen waited behind him and stared at me as if I'd done something wrong. I took a step back into mom's apron. The fat man stared at me and kneaded a dirty fedora hat between powerful looking hands.

"What is it?" Mother said.

The fat man made a gurgling growl in his throat. He smacked his thigh with his battered hat, coughed and said, "Mrs. McAlister? My name is Albert Zonski. I represent the Hobart Construction Company of Chicago. I'm sorry to inform you of your husband's demise. It was an accident, ma'am. A cable broke, you see. A beam fell and .... We're truly sorry, ma'am ... truly sorry."

Mom hugged me tight and asked me to be a man before she went up the stairs. I don't remember much after that, but I do remember Uncle Marion bursting in the front door around the supper hour. He found me on the parlor floor playing with the fire engine truck my father gave me for my birthday a month past.

Uncle Marion was mom's older brother by two years. He looked nothing like her with his dark hair and five foot, eight-inch frame. His rangy, muscular build made him look bigger, at least to me, but I know now, he was a man of average height.

He stayed with us for a long time, helping mom to cope and giving me his ear. He lost his job for not showing up. No small thing to suffer in August of 1928. When he learned he'd been fired, he laughed and banged the table. "Don't worry yourself, sis," he said. "I never liked that job anyways."

People handle pain in different ways. For kids loss of a parent is an inconsolable event. The first few days I think I was numb. When the reality of my father's death hit me, it felt like a huge hand reached into my chest and scooped away a big part of me. The ache from what that hand took hurt bad. Over time, Uncle Marion helped me fill in the cavity, in a way no mother could. As time went on, I used him like a crutch. He listened as I screamed at life and its unfair ways. When my anger passed, he listened to my fears: How would we live without my father? What would happen to mom? Where would we go now? How could I grow up without my daddy? What would the months ahead have in store for mom and me?

Uncle Marion found other employment. Mom refused to discuss what he did to earn money. I didn't care. Uncle Marion was there when I needed him: school, neighborhood squabbles, man-to-man talks, all the tiny, meaningless, important needs of a boy growing into a young man. My Uncle Marion was there.

I confess to another reason I was so attracted to my uncle. He dressed in fine clothes. He had plenty of money in his pocket and some of the men Uncle Marion called friend scared mom. Things like that made my uncle mysterious and a little dangerous. His secret lifestyle drew me to him like static electricity draws the hair up on your arm.

On a stroll near the shores of Lake Michigan, Uncle Marion told me his friends thought he looked like the famous outlaw, John Dillinger. The comparison gave him something to brag on for sure, but I thought his friends were nuts. He did have hazel eyes and a deep dimple in his chin. I suppose you could say he resembled the famous bank robber ... a little.

We had plenty of man-to-man talks as I grew. It became obvious as I grew older, which side of the McAlister family I favored. Once a week, it seemed, mom would get red in the face and cry silent tears when she looked at me. Tall for my age, I sported a head of tightly curled, red hair. I'd heard neighborhood kids were making jokes about my looks, but they didn't try it to my face. From the time I entered puberty, Uncle Marion told me I was the spitting image of my father, and to me, that was a proud thing to be. His affirmation of me, for who I was, swelled my heart with pride.

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July 22, 1934 was a special day for our family. The date marked my Uncle Marion's thirty-fourth birthday. Mom planned a grand lunch to celebrate the occasion. Uncle Marion came through the door that afternoon holding two tickets aloft. "It's the Sunday night movie show for us, boyo, so be on your best behavior."

I felt a rush of blood flush my skin as he made his entrance, his hat cocked low and a dangerous look to his eye. Hero worship is the best way to describe what I felt for him. I couldn't contain my excitement at Uncle Marion's extravagant and unexpected gift. I turned fourteen that blistering July day. Uncle Marion and I shared many things, including our birthdays.

Sitting through the fine lunch mom prepared proved hard for me ... I was wound that tight.

Uncle Marion and I took turns blowing out the candles on our birthday cupcakes. A perfect day went sideways after mom insisted on taking a photograph.

The previous Christmas, Uncle Marion gave us a Brownie Model C camera. That day, Mom kept trying to find reasons to use it. She pestered me before and after Uncle Marion's arrival to change my clothes and stand in for a picture, but I kept saying no. I saw little need to dress up for picture taking. Though I remained proud of favoring my father, pasteboard images mocked me like the kids in the neighborhood would do when my back was turned.

Heat and humidity that summer afternoon added to my reticence for her attempts of persuasion. This attitude made mom all the madder. Her displeasure didn't bother me a bit. I'd eaten and had other fish to fry ... movie show fish to be exact. Uncle Marion and I would leave soon to enjoy a birthday present to end all birthday presents. Mom and her camera couldn't compete.

I attended movie shows, but only in my dreams. Matinee tickets had a price tag of fifteen cents, out of my reach by a long shot. I'd heard rumors Sunday night movie shows went for fifty cents a head. I didn't expect Uncle Marion to spend that kind of money. I told him if he wanted to get a refund, I'd understand, but he said, "It's a dark theater and flickering screen for us, boyo, and no backing out."

How I stayed in my skin, I'll never know. I would define my attitude that day as eager.

"Marion? Jock? I want your picture," Mom said. "I won't be put off. You hear?"

Uncle Marion jumped from the table and pulled his chair to the center of the parlor floor. He brushed at the lapels of his rumpled linen coat and said, "Leave the boy be, sis. I'll pose for your picture."

He put a smear of chocolate on his napkin and tossed it back on the table. Uncle Marion struck a pose with his hand on the back of the chair and his snoot in the air. Sweating like a heathen, he said, "How's this, Sally, my dear lass?"

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Uncle Marion wanted to stop by his apartment on the way to the movie show. "I need a change of clothes, boyo," he said.

He turned on the radio for me and disappeared into back hall. I jumped on the kitchen table, and legs dangling, kicked my feet in time to the music. I sat like that until he appeared in the kitchen doorway, flipping a straw boater like he was James Cagney. Catching my eye, he took a stance. He wore a heavy pinstriped suit. It seemed a silly choice for such a hot night, but he cocked the boater low on his forehead and said in a deep voice, "I'm a born gangster, boyo. Keep that under your hat when you're blathering with your ma."

I watched for a wink, but it never came. I looked for the joking shine of his eye, but saw only the look I'd see if he had confessed to the priest. As of that moment, I believed Uncle Marion with all my heart. He narrowed his eyes at me, waved a hand, and growled, "Take your butt end away from my place of sustenance if you please."

As we strolled down the sidewalk, I made up my mind. I loved this man as I had my father. His dreams were my dreams. Chicago could disappear into Lake Michigan, it mattered not a wit. I would be a gangster like Uncle Marion and damn the consequence.

The scent of flowering gardens along the way filled the air with heavy perfume as we made our way to North Lincoln Avenue. Taking a breath felt like drowning in thick, sweet syrup. We reached the Avenue as the sky turned soft and hazy. The boulevard sparkled, ablaze with lights,



but twilight had yet to fall. The day's hot, humid air seemed trapped between the gutters of the street. I watched people down the block squiggle and jump, distorted by the shimmer of heat waves reflected off the pavement. The crowded sidewalk reminded me of a carnival midway. Colored neon, buzzing like a hundred bumblebees, splashed the walkway lighting our way. The warmth of the 104-degree day lingered as the sun left its scarlet smudge on the western sky.

I hurried beside my uncle, afraid we'd be late. Uncle Marion reached to tousle my hair, but I ducked away. He laughed and said, "Don't worry, Jocko, previews and news before cartoons. You won't miss a thing."

His eyes twinkled, reflecting the multi-colored lights on the boulevard as he looked here and there. I saw beads of sweat squirming along his jaw. The end of his nose and chin dripped and he dabbed them, and his black mustache, with a folded handkerchief.

My undershirt stuck to my back and my body itched everywhere. Every damn place a guy couldn't scratch without being alone. Smells, like a wall of sticky gelatin, smothered us as we passed the Eat Inn Café. Sizzling hamburger meat, steaming frankfurters, bubbling hot sauerkraut, all merged with the smell of burning grease and French fries. The melding aromas oozed through the eatery's screen door and mixed with the odor of the street's melting asphalt. I waved a hand in front of my face and coughed.

With quick glances, I studied Uncle Marion as we walked. I tried to imitate his every move. He looked older than thirty-four. Sharp angles and straight planes made up his face. Hazel eyes crouched under a heavy brow. They had a cold look about them, even when he laughed. I watched Uncle Marion finger his claim to fame, the puckered knob on his jaw ... what he called his "baby-butt chin."

Mom blushed at his use of the off-color description and Uncle Marion and I enjoyed a good laugh at her expense that afternoon. Mom gave him a hard look and said to me, "Mind my words, Jock McAlister. Don't ape your nasty-mouthed uncle. He's got no prospects of marriage and how he makes his living ... I don't want to know." She shook a finger under his nose at the end of her ragging.

"Don't badmouth me to the boy, Sally," Uncle Marion said and threw me a wink. "I work hard for my bread like every Stoddard before me."

Before mom could retreat, Uncle Marion grabbed her up in his arms. He buried his face in her chest and shook her side-to-side. In no time at all, he had her laughing, too.

"What time is it?" I said blinking away the memory.

"Look," he pointed. "There in the window ... it's six-twenty-three."

"What're we gonna see?"

He canted his head. "It's the Biograph Theater for us, boyo. See the marquee, all lit up so grand? We'll have honest-to-God refrigerated air-conditioned air, Manhattan Melodrama and Clark Gable himself."

"What the hell's refrigerated air-conditioned air?" I said.

"Mind the damn cussing. Your mom'll have my butt in her sewing basket if she hears. No cussing until you're sixteen. You hear me?"

I glanced at Uncle Marion's expression, fearful I'd made him mad, but he had eyes on a young woman passing. He tipped his boater and smiled. A bus whooshed past spitting sparks as it clacked along the overheads. A pungent, burning smell joined with the mixture of odors fouling the air.

"That bucket a bolts ought to be retired," Uncle Marion shouted above the din. I pointed at the banner on the marquee. "What's it mean refrigerated air-conditioned air? Is it like sitting in

an icebox?"

Uncle Marion pulled me into an alley beside the theater and looked around. There were several men in wrinkled suits and curling shirt collars slouched in the murk. They all wore soft fedora hats pulled low on their foreheads. The broad downturned brims shadowed the upper portion of their faces, hiding their eyes. One man pushed off the wall and splattered the side of a garbage can with tobacco juice. The others stared, cigarettes hanging from thin, sweating lips. They looked like trouble to me and I wondered what they were doing there.

"Forget about air-conditioned air." Uncle Marion put his body between me and the scary looking men. We squeezed between the garbage cans and against the opposite wall before he glanced at the men again. The rank smell of rotten meat and sour eggs blended into one with bad oysters, the putrid smells mingled into one vomitus odor, I covered a gag with a cough.

"I wonder who those guys are," he whispered.

"Why?" I whispered back.

He shook his head. "I'm gonna tell you something, but you gotta promise you'll tell nobody, gimme your word of honor."

Uncle Marion held my arm tight. I winced, but met his stare, pretending to be the man I wouldn't be for years to come. I put a ridge in my back, squared my shoulders and sucked my lip under my protruding teeth. I hoped my behavior looked as manly and solemn as I meant it.

"I swear." My voice sounded thin and frightened in my ear.

Lips close to my ear, he said, "Okay. Don't show nothing, now, don't move a muscle when I tell you, understand?"

I stared.

He put his hands on my shoulders. I took a sidelong glance at the guys in the alley. They all looked bored ... creepy, but bored.

Uncle Marion held my eyes. "Steady she goes boyo." He took a breath. "I'm meeting John Dillinger," he whispered. "Right here tonight at the movie show."

I heard the outlaw's name and came close to wetting my pants. Lightheaded, I thought I'd go down, right there in the garbage cans, stink and all. A bubble rose in my chest. I wanted to scream. Excitement threatened a laugh. I shook so bad inside I thought Uncle Marion would feel it sure. I willed myself ... be still.

He studied my eyes. I turned my body to stone ... proud...so damn proud. Uncle Marion pulled me to his chest and held me tight for a few seconds. His body had the feel of steel coils, resilient yet hard and strong. The moment seemed embarrassing with the sinister men looking on, but I felt warm and safe and I wanted his embrace to go on forever.

Uncle Marion put his lips close to my ear once more and said, "After tonight you, your mom and me, we'll be set for life. I'm in, Jock. I'm in."

"Let's go see the movie show," he said louder. "I'm buying. It's popcorn, soda, the works for the birthday boyo's."

"Wait," I whispered, "how do you know he's here?"

"I'll tell you inside," he said through tight lips. "Let's go." Uncle Marion took my arm and we left the alley.

\*\*\*

The newsreel played as we entered the auditorium. We circled the big dark room and I saw plenty of good seats, but Uncle Marion put us in the back row ... center.

"What's the matter with the seats down front?" I asked.

"See the guy down there? Sitting between the lady in the orange dress and the blond?"

"Yeah? I said."

"The woman in orange is Anna Sage, a business associate a mine. The guy in the middle is you-know-who. She told me he'd be here tonight."

"What kind a business? Is it dangerous?"

"She has a .... She operates a gentlemen's club."

Uncle Marion looked uncomfortable, like his collar was too tight. In the dim light of the theater his face seemed to grow darker and I wondered if he was blushing.

"How ...?" I began ....

He put his finger to his lips, "Shhhh."

I zipped my lip.

\*\*\*

Manhattan Melodrama neared its end when the man Uncle Marion pointed out leaned into the blond woman, whispered something, got up and walked up the aisle. He gave us a quick once-over, but Uncle Marion kept his eyes on the screen. As quick as the man passed he said, "I'm going to the men's room. Meet me at the lobby doors."

I nodded and watched my uncle follow the man through the auditorium doors. The man he called "You-know-who" wore a dark suit and white dress shirt. Pretty much like my uncle's outfit.

"The End" appeared on the screen and I jumped up, heading for the lobby. Four doors opened onto the theater's foyer. I stood on the restroom side of the lobby and held up the wall. Groups of people strolled by, but I only had eyes for the lady in the orange dress and her blond friend. They drifted toward me, glanced at the men's room and stopped a short distance away.

Behind them, the restroom door opened and the man my uncle followed to the men's room strolled through doorway. He carried a suit coat over his arm and wore a high-collared white shirt, starched to perfection and open at the neck. He wore a dark mustache and looked like Uncle Marion, but not quite as tall. Slapping a straw boater against his leg, he walked up behind the women and said something to them. They listened and laughed and nodded.

Uncle Marion nudged me and I jumped.

"Jock, I want you to do exactly as I say, got it?"

"Okay," I said.

"I'm going to help our friend. I'll walk out first, the two ladies will follow me and our friend will follow us. You wait and let a few people go between; then you come after, understand?"

I nodded.

"If you hear a ruckus, don't worry," Uncle Marion smiled looking as tight as a circus high wire. "You head straight home and I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're something, Uncle Marion." I grinned from ear to ear. "I bet I'm supposed to keep my trap shut, right?"

He winked, looked at the women and gave a nod.

The ladies brushed by trailing the odor of face powder, lipstick, and spearmint gum. The blond woman blew a kiss to my uncle. You'd a thought music played the way he danced out those double doors.

A little man, puffing a fat cigar to life, fell in behind Uncle Marion. Near the box office the

little man said something. Uncle Marion turned, pushed the guy away and dodged around the ticket booth making a run for it.

I heard: Stop ... shouts ... gunshots ... screams ... and gunshots ... lots of gunshots.

The man in the white shirt paused beside me, his stare cold enough to freeze a candle's flame, but all I saw was his baby-butt chin. He shoved a fifty-dollar bill in my shirt pocket and said, "Tell your grandkids Johnny Dillinger gave you cab fare, boy."

I watched him walk through the double doors. He paused and looked back at me and said, "Your uncle made a damn fine gangster."

Dillinger settled the boater on his head at a jaunty angle and disappeared into the milling, screaming crowd on North Lincoln Avenue.

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The next morning the Chicago Tribune ran a front-page story ....

### **John Herbert Dillinger Shot Dead at The Biograph Theater.**

Dillinger, the newspaper reported, was shot three times: twice in the chest and once in the back of the neck. The bullet to the neck exited under Dillinger's right eye, blowing away most of his lower face. Straight dark hair, a hazel left eye and dimpled chin helped make a positive identification, said DOI Special Agent in Charge, Melvin Purvis.

A few days later, angry at the world, I burned the picture of my Uncle Marion in his rumpled linen suit ... with his snoot in the air ... sweating like a heathen. I watched the picture curl and turn from black to gray ash. Smoke tumbled from the metal wastebasket I held out my bedroom window and dissolved into the smothering heat of another Chicago summer's day.

People we knew asked about Uncle Marion. Mom would only say he'd taken a job in California for an important man. Persistent journalists badgered Purvis and J. Edgar Hoover about fingerprint analysis. In a long awaited interview, Hoover stated Dillinger had his fingerprints distorted by using an acid bath on the tips of his fingers. Comparisons proved inconclusive, but Dillinger's trademark chin, black hair and hazel eye were proof positive in the Department of Investigation's opinion.

My ambitions for a gangster's life evaporated like the smoke produced by the burning photo of my uncle. My desire to emulate his behavior disappeared with his betrayal of my mother and me. Mom lost her brother to Johnny Dillinger and I lost my second chance to grow up with a father. Yet, as I finish this purging of my conscience, I cannot remember Marion Timothy Stoddard without acknowledging that, along with the father I lost at eight, he owns a place in my heart. A place still filled with the love he gave freely to me.

\*\*\*

Ah, there's the slam of their car door. Glen and Margie are here. I'm guessing they've got my seat all picked out in Death's Waiting Room. I expect it's time to wet my finger and turn the page. Who knows, maybe I'll like the magazine.

~ 0000 ~

## The Eradicator

### South Lake Tahoe

#### Paradise Valley, California Summer 2005

##### **Mobster Death Is Murder Claims Anonymous Tipster**

**AP Exclusive:** by Murray J. Plout. *A source close to the McCandless crime organization confirms the death of used car dealer, and McCandless enforcer, James, Jimbo, Fallows, as murder for hire, the contract carried out by professional gangland hitman A. Friend. My source is quoted as stating: "The boys call him the eradicator, but not with the boss around of course. Mr. Friend's a longtime go to guy for certain jobs. He takes care of problems that might prove embarrassing and interfere with business."*

"Son-of-a-bitch," Milton Sonntag shouted and threw the newspaper across the coffee table. It hit the loveseat opposite him and burst apart, scattering loose pages on the floor. Rage threatened to rule his mind and he fought the urge to let go. He glanced up at the fifty-five inch Hitachi suspended on the wall and picked up the remote. He wondered what damage he might do to the plasma screen if he hurled the heavy electronic control at the hysterically happy woman showing off the wonders of the paper towels she was using.

Sonntag surrendered himself to the soft cushioned back of the lounge chair and deeply inhaled, his thin chest expanding until it hurt. Eyes closed, he held his breath as if it were his last exhaling only after he felt lightheaded. Calm slowly took possession of his mind. A fresh cell phone lay on the table not far from his fingertips ... Sonntag glanced at the face of the Rolex Daytona Chronograph on his wrist and decided to wait another few minutes ... settle down before making the call.

After twelve years of flawless operation, he was disgusted and embarrassed by this debacle. He couldn't imagine a scenario capable of breaching his security measures. His list of clients totaled eight and all held the position of chairman in their respective organizations. They, in turn, selected eight trusted advisors, briefing them on the protocols necessary to order the specialized service provided by The Eradicator. Second-in-command was only authorized to engage his specialized services if the chairman was indisposed or dead.

Sonntag checked the time again, closed his eyes and pictured clouds. How beautiful they appeared. Their purity blazed bright. Their white majesty invigorated him as he envisioned them drifting high over the peaks and valleys of the Sierra. He'd photographed magnificent clusters of these natural wonders while piloting his glider.

Pulling another full lung of air, he let it seep through his lips until he had no more. Sonntag opened his eyes and reached for the phone, ready for the confrontation ahead. He'd spent a restless morning giving his client the benefit of a doubt, but all evidence pointed to a breach in the McCandless organization. No other explanation was feasible and that left Simon McCandless responsible. Sonntag, in good faith, had filled the order, but the fee remained unpaid ... the breach could not be tolerated. Lack of payment exacerbated an already untenable situation.

At one twenty nine and fifteen seconds, Sonntag dialed the number. The second ring tone sounded at one twenty nine and fifty five seconds. He heard the click of contact and the same voice from the previous day answered his call. The time was exactly one thirty.

Sonntag nodded ... his meticulous nature satisfied.

"Hello?"

"Mr. McCandless, please. Mr. Friend calling."

Sonntag heard the whisper of white noise and then McCandless picked up. "Mr. Friend. Thanks for calling back. I have an answer, but before I commit, I'd like to confirm a few facts. Will you grant me an additional twenty four hours?"

Sonntag stared at his bare feet. *Time for a pedicure*, he thought

The enormity of his power almost pushed a laugh from his throat.

*Simon McCandless and his family are a breath away from extinction and I'm pondering my toenails. How bizarre.*

Sonntag took a breath, "I've reviewed our relationship. In the past, you've been a man of your word so I'll give you the time. I'm assuming you have no part in this fiasco. I'm sure you're cognizant of the liability if I find that's not the case?"

He didn't wait for a response. In the kitchen he prized the back from the cell phone and removed the battery. He used the ice pick to nudge the SIM card from the motherboard. Sonntag dropped everything but the SIM card in the trash compactor and ran it through a cycle. A cold shiver of unease passed through his body.

Have I made my first mistake? Sonntag decided a long hot shower and contemplation was in order.

\*\*\*

Sonntag slept late, not opening his eyes until twelve fifteen. He sat on the edge of the bed and scratched his scalp. The cobwebs of sleep seemed harder to shake off. Why? He wondered. The house was cold, meaning he failed to set the thermostat. He arrived home after three in the morning, angry about his stupid card play. He could blame McCandless for his losses, but he knew the truth. Throughout the games his mind strayed to the dilemma he faced and his normally good common sense failed him.

*I don't play cards when I'm upset.*

He cursed the memory of the twenty-two thousand dollars he dropped at the table. The evening's disaster was not the fault of the McCandless/Fallows business, but his poor judgment. Nonetheless, cutting Simon McCandless some slack would be a clear sign of weakness and in the assassination business that was a kiss of death for the assassin.

"I hope you have a plausible explanation, Simon," he muttered.

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"Hold please," Sonntag said and dropped the cell phone from his ear. He glanced at the time: 1:42 p.m.

Destiny reversed in a mere twelve minutes ... the mysteries of fate. He shook his head. "Mr. McCandless, you simply amazed me. This situation is uncanny to say the least."

"I give you my word, Mr. Friend. This couldn't happen again in ... in a thousand lifetimes, but she made two amateur mistakes. She left a gloating message in Jimbo's computer journal for

one. She's smart enough to have cleaned out the accounts, but I'm checking as we speak, just to make sure. I've no doubt she plans to disappear after the memorial. She has every intention of being long gone before any suspicions are raised. Mistake number two is simple. She failed to pay your bill and in doing so underestimated our resources."

Sonntag laughed. "Are you sure our friend, Jimbo, didn't swing his bat from both sides of the plate? I know Fallows was your number two, but his wife setting him up?" He chuckled. "I believe I'd take a look under her skirt were I in your place."

Simon McCandless wasn't amused. "I told Jimbo she'd be trouble. She was a twenty-two-year-old stripper when he met her. Jimbo was forty-eight for Christ's sake. She's Russian, from Georgia no less. They come up hard and smart over there or they don't come up at all. That's the word anyway. They were married eight years. There's a seven-year-old daughter, beautiful little girl. It's a mess, Mr. Friend. I've taken steps to rectify your situation. Peripheral considerations aside, we'll clean up the mess on this end."

Sonntag allowed the silence to drag on for half a minute. "Simon ... I hope you'll forgive my familiarity? I appreciate your thoughts and action on my behalf. She took your number two, but she stiffed me in the process. You know I can't tolerate a situation like that, it's bad for business. I would consider it a favor if you'd allow me to assess and finalize this situation in a permanent manner."

"I'm flattered by your familiarity, Mr. Friend. I'd be happy to have your assessment and help in finalizing our mutual situation. Your means are usually colorful in these cases, I understand."

His bad poker play of the previous evening faded from his mind with this new information. Sonntag grinned.

*I'm going to enjoy this job so much.*

"When did you say Mr. Fallows' memorial will take place?" He listened and made a notation in his Day-Timer.

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Sonntag yawned into the back of his hand. He waited in a rented Ford Taurus. Now and then idly glancing at the pearl-white Escalade parked two rows back and to the left. On the seat beside him a scanner indicated no cell phone activity.

Arriving ten days earlier, Sonntag called McCandless. He asked his client to withdraw his watchers and with that accomplished, he began to catalogue the daily routine of Marianna Orlenda Fallows. On the evening of the third day, mother and daughter kept an appointment with the funeral director. Sonntag took the opportunity to place his listening devices. He finished in less than an hour and covered the phones and all critical areas of the Fallows home.

The wife of the late Jimbo Fallows challenged Sonntag's resolve from the outset. Her long chestnut hair framed an angular face with high cheekbones. Her nose was bent slightly at the bridge. He guessed some type of injury at an early age. She appeared taller than he, but so far he'd only seen her in heels. Barefoot or in running shoes Sonntag found himself hoping she'd be close to his five-ten.

Marianna Fallows carried herself with a dancer's sensual assurance. The minor blemish at the bridge of her nose gave her overly pretty face character. Her firm, slim body added to her allure.

Marianna's cool demeanor during her practice of normal activities before the memorial was

fascinating. Her performance as an innocent, grieving widow signaled planning. Based on his observations, Sonntag determined his target to be calculating and intelligent. He eagerly looked forward to meeting Marianna Fallows.

Sonntag blinked. A stab of sunlight reflected off the glass door of Saint Rose Hospital's outpatient facility. Marianna and seven-year-old Mavra Duscha Fallows walked hand-in-hand toward the parking lot. McCandless described the little girl as beautiful, Sonntag concurred. The child possessed her mother's angular model's face and long chestnut hair. Unfortunately, little Mavra also possessed Type 1 Diabetes.

As mother and daughter came closer, Sonntag smiled. Marianna dressed her daughter in a candy-striped jumper with white apron. Emblazoned on the bib part of the apron was a red cross. The little girl clutched a "Let's Play Doctor Kit" in her left hand. During Sonntag's ten days of surveillance, he observed the child carrying her little kit everywhere.

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The memorial for James, Jimbo, Fallows was scheduled for two o'clock Monday afternoon. The Mausoleum of Holy Sepulcher Cemetery was filled to overflowing with a cross section of Bay Area humanity. Politicians rubbed shoulders with McCandless organization associates. Undercover police, FBI and DEA rubbed shoulders with everyone.

Initial reports indicated Fallows died of a heart attack. Two weeks following his demise, AP ran a news story quoting a source in the Office of the Coroner. Alameda County Sheriff's Homicide announced Fallows' death was being reevaluated. Conclusive autopsy results, as quoted in the AP story, were in the hands of law enforcement, yet both the County Medical Examiner's office and Sheriff's detectives remained tightlipped as to the official cause of death.

One of the downsides of his profession as Sonntag saw it was his lack of ability to brag. Marianna Fallows, using McCandless' codes, contracted with A. Friend for an exotic form of execution. She'd offered a bonus for something truly special. Sonntag could only bow to her incredible chutzpah.

In good faith, he gave his customer exotic and more. He formulated a mixture of venoms from the King Cobra, Inland Tiapan and Hooked Beak Sea Snake. The Cardiotoxin of the Cobra would indicate a death from heart attack. Autopsy toxicology would later reveal Neurotoxins and Hemotoxins from the Tiapan and Sea Snake respectively.

The frosting on Sonntag's death cake was the ingenious method of venom delivery. Professional pride ran deep in him. Sometimes his genius provided memorable results. Sonntag fashioned a tiny bulb type syringe and adapted the device to a garage door button, a duplicate of the button on Fallows garage wall. Several days passed before Jimbo used the button. When he did, he was dead twenty-six minutes later.

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The memorial service lasted less than an hour. Sonntag followed the entourage to a McCandless restaurant. He parked a block down the street and watched Marianna and her daughter exit their Escalade. Mother and daughter dressed in matching black dresses. Both wore flat black hats with a veil. Sonntag laughed when Mavra reached back into the SUV and retrieved her doctor kit.

Sonntag hoped Marianna's attendance at the wake would be short. He checked the time. The



day was still young ... 3:30 p.m. He leaned back in the seat, utilizing the headrest to full advantage and smiled.

*Marianna Fallows intrigues the hell out of me.*

He first thought the woman was plain lucky, but he found ruthless better described her.

*She has the intelligence to seize opportunity and she appears as cold as a winter's day at the South Pole,* Sonntag laughed at the thought. *Yet she appears loving, caring and softly feminine in the company of her daughter.*

"We have many things in common, Mrs. Fallows," he murmured.

Sonntag found himself wondering what it would be like to have a woman like Marianna Fallows, someone to share his vocational passion; someone to whom he could brag, someone to share ideas and intimacy. He wondered if Marianna Fallows might be attracted to him. What would she think if he told her he was the now notorious A. Friend?

His pleasant conjecture came to a halt as a white coated attendant ran through the restaurant's door, looked left and right, and ran toward the Escalade. Marianna and Mavra stepped through the door a few seconds later. She spoke briefly to several well-dressed men escorting her until the Escalade jerked to a stop. The attendant held the driver's door, waiting while Marianna belted Mavra into the rear seat. Sonntag sat up and started the Taurus. Marianna, carrying Mavra's kit, tipped the attendant and slid into the Escalade. The well-dressed men disappeared back into the restaurant.

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Marianna drove straight home. The sun left a dark orange and lavender smudge on the western horizon as she drove higher into the Hayward hills, Sonntag following at a safe distance. He kept his headlights off as he dogged her. After twenty minutes of watching her taillights three blocks ahead, he knew they were close. Not a moment later he saw her right turn signal flashing. The Fallows home sat alone at the end of a long court. Sonntag pulled to the curb just shy of the corner, got out of his car and walked forward. At the corner he saw her taillights wink off as the garage door rolled down. He returned to the car and got his briefcase from the rear seat.

Sonntag tilted the rearview mirror and checked his teeth, opened a stick of peppermint gum and popped it in his mouth. After chewing for several minutes, he was satisfied he'd freshened his breath sufficiently and he spit the mass into a Kleenex and put it in his pocket.

He took his time strapping a spring-loaded knife holster onto his forearm. A thin bladed, eight-inch knife rested in a sheath in the briefcase. He removed it and clipped it to the holster's mechanism. A loop of clear filament fit over his thumb and he flexed the digit to test the mechanism's smoothness. The knife slipped into his palm swiftly, the blade grazing his splayed fingers, the grip resting comfortably in his palm. Satisfied, he selected the business card he needed. Sonntag thumbed through the paperwork once more, making sure everything was in order to carry out the ruse he had planned.

Forty-five minutes passed by the time Sonntag rang the doorbell of the Fallows home. He adjusted the knot of his tie and realized his hand was shaking.

*Calm down,* he warned. A case of nerves could trigger the knife mechanism at the wrong moment; it had just enough slack to allow simple movement.

"A moment, please," the voice he heard was clear, but carried a touch of huskiness that made him tingle. Sonntag straightened at the sound of the deadbolt's click. The door opened to reveal Marianna, still in her black dress and even more beautiful than he remembered. She was

barefoot and a tad shorter than him. This revelation made her more alluring. The tight bun she wore in her chestnut hair earlier in the day was loose. The lazy, long curls of her hair framed her slim, classic face and fell in a cascade over her shoulders. He mentally congratulated himself on his decision not to act in haste.

A slight bow preceded his salutation. "Good evening. Am I addressing Mrs. Fallows?"

Marianna nodded. "Yes," she said.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late," Sonntag replied and offered his card.

"Milton Sonntag. Safeguard Insurance Company?" Marianna asked, her look a quizzical one. She shook her head frowning. "Insurance is the last thing I need today. I've just buried my husband."

Sonntag felt embarrassment creep into his face. "No ... I'm sorry," he said in a rush, "I didn't explain myself. I'm here to give you a check, after you sign the release, of course. You're husband had a life policy with us ... you didn't know?"

Marianna shook her head. Her chestnut hair caught the foyer light and seemed to spark. Sonntag's tingle turned hotter and his breath caught. He coughed to cover the reaction, feeling like some love-struck teenager.

"No," she said, "he didn't tell me. There was a lot he didn't tell me." Sonntag saw her neck go scarlet. "Oh, pardon me, please come in." Marianna stepped back in a welcoming gesture.

She seated him in the family room. Mavra sat on the carpet, her doctor kit open beside her. She watched Milton with big, solemn brown eyes. He opened the briefcase and retrieved the form and check.

Marianna stood at the breakfast bar. "Would you like something to drink ... coffee ... water?"

"No, thanks," Sonntag said and smiles. He offered the paperwork and check to Marianna who quickly crossed the room and took them from his hand.

Sonntag was surprised to see her slip on a pair of reading glasses. She looked at the check first and then at Milton. "Sixty thousand? This is a surprise."

He couldn't think of anything to say and so he said nothing, his smile weak.

The smell of this woman was intoxicating. Her child playing on the floor quietly, and the mouthwatering smell of pastries baking in the oven, created an atmosphere so different from his lifestyle. This felt homelike ... this seemed strange and yet compelling. He felt a longing for a domesticity of this kind. This way of life gave him the feeling of trust and belonging he realized he had desired all along. These strong emotions appalled him, but at the same time pulled at him, bade him; *reach out ... take what is offered*.

Mavra's quiet little voice broke his train of thought. "Mama," the little girl said, "have you forgot? It's time for my shot."

Marianna looked up from the release form and nodded. "I haven't forgotten, sweetheart. Do you want to try by yourself? Mama will help if you don't want to try this time."

Mavra took a black case from inside her doctor kit and zipped it open. Milton saw a blood meter and several slim syringes, each with a sterile cap of red plastic. The seven-year-old held the blood meter to her finger. With her huge, sad eyes fixed on Sonntag, she pushed the meter's button and winced. He saw a tear slide down the little girl's cheek, but she made no sound.

Mavra put the meter back in the case. "It's time, Mama. I want to try again. I'm going to be a big girl, but you first, Mama."

Sonntag watched as Mavra dug into her doctor kit again. She stood holding a large, white plastic syringe. The top half of the cylinder was clear showing a colored liquid. At the bottom, Sonntag saw a one-inch plastic needle.

Marianna held out her arm. "I have to take my shot before Mavra," she explained, "that way it doesn't hurt." She cupped Mavra's chin. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?" Milton thought Marianna sounded proud of her little girl.

Mavra nodded yes and pushed the plastic needle against her mother's arm. It retracted into the syringe's body making it appear to penetrate the skin. The little girl pressed the plunger and the colored liquid disappeared into the lower chamber ... it all looked very real.

Marianna kissed her daughter and Mavra returned to the floor and her doctor kit. Milton watched the little girl as she put away her play syringe. She plucked an insulin syringe from the black case. Before pulling off the sterile cap, she looked up.

"Mama, if the man takes his shot before mine, my shot won't hurt even a little bit."

Marianna shook her head. "I'm sure Mr. Sonntag is in a hurry, honey. Mama took her shot, you'll be okay."

Mavra turned her big brown eyes on Sonntag. Milton took pleasure from the look of trust the little girl gave him. He snapped the catch on the briefcase and set it on the floor. "Can you give me a shot through my pant leg, my shoulder is sore and I'd rather not take off my jacket."

Marianna said, "Please, Mr. Sonntag. It's isn't necessary. I'll give Mavra her medicine. Here's your release." She crossed the room and handed the form to him. Both adults heard Mavra's choked sob.

"Mavra, that's your name, isn't it?" Sonntag asked. "It's okay. Why don't you give me my shot and then yours won't hurt even a little," Sonntag said and looked up at Marianna who smiled at him and nodded her thank you.

Mavra gave Sonntag a shy look, but dug in her doctor kit. She stood, holding another plastic syringe. It was a duplicate of the one she used for her mother. The only difference, Milton saw, was the color of the liquid.

The little girl came forward with timid slow steps. She reached out to touch Sonntag's thigh a few inches above the knee. She looked at her mother. "Is this okay, Mama?" She asked so sweetly it created an ache in Sonntag's chest.

Marianna raised her eyebrows, looking a question at Sonntag. He sat back and said, "Sure, honey, go ahead. I'm ready for my shot."

Marianna's eyes seemed to promise something special for his kindness. She moved to the back of Sonntag's chair and he felt the light touch of her warm fingers caressing his neck. "That's perfect, darling," Marianna said.

Mavra's hand shot forward. At the same time Sonntag felt strong arms wrap around his neck. He jumped at a stinging sensation in his thigh and had a moment to wonder about the warmth he felt that followed. A burning sensation ran up his leg and across his stomach, leaving everything it its wake numb. It climbed into his chest, neck and jaws.

Sonntag struggled, but found his muscles had no strength. That fast, he couldn't move his legs or arms. His head flopped on the back of the chair, his mouth locked in a scream his throat muscles couldn't produce.

Sonntag's eyes were fixed, eyelids frozen in an open position. Marianna's voice came from close to his ear. She smelled of sandalwood, cinnamon and nervous sweat. Her breath warmed the stone cold feel of his flesh as she whispered, "It is a drug called succinylcholine. I was assured it works fast and I guess it does. Oh, I shouldn't leave you in the dark. You were video taped when you put in your bugs. That's how I know what you look like."

"Did I do right, Mama?" Mavra jerked the syringe out of Milton's leg.

Sonntag felt Marianna's hair on the side of his face. Her lips brushed his ear. "Yes, Mavra

Duscha ... you did fine. Get your kit please ... we'll be ready to go in a minute."

His eyes were quickly losing focus. Breathing was a labor and getting oxygen into his lungs required his full concentration. Marianna's lips tickled his ear. "In my native language, my baby's name means Dark Ghost, a perfect name for a perfect child, wouldn't you say?"

Sonntag's diaphragm ceased its function. Panic overwhelmed him and the pain of suffocation was an agony amplified by his terror of impending death. The room grew dim and dimmer ... dark and darker.

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Mavra, with her doctor kit in hand, ran ahead to the garage.

Marianna pulled a satchel from under the sink, along with a small overnight bag. The satchel contained 863,000 dollars in cash. She'd buy what they needed in New York and then board the plane for Mother Russia and Georgia, her home.

Mavra was trying to open the door of the Escalade. "I want to roll up the door, Mama."

Marianna smiled at her daughter. "You can close it, baby, we've got to hurry." Marianna hit the button on the garage wall and jerked her hand back as a small bubble of blood appeared on the heel of her hand.

"Ouch," she said. Marianna suckled her hand as the garage door rumbled into the ceiling.

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### Odorless

#### **Walnut Creek, California September 26, 1983**

I came through the door and blinked at the sudden brightness of the crisp, cool morning. Cars rushed by on Civic Drive, commuters on their way west into Oakland or San Francisco or north into Martinez, Benicia or Vallejo or maybe south into the real estate, mortgage lender and broker paradise of Alamo, Danville, San Ramon, Dublin, Pleasanton and Livermore.

Someone opened the door behind me and I glanced over my shoulder. It was the bartender and owner of the Lamplighter, Angelo Cappino.

"You okay, Tom?"

I wondered what the hell he was talking about, I felt fine. "Yeah, I'm good, Angelo, but thanks for asking. I've got an appointment downtown. Just thought I'd stop for an eye-opener. What's the matter? Don't I look all right?" I said.

"Ah, you know me ... Mr. Worry Wart. You looked kind a pale, sweaty-like. Thought you might be coming down with something, you know."

I was feeling sick to my stomach. It rumbled and bubbled while regurgitated bits of my breakfast cereal paid a curtain call. I had an acid sting burning the back of my throat to boot, but other than that, I felt normal.

"Thanks, Angie," I said, throwing him a grin. "Catch you later." My voice sounded strong in my ears as I waved and headed for the parking lot at the side of the building.

A couple of deep breaths cleared the fog from my head. I unlocked my car door and sank into the driver's seat. I glanced at my watch and heaved a sigh of relief ... quarter to nine. My appointment was scheduled for nine-thirty. The building, I knew, was only a couple of blocks away on Broadway between Cypress and Lincoln streets.

Angelo didn't miss much. I'd just finished my third vodka and soda when I began to feel lightheaded. Cold sweats were followed by a seasick-like nausea in my gut; I must have turned fish-belly white. That's when I got up and headed for the door.

Two weeks ago, I spent a few hours on a gurney parked in a hallway of Kaiser Hospital. I laid there staring at the ceiling as they pumped me full of pharmaceuticals trying to get my blood pressure under control. Then, the results of a blood test revealed I was dangerously low on potassium. That's when a nurse brought another big bag of clear liquid. I thought I was never getting out of there.

The feeling I had that day seemed similar to what had just happened in the Lamplighter. I guess that's as good a way as any to describe what I was feeling. I tried to tell myself these moments of nausea and sweats were normal for my age, but in soberer moments, I knew that kind of thinking was plain stupid.

That last trip to the hospital convinced me I had to do something to get my drinking under control. The doctor I saw that day suggested Kaiser's Alcohol Abuse Rehabilitation program. So here I was sitting in my car, in the parking lot of a downtown bar, while a few fundamental truths leaked through my semi-sober brain.

Why did I have to get my head on straight by hitting the mahogany at eight o'clock in the morning? Why was it necessary that I steady up? Why did I have to do this before meeting a psychologist to discuss my cessation of drinking alcohol in all its forms? Was I purposely trying to sabotage this meeting? If so, I was off to a great start.

A few more minutes passed and the giddy buzz I'd hoped was coming started to kick in. The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach disappeared. Once more old iron gut responded and I started feeling like my old self-confident self again. I sighed first and then I laughed.

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The building was bigger and more imposing than I remembered. I'd delivered real estate documents here in the past. Now, it was refurbished with brushed nickel, smoked glass and refaced with gray marble at the entryway.

My thought as I approached was ... *this baby's cool ... unreadable ... just like me.*

I checked the directory before approaching the help desk. The psychologist I was scheduled to see had an office on the first floor. My watch indicated I was running late. I'd lost some time somewhere, but I was semi-high and very cool and I figured so what?

I allowed a stifled giggle to slip through my lips. I put a serious look on the clouded reflection of my face in the smoked glass and pulled through a second set of big doors. The interior was cold, a shock from the warm temperature outside, and shadowed. I blinked having trouble making my eyes focus.

"Shit," I whispered, "I'm half in the bag." That realization leaked through my brain like spilled vodka soaking a cocktail napkin ... a waste, although I wasn't high enough to think I could con a psychologist. Or did I? I still felt cool and confident. Maybe I was just stupid ... I smiled.

Two receptionists sat behind a wall of glass. One bent over something, her nose inches from the paper on which she was writing furiously. The second was on the phone. I picked the writer

and stepped up to the glass. There was a speaker at bending level and a concave tray below for paper pass. I noticed four additional workstations, but they were unoccupied ... more waste, but in this case good waste.

"Morning," I said. "I'm Tom Rowley?"

*Why do I introduce myself like I'm not sure that's my name? I wondered. I do know my fucking name. Ain't that right, big guy?*

The lady pushed a form through the tray without looking up or making a comment. She hooked her thumb at the end of the counter in front of me, indicating some clipboards and pens I spotted at the far end.

*Is everybody fat around here or is it just me?* I was tempted to ask that question, but I wasn't high enough yet. I sucked in a snicker. *You're really running hot today, Tommy boy.* I wanted to laugh, but controlled the impulse.

I picked a seat in a far corner and looked at the questionnaire. *What the hell possessed me to agree to this appointment?* The psychologist would make a decision based on this interview whether or not I would be admitted to the hospital's alcohol abuse rehabilitation unit? This had to be a joke. I looked up from the paperwork and wondered .... *Who appointed this head-shrinker God? Why don't I just get the hell outta here?*

My stomach jumped, as if to remind me, it and my clammy sweats, were the reasons I was here. I swallowed ....

I've just had a couple of bad days, that's all. I don't need this shit ... I'm not really worried. I scribbled in all the blank spaces on the form while my mind wandered off on its own as I did. The thought struck me ....

*This joint must get a lot of substance abusers if they need that many receptionists.*

I stifled another nervous laugh and glanced around, hoping no one heard me. That was the main reason I chose this corner of the huge waiting area. I wanted space, sometimes I laughed at the damnedest things. I was glad I wasn't too high and taking silly chances.

*What am I doing here?* I asked myself again. *I function, shower every day and go to work. I kiss the asses of all my customers. Yeah, that's my problem ... customers.*

Before slipping the completed form under the glass, I squinted at my handwriting ... it looked like shit.

"Have a seat, Mr. Rowley," the fat lady said. "Someone will be with you shortly."

"Thanks," I pointed in the direction of the men's room. "Do I have time for the ... ah, potty?"

The lady gave me a nod and I followed her finger across the room. In the men's room, I did my best to avoid the mirror, I did after all, know what I looked like. I'd put on a new golf shirt and fresh jeans that morning and I was wearing new cross-trainers that still squeaked when I walked on a polished floor. This morning, while I shaved, I noticed how red my gray eyes looked. The color red always makes me think of the tiny broken capillaries marking my nose and cheeks. I risked a look at my graying hair anyway. Thank God it was okay. I could escape one reality ....

*Jesus, I look puffy.*

I turned my back on the mirror and I dried my hands.

*What the hell, I'm as ready as I'll ever be ... screw puffy, magic dragon or not.*

Back in my corner I didn't sit in case they were watching me, those women seemed so cold. I felt a superior contempt for those fat bitches. They roosted there behind their protective glass like sitting hens ... watching everybody and making judgments ....

*I'll show them. I'm just a guy with a minor problem. I'm sober ... yeah, sober, but that's*

*your philosophical straw, isn't it dumb shit? Sober ... that miserable word always breaks the back of your personal beast of burden. I couldn't think of a time when I didn't climb behind the wheel of my car thinking I'm sober. As a result I've been a guest of two counties, spending the best part of two nights in each of their lovely jail facilities. I was sober then, too. Yeah, right. Think it's time you admitted you're an alcoholic? There, I'd said it, well thought it, but the important part was I admitted it, right? I'm an alcoholic ... that's what I am all right.*

"Mr. Rowley?"

I dropped the People Magazine I was about to open. A short, heavy-set woman in an orange and green Muumuu stared at me. I raised my finger although I was still the only one in the vast waiting room.

*My finger shook. What the hell is this? I stopped at the Lamplighter and hit the mahogany, I steadied up.*

"That's me." I said, my voice breaking.

*Christ, I sound like I got a throat full of broken glass. Did I slur any words? I'm sure I didn't. I'm definitely cool.*

The woman extended her hand as I approached. "I'm Dr. Majewski," she said sounding tired; a been-there-done-this-too-many-times, kind of tired.

I took her hand. It felt like gripping a half-inflated balloon ... squishy.

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor." I managed to push my quivering lips into a smile, I hoped.

"Follow me, please." Her voice was flat, no inflections of any kind. She closed the file she was carrying and did an about-face that would've made a D.I. proud. I followed obediently as she rolled away.

At first it was easy keeping up with her lumbering frame. We walked a couple of halls with highly polished linoleum tiles, my shoes squeaking away. After a couple of turns, the hall flooring turned into Astro-Turf-like carpet. My toe caught on a seam and I stumbled. I caught my balance on the wall. The Doc threw me a look over her shoulder, a mixture of exasperation and disgust.

*I got a bad leg, what do you want? I wanted to scream at her.*

Instead, I kept my rage in check ... inside. It beat there at the back of my eyeballs like a madman pounding on a kettledrum. Before I knew it, she had stopped next to an open doorway. She indicated a closet-sized office, and with a hand gesture, invited me in.

I dropped into the only chair without casters while she closed the door and swallowed the one with casters. She swiveled her gelatinous mass around to face her littered desk. I felt sorry for the chair, her abundance overflowing and surrounding the poor thing.

I wondered what I'd do if the chair just collapsed. I didn't have much time to contemplate, she opened my file and I watched her study several orange highlighted sentences and what looked like paragraphs. The file was thick and it dawned on me it was my medical history. I sat forward and saw even more orange highlighted passages; the Doctor had done her homework.

"I hope ... I think I'm close to the end," I said, voice shaking, "I ... I need this program." The squeaky sounding words came out of me unbidden.

*Where the hell did that come from, panic maybe? I wondered. My forehead felt slick with sweat and I licked my lips with a sandpaper tongue.*

She rotated toward me and the look in her eye carried the same message I saw in the hall when I tripped. If it wasn't contempt on her face, it was a reasonable facsimile thereof.

*Oh, God. I felt a queasy ache in my stomach. I started to tremble. I'm scared and not sure why. I tried to soldier up ... I don't need their fucking program, right?*

Her eyes, I noticed for the first time, were dark brown. I also noticed her demeanor had changed. Instead of contempt she looked as serious as an empty bottle of booze.

"I've gone over your file in depth, Mr. Rowley," she said. "You're spot-on with your diagnosis. I'll recommend admittance, but I'll give you the truth, based on my observations of you this morning. Truth is what we deal in here, it's something you will have to get used to immediately. It's my professional opinion you'll never complete our program, but I'll call you with the details. Who knows, I've been surprised before."

I nodded and stood on shaking legs, but I still had some dignity left. "I wasn't aware you made snap decisions here. Perhaps we'd best not waste my time or that of your program. I'll go my way and you can pick a more likely candidate."

I made the doorway and started to turn back down the hall the way we came when her voice stopped me cold. "You're free to make any decision you choose, Mr. Rowley, but based on your medical record, I don't think you'll survive another year without this program."

I busted back into her office and stood over her. "You're a self-righteous ...."

"Bitch," she finished for me. "I could be wrong about you. Have you come to a conclusion about your situation?"

"If you mean have I reconciled to the fact I'm an alcoholic, the answer is yes, that's what I am."

"I'd like to hear you say it out loud, Mr. Rowley," she said, looking up at me.

"I thought that's what I did say ... just now," I said. I was starting to lose it.

"You used the word in a sentence, but you haven't yet put that word in a personal context."

I bent forward putting my face close to hers. "I, Tom Rowley, am an alcoholic. Is that Goddamn good enough for you?"

"That's good, Mr. Rowley, Goddamn good. That's the first and most important step in getting well. I'll set you up for a preliminary visit to our Vallejo hospital's clinic. They'll call you with a day and time."

I turned to leave, but she had one final word. "Just so we're clear, Mr. Rowley? Vodka isn't odorless ... that's a myth."

~ 0000 ~

### Nightmare's Reality

"Remember, Mrs. Rowley," Dr. Chadrahia said, "no visitors for another two weeks, but you can view him through the one-way glass."

Mrs. Rowley and her brother, Sam Bacon, crowded around an eighteen-inch square of glass in the door. "Can he see us, Doctor?" Sally Rowley asked.

"No, he cannot. It is one-way glass. We don't want him upset. That is the purpose of isolation. Please don't tap on the glass or make any attempts to get his attention."

Tom Rowley lay curled on his left side facing the wall on a bed with a plastic covered mattress. He wore institutional white pajamas. To Sally Rowley he looked dead.

"Is he asleep or drugged? He looks so cold." Mrs. Rowley said.

"He's lightly sedated, but sleeping in peace," Dr. Chadrahia said. "The room is heated to an adequate temperature and you'll note the restraints are removed. He's making excellent progress."



We'll go to my office now. I'll be happy to answer any further questions you may have."

"I don't understand," Mrs. Rowley said to her brother, Sam. "He hasn't had a drop in fifteen years. Why now?"

"The booze addled his brain, honey. My guess is Alzheimer's and what's his strongest memory ... booze, he remembers booze, Sally, not you. I tried to tell you not to marry the asshole."

"Don't talk about him that way, Sam. He's trying. He's sick," Sally Rowley said, her voice a choked whisper. "He can get well, I know he can. Don't talk about him like that again, Sam."

"Jesus Christ, you're stubborn. You know that, don't you?" Sam said from between clenched teeth.

"This way, please," Doctor Chadrahia said in a soft conciliatory voice, a smile splitting his face in half.

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"Tom-Tom?"

He heard a soft voice, but he couldn't see anyone. A black gloom filled the space in front of his eyes. Where was the speaker? The velvet-like timbre of the voice indicated a female.

"Do I know you?" He asked.

"Come on Tom-Tom." The feminine teasing tones caressed his ear ... mink soft. The voice scared the shit out of him and he didn't know why.

"I can't see," his voice trembled as he mouthed the words. "Where the hell's the light?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "Your eyes are closed. Why are your eyes closed?"

He could feel the breath of her words wash over his face. She was close ... face-to-face ... he shuddered.

"My eyes are open, for Christ's sake. Who the hell are you?" His insides rolled and quivered in a fear he didn't understand.

*Am I going to shit myself again? What's going on?* He wondered. His fear grew legs and crawled into his throat.

"You're cute," she crooned. "I always thought so. Open your eyes, Tom-Tom."

Her voice sounded familiar, like someone he knew, but a long time ago. It was someone he trusted at the time, but who? He didn't have a clue.

*Are my eyes closed? I'm sure they're open.* He tried to blink. *Oh Christ,* he thought, *someone's screaming again. It's only in my head,* he told himself. His eyelids wouldn't move, he couldn't open his eyes. *Don't panic ... the doctor said ....* "Never panic," he mumbled.

He took a breath ... let it out slow and saw a flicker, a patchy glow of gold. His fingers shook, but he pushed his eyelids up ... it hurt to push, but he got them open. A candle flame jittered in a table ornament shaped like an old-fashioned lantern's chimney. He recognized the smoky red fixture and it brought a smile to his face.

Tom sat at a table cluttered with a mélange of colored streamers, noisemakers and three silly pointed hats. Two brandy snifters winked in the candle's reflection. They crouched like sentinels, waiting to be filled and brought to life. They were arranged on place settings across the small table from where he sat.

An icicle spasm of fear slashed through his gut. He was holding a snifter in his palm. Tom dropped it as if it were hot and snatched his hand to his chest. The snifter landed on the placemat in front of him and rocked on its base, sparkling, dry and clean. Thank God. Relief, like a soft

summer wind, blew through his brain.

"That's better, Tom-Tom." The female said and her laugh was deep and chesty.

*She laughs like she just had great sex,* he thought. *A female, laughing like that after sex, makes a man feel like a man.*

He stared into the gloom. "I haven't been called Tom-Tom in years. Who the hell are you?" he whispered.

A woman's shape materialized from the darkness, taking form in the glow of flickering candlelight. Her oblong face had a hungry look. Sharp cheekbones highlighted her eyes and threw shadows on her jaws. Her thin mouth was unspectacular, but glistened ruby-red. Her rouge-colored tongue passed over her painted lips, leaving tiny rivulets of saliva gleaming in the creases. Flecks of yellow candlelight caught the moisture and it winked like tiny sparklers. Tom watched ... mesmerized.

"Twyla?" He mumbled. "Is that you, Twyla?"

*Impossible, it can't be. If Twyla were still living, she'd be in her seventies.*

"Course it's me, silly," she said and giggled.

He shuddered as a chill raced through his body.

Something drew her attention. Twyla turned and glanced into the gloom. Auburn locks fell in a cascade over her shoulder. The candlelight caught the red and gold tones of her hair, setting it on fire. Her hand appeared holding a bottle. She probed Tom's face with dark, liquid eyes. Her wet-lipped smile offered everything. Twyla poured amber fluid into his snifter ....

*Gurgle-lop-lop-lop.*

The sounds of the heavy liquor seemed magnified a hundred fold. The drum-like, lop-lop-lop hurt his ears, their reverberations rattling around inside his skull. Sweat burst from his scalp and trickled into his eyes.

"You were my bartender thirty years ago," he said. "I was twenty-eight and you were in your forties ... you can't be Twyla."

She ignored him and continued to pour, filling all the snifters. Tom's eyes never left her gleaming lips ... her tongue darted in and out as she poured.

He saw her mistake immediately and laughed. The relief gave him a lighter than air feeling. "Twyla would know snifters aren't meant to be filled to the brim," he crowed. "Who the hell are you?"

"She's Twyla, Tom." A hard male voice growled like bone going through a meat grinder.

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph.*

The face of the voice came into view. The surge of fear Tom felt earlier made itself known in the visage he saw before him. The man's facial muscles moved up and down, side to side. His skull expanded and compressed, his face bulged and pulled and coalesced ... first one countenance then another. Tom recognized men he admired, men he hated, men he'd known throughout his lifetime ... a scream, guttural and animal-like clawed its way up from his lungs.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his hoarse voice quivering in his ears. Terror, like that of a youngster home from school and finding his mother naked, slaughtered like a spring pig, gripped his guts.

"You've known me for years, Tom." The male thing said. He extended a hand across the table. A huge hand covered in coarse black hair, its fingernails long and dirty. A horn-like nail on the index finger shined black and extended beyond the others. Revulsion forced Tom backward, his chair tipping precariously.

"Have a drink," the male thing said, "you'll feel better."

"I'm an alcoholic," Tom said. "I haven't had a drink in fifteen years. You'd know that if you knew me."

"You're not an alcoholic anymore," Twyla said and moved in front of the male thing. She gave him a wet-smile. "You can have a couple. It's fine now ... you're cured."

Twyla was more beautiful than he remembered. She and the male thing raised their glasses in a toast. To his horror he pushed a full snifter aloft.

*Are they right? Are they right? Someone tell me ... I don't know.*

His arm bent inward. His hand brought the glass to his lips and the aroma of the liquor's odorous fumes birthed a terrible ache in his chest.

"Here's to a great party." The male thing said and howled with laughter.

The warm, smoky flavor swallowed Tom's tongue with its velvet mouth. The hot burn that followed caressed his throat. All those sensations brought tears of pleasure ... and he wept.

"Tom-Tom?" Twyla said in her kitten-soft purr. "You're back with us again. I'm so glad."

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He sat up. Looked around the bright room ... terrified. "Where am I?" He yelled. "I won't go back, I won't, I promise. Let me out of here."

Tom saw Twyla then, standing against the back wall with a huge dark figure at her side. Her hair began to drop away and the skin of her face, bare shoulders, arms and hands slid off her bones and splashed on the floor. The huge dark figure giggled showing long, sharp teeth in a wide snout, the sound like a nervous school girl before her first kiss.

Tom screamed, jumped from the bed and flattened himself against the opposite wall.

Three large men rushed through the door, grabbed him, forcing his arms into a straightjacket. He screamed and screamed until blood filled his throat and he puked. A needle pierced his neck.

Tom screamed, but the sound by then was only a gurgle. The last thing Tom saw was Twyla's skull, its boney mouth laughed her merry laugh ....

~ 0000 ~

### [Tolliver's Grade](#)

#### **Christmas Week - 2012**

"I'm ready, Daddy."

My seven-year-old daughter, Megan, stood in the foyer dressed to her nose in a red snow parka, woolen scarf and hood trimmed in white faux fur. She looked like a Christmas elf and her eyes sparkled with anticipation as I zipped my coat and took her hand.

"Megan," my wife, Sherry, called from the kitchen, "Simon, wait please." She joined us at the front door with a hand towel draped on her shoulder and spots of spaghetti sauce staining the apron she had received for Christmas.

Sherry crouched, tugging at Megan's parka as if checking the zipper for leaks. "Honey," she said in a cooing voice to Megan, "dinner is almost ready. Daddy was late tonight. I think you

should wait until tomorrow to practice."

Megan's face fell like an elevator with a broken cable. "Please Mommy, pleeeeee?" A tear trickled over her scarlet cheek.

"We won't be long, babe," I said and opened the front door. "Get your snowboard, sweetheart. I'll meet you in the garage." I gave Megan's upturned face of dismay a smile and a wink. "Let Daddy talk to Mommy for a second."

A gust of cold air bit my face as Megan slipped through the crack in the door. I kicked it closed and wrapped my wife in an embrace. Her lips had the saucy tang of her homemade pasta sauce. "Ummm," I licked my lips. "Can we spread that sauce on a few other things later tonight?"

"You're lucky I haven't put the spaghetti in the water," Sherry said and shook her finger in my face. "You shouldn't indulge her like that; can't you see it's starting to snow again?"

"It's okay, babe. I'll take her to Tolliver's Grade, just up the street. She can try a couple of runs. She'll take a tumble or two in the snow and be ready for dinner and a warm bed."

"Are you sure?" Sherry stroked my cheek. "Don't drive, okay? You look so tired."

"I'm sure, babe," I said. "I am tired, but I'll look forward to a little wine and thou in the bedroom after Megan's tucked in."

"Sherry smiled. "Ummm, I'll save the extra sauce, but be warned ... I'll make you lick up every drop.

Waste not, want not," I said, and gave her bottom a squeeze.

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Megan and I stood at the top of Tolliver's Grade. I shivered as she fooled with the binding on the snowboard. I looked down the hill at the lights of our home two hundred yards away. They looked like flickering flames in the blowing snow.

*Maybe, I thought, this isn't such a good idea after all.*

The snow came down harder. Through the increasing gloom, I saw headlights appear at the end of the cul-de-sac. They approached the grade at a slow pace. Snowflakes swirled on a slant through the shafts of odd bluish light cast by the car's halogen headlamps.

*Where did they come from?*

The car looked big, its dark shape passing at a crawl below us. Snow crunched like popping corn caused by the big car's fat tires rolling forward. The path it left filled with new snowfall as fast as it was created.

*Gotta be a Mercedes.*

"Help, Daddy." Megan's cry drew my attention; she had slipped, stepping into the snowboard binders. I managed to catch her before she and her board went down the hill. Already an accomplished skateboarder, now she was determined to master the snowboard as well.

"Master" being the operative word.

Her gloved hand found a grip on the hem of my coat as she caught her balance. Her quick fingers made fast work of the binding and she yelled, "I'm okay, Daddy. You can let go now."

"I don't like the looks of this," I said, still holding on. "I think we better go back to the house."

"Daddy," Megan moaned in her softest voice, "just one time. I want to show you what I've learned."

I looked at her eager little face, so red and glowing from the cold and anticipation. I peered

in the direction the car traveled. I saw the red glow of its taillights grow brighter; the car apparently came to a halt out of my sight for some reason. We were the only house on this cul-de-sac.

*Why are they stopped? What are they doing out here? How did they get through the gate? Are they visiting and got lost? That has to be it ... sure.*

"Wait until the car goes around the bend," I said, "okay, honey-babe? One time and we head home, deal?"

"Okay, I promise," she said and giggled. The falling snowflakes made her blink as she looked up at me. I knew what she was thinking. I knew what that little giggle of hers meant.

*I can talk Daddy into anything.*

I smiled thinking, damn if she isn't close to the truth.

I held Megan's shoulder, making sure she waited for the car to move on. Less than a minute passed before the taillights dimmed and the glow of taillights disappeared around the curve. I pointed to the plowed snow bank on the left side of that curve. "See the fresh snow bank, sweetheart? Drop into the soft snow, okay? No nonsense, just make the run ... promise?"

She showed me a pout. "Oh, Daddy, I know how to stop. You know?" She laughed, so excited she could hardly stand still. "Give me a push. Please, Mr. Policeman Daddy."

I complied and Megan crouched on the board like a pro. A quick wave and she picked up speed, disappearing into a curtain of snow. I heard her yell, "Watch me, Daddy."

I tried to pick her up in the beam of the big trouble light I brought along, but it only made my vision worse. She had moved away and down the hill faster than I thought possible.

"I'm watching, honey," I hollered.

There was a break in the wind-driven snow and I saw her wobble a little, but regain her balance with ease. I thought I saw the rosy reflection of taillights on the bank of freshly plowed snow again. An icicle of fear pierced my belly and I lost sight of Megan once more. Then she reappeared looking more confident as she neared the bottom of the hill. She headed for the banked curve as I'd told her. She was racing toward a suddenly brighter glow of taillights.

*Those are the lights of that big Mercedes ... they have to be. What the hell are they doing waiting down there? The question squalled at me, screaming like a baby in the dead of night. What the hell?*

I saw Megan lean right and go into the curve, sweeping up the side of the banked snow in a graceful arc. She was doing what I'd told her to do, but that was before the red glow reappeared. The red glow signaled some inner primal fear inside me. I recognized the warning ... it cried danger.

I blinked a flurry of snowflakes from my eyes, but it did no good. Megan had disappeared.

"Megan," I yelled.

A faint, hollow echo answered my call. I tried to run, but slipped and went to the bottom of the grade rolling and sliding on the icy snow. Regaining my feet, I shouted again, "Megan, answer me."

A hot hand of terror gripped my heart in vice-like fingers. "Megan," I shrieked.

I slipped, slid, and went down again. A jagged tear opened in the knee of my jeans, matching the bloody rip in the skin of my knee. My big light cut a swath through the gloom and falling snow as I came slipping and sliding around the curve. The big car crouched in the snow, not more than thirty yards ahead. Its bright red brake lights winked off along with the cars headlights, hiding the license plate.

A light inside went on and Megan's bright red face popped up in the rear window, tears

streaking her face. A ski-masked head appeared beside her terrified face. The man's hands gripped my daughter's throat. He wagged her head back and forth before she was jerked out of sight and the interior light winked off.

The big car's rear end ducked toward the icy roadway as the car accelerated away. My brain and body came out of their state of shock. I ran forward a few steps and fell in the snow.

A voice yelled, "Simon Halloran," the words following carried to my ear on the wind, "look for the snowboard."

Only the gusting howl of blowing snow remained. "Megan," I screamed. "Megan," I whimpered, dropping my forehead to the snow covered pavement.

I don't recall how long I huddled on hands, knees and forehead. Long enough to lose some skin as I jerked my head up and climbed to my feet. My need to find Megan's snowboard finally broke through the state of shock paralyzing my body. Blood trickled in my eyes and I staggered backward searching the banked snow for Megan's board. I went down several times, jarring my tailbone on the pavement. I was shaking with cold when I finally saw it through the swirling snow, jammed heel first in the bank. It leaned like a broken fence post to the left. The manufacturer's logo, a bright orange smiley face wearing a silly black clown hat, mocked me. Above the logo, and below the tilt of the toe, an envelope was duct taped to the board. It fluttered in the wind.

Darkness descended and the silence of the night roared in my ears. Tears filled and overflowed my eyes adding to the blood running down my face. I looked dumbly at the bloodstained snow at my feet. Something told me to move or die where I stood. I was quaking so bad I could hardly walk. I managed to pull the snowboard from the snow bank. Like a man with a bad case of palsy, I staggered toward home to my waiting wife and her spaghetti sauce which would go to waste tonight.

~ 0000 ~

### [Mompa's Garden](#)

**Riversbend, Wyoming  
Sunday, May 28, 1965**

For some, death comes on feet of stealth. For others, it arrives amid cries of agony and fear. Death is a great equalizer. It favors none, ethnicity be damned. It gathers young and old, weak and strong, brave and cowardly. It steals the loved from the living, and in its wake, death leaves sorrow; a smothering shroud of grief that enfolds those who still draw breath. Like a dry cleaner's suit bag, misery clings, suffocating those death's visit has left behind.

She was not of my flesh and blood, but I am not immune. My breath ... my life is smothered in her loss as well.

Mompa's vegetable garden is parched and rife with wilt. The neglected ground Mompa once nurtured lies dry, puckered and cracked. The tomato vines she so lovingly cared for hang limp, showing white, shriveled leaves in the pale sunshine. Death's anguish molders in my gut like a pus-filled boil.

My ex-wife found Mompa lying among her beloved tomato plants. Laura called me from her

mother's bungalow, but the tiny house was empty when I arrived. I found Mompá face down in the dirt of the garden she loved, alone and unattended. Laura had left to run errands, she explained later. Mompá was two days dead ... I was stunned. Laura lived with her mother. How had she failed to miss her? One look out the back door would reveal her body lying in plain sight. I wondered what explanation Laura would invent when I asked that question. I knew the truth and soon, Laura would know I was aware of her activities. Laura was in for a surprise.

Now, as I gazed at Mompá's garden, I saw how the vegetables seemed to mimic the fate of their gardener ... neglected, wilted and lifeless. Decay had begun. Soon they would join Mompá and return to the dust that bore them and sustained them.

Mompá's heart pumped for seventy-six years before it decided enough was enough. Mompá was my friend, a mother and father-in-law combined. When I asked for her daughter's hand in marriage, some twenty-five years ago, she said: "Call me Mom or Pa. Just don't call me Mrs. or ma'am." She was the only Mom or Pa I ever knew and I called her Mompá from that day forward.

Mompá was a woman's woman and a man's dream. I learned later, she could be a wayward man's nightmare at the same time. Not long after I married Mompá's daughter, I became a wayward man. I didn't start out that way, but Laura had bad in her blood and she had a way of causing unpleasant things to follow along.

Mompá's birth name was Agnes Lisa Morre. Lisa is pronounced Ly-za and the Morre is pronounced plain old More. Thinking of trivialities, like the pronunciation of Mompá's name, rocked me with a guilty fist. Her wake was a crowded affair. I had escaped through the kitchen door of the one bedroom bungalow and followed the pea gravel path to her vegetable garden. There, I thought, I would find the appropriate place to say my thanks and whisper my private goodbyes.

The hard, hollow sound of dirt thudding against her coffin's lid came back to me and I felt a rush of shame. I'd failed to confess my love for her while she lived. Tears put the sting of maddened wasps in my eyes. Why? The question was too late asked. Its answer's meaning as dead as the body I helped to bury that morning. I would carry the pain of that thoughtless omission every waking moment.

My attachment to Mompá grew out of a bad habit called slow self-destruction. Mompá was the woman who opened my eyes to an eternal truth: The search for the bottom of a liquor bottle is not found by ingesting the liquid in the container.

I married Laura Agnes Morre straight out of high school. Laura and I were not an item during our school years, but we dated in our senior year. Off and on ... sort of ... the fact we got together at all, plays in my head like a bad cliché. Laura was the beautiful cheerleader and I was the football and baseball jock of Riversbend Polytechnic High School ... rah ... rah ... rah.

Three months after our senior prom, Laura saw me at the drug store and announced she was pregnant. Recalling my bad boy attitude at the time, I can't think why I didn't tell her tough shitski, y'all. I was a nutcase, a wild screwball after graduation. I'd never had a real home. I was raised by a so-called uncle who was mostly drunk or getting there, depending on the time of day.

I felt the sharp planes of my cheekbones tighten as I remembered those early years. I was not the product of a good upbringing. Parental guidance was something I joked about. Yet, I thought I knew what a man should do. A man who got a girl pregnant took responsibility. I liked to watch old movies and the good guy always took the highroad. I imagined my responsible action would show certain snoots in Riversbend, Wyoming; Henry Daniel Straker was not a piece of trash.

My decision to settle down surprised my buddies and I vowed I would be a good husband and father. A month following our wedding, I came home after a long day of cleaning horse stalls. While she nuked frozen macaroni and cheese for our supper, Laura told me she'd lost our baby. At the time, I thought her reaction to this traumatic event was shock ... Laura had shed no tears over the loss of our child. My naiveté in matters concerning human gestation became obvious a year later. During a routine physical, I brought up my wife's miscarriage. "Is Laura still okay, Doc? Can she still have kids after her miscarriage?"

"I didn't treat her for a miscarriage, Hank," he said. "I didn't treat her pregnancy. Who diagnosed her?" the Doctor asked, looking hurt.

I confronted Laura with my discovery. Dry-eyed yet again, Laura admitted her lie. She'd never been pregnant. She wanted to be free of Mompa's control and marriage seemed the perfect solution. That night marked the beginning of my romance with liquor. After too many addled nights and blurred weekends, Laura and I divorced. We were married twenty-nine months.

My life stepped aboard the skids and began a rapid descent into the land of the lush. I had no idea how to handle being used. Despite the divorce, Mompa stepped in and took charge. Mompa was a woman who loved big and she made my salvation her personal mission. Like a fresh, green cocklebur, she fastened herself to my life and never let go. Her patience was remarkable. I cringe when I remember the nights she sat with me as I raved about furry bugs on the wall. I remember her phone calls, forcing me from a bed filled with countless hangovers. Before I realized what was happening, a sob racked my body.

"Henry?"

I jumped at the sound of that familiar voice; I recognized its timbre and inflection. I didn't turn or acknowledge my name. I hoped my silence would indicate I had nothing to say. My hopes disappeared as her feet mulched the pea gravel path ... crunch ... crunch ... crunch. The sounds of her footsteps moved in my direction.

I turned away from her approach and wiped the tears from my cheeks. Her voice, when it next came, was close by my left shoulder. "Henry? What the hell are you doing out here? I'd like a little privacy," she said. "Can you do something ... get these people to leave?"

I turned, and as usual, wasn't ready for the surprise. Prior to Mompa's death, I'd received an invitation announcing my high school reunion ... class of 1955. Twenty years had passed, give or take a month, but time's finger failed in its attempt to alter the face and body of Laura Morre. She still had the look of a high school cheerleader, but, and there's always that but, if you looked past the makeup, her eyes gave the first clue to the hard years she put in. When she spoke, her voice had a coarse sound. Too many cigarettes for too many years. Her words and how she delivered them, signaled a callous disregard for all but her own desires and comforts. Along with her obvious disregard for any type of social decorum, she left little doubt of the loveless character hidden beneath the surface beauty remaining.

"I'm here for Mompa," I said, "to pay my respects."

"Her name was Agnes, Henry. I wish you'd can the Mompa shit. Your eyes are red. Don't tell me you've been out here crying ... Jesus Christ. Did you think she was your mommy?" Her smile was not even mocking, it was simply cold.

"Laura," I said. "You haven't changed a bit. You're the same cold bitch I married out of high school. When your time comes, your wake will be a quiet one. Bet the damn ranch on it. Now, what makes you think I'll do anything you ask?"

Laura smirked and it was better than a cold shower for me. "I'll tell you why, Mr. do-good. You serve the people of this hick Burg and right now, I'm the people."



I stared at that petrified face. Studied the hard angry lines around her mouth and shuddered. A breeze came up, pushing the fragrance of wild prairie flowers ahead of it. It was a fresh, fruit like smell, mixed with the aroma of fertile soil, fresh turned.

"You're right," I said. "I serve the people hereabouts, but you're just one. There are sixty odd folks in your mother's house and they deserve a little time to say goodbye."

Laura returned my stare. A few more lines appeared around her eyes and deep slashes cut away from her nostrils. She opened her mouth to speak, but I held up a hand. "Before you go on about my duty, I've got a question. Did Mompá .... I beg your pardon. Did Agnes talk to you about problems with her garden, specifically her tomatoes? See, I'm curious. I found her where you left her, out here in the garden. She wasn't dressed for gardening and I'm wondering why I found her lying in tomato vines, face down in the dirt?"

Laura opened her mouth to answer, but heavy footfalls coming our way made her turn instead. A tall young man with premature graying hair approached. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, starched white on white shirt and muted burgundy tie with matching hanky in the breast pocket. I might've been intimidated, dressed in my khaki twill shirt and pants, but my black, spit shined cowboy boots sported a glossy finish and my beaver Stetson was square on my head, so I relaxed. As he covered the remaining distance between us, I noticed his black wingtips with their thick, rubber soles. My shine had his beat by a mile and that made me smile.

Laura stiffened at the stranger's intrusion on our conversation. He stopped a few feet away and gave us a hard look. "We found it, Sheriff Straker, right where you said it would be," his voice was flat and hard like the pea gravel underfoot. He didn't smile, but moved to his left a bit to block the path back to the house.

I nodded and said, "She doesn't have much imagination, does she?"

Laura tried to turn toward me, but I stopped her, grabbing her wrist and twisting her arm up behind her back. I snapped a cuff on her right wrist, grabbed her left arm and cuffed that wrist as well. As I guided her toward the DEA agent, Laura looked up at me, her eyes attempting to look pleading and innocent, but the emptiness inside her couldn't hide. Her white face had the look of eroded sandstone.

A few steps separated us from the government man when Laura started to struggle. "What the hell?" she yelled. "What do you think you're doing Henry?"

"Laura Agnes Morre," I said in my professional voice, "you're under arrest for the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamines. This gentleman's name is Philip Randolph; he's with the Drug Enforcement Agency. They're part of the Treasury Department, in case you're wondering. He was kind enough to allow me the honor of cuffing you. He'll take you into custody now and serve you with a federal warrant for your arrest. When you've done your federal time, I'll be right here.

Laura looked over her shoulder at me. "I'm not ...."

I cut her off, "It was good of you to, what did you call it? run errands, that's right. Yeah, that was the same day you called me about Mompá. At first I thought you were callous, later I realized you're just stupid. Your absence gave me reason to legally look around. Once I got Mompá off the ground and cared for, I did just that ... it was dumb, Laura, very dumb, leaving her outside like that. I found the scuffmarks on the floor in the basement right off. It was laughable. I pulled on the workbench and ... well, hell, you know what I found. You know where your cooker is, don't you, Laura?"

You set up in the wrong place. The fumes leeches through the ceiling boards of that old root cellar. Mompá called a couple of weeks ago, asking me to have a look. Said she was having

trouble with her tomato plants, but I was too busy chasing druggies around my county and didn't get time.

Death in the commission of a felony carries the death penalty here in Wyoming. I'll be waiting right here along with the people of Riversbend County. We'll be anxious to settle accounts with you."

~ 0000 ~

## The Stopper

### **San Francisco International Airport**

**Sunday - November 12, 1972**

**3:14 a.m.**

Haldstad had enough of being bumped, jostled, cramped and squeezed into a seat designed for a person half his size. Once clear of the airliner, he bulled his way through the departure tunnel. When he saw the empty arrivals gate, and concourse beyond, he was surprised, but took it as a good omen and walked in the direction of baggage claim and parking.

Not able to use the tiny toilet facility on the plane, his bladder was about to burst. Thoughts of his warm bed, a soothing cup of tea before surrendering to sleep, would have to wait. The insistent need to urinate made finding a men's room a priority. He recalled seeing a facility near the escalators for the parking garage, but hoped he could find something closer and increased his pace. He silently grumbled, as his stride lengthened, over thirty-one hours of sleep he wasn't going to get back. Frustration built as he failed to find a toilet facility for men in the immediate area. His irritated state of mind increased exponentially with every long stride he took.

The struggle to control the increasing desire to urinate caused him to consider using one of the many waste containers along the concourse. It seemed there were an abundance of women's facilities, but men's ... forgetaboutit. Anger threatened the tenuous grip he had on his overtaxed bladder and bad temper. To ameliorate the situation, he rethought the Chicago job. The briefing portrayed it as an uncomplicated piece of work. Contact, explain the realities, and fly home, simple.

He was skeptical from the get-go. The last few "uncomplicated" assignments all went south. Some of the ramifications proved more serious than others, but bottom line, sloppy results were noticed; pristine work was expected and thus went unnoticed. The humiliating part for him was accepting responsibility, when it was the planning phase that turned a good assignment bad. He had received no reprimands to date, but had little doubt The Old Man kept tabs.

In Chicago, he put two men down. That wasn't in the plan, but things went south. He could argue, if called on the carpet, the fault wasn't his, but self-doubt had him by the balls. Deep inside the core of him, he had come to believe his proficiency inadequate. Something happened that night and it couldn't be blamed on age alone. The keen edge of his skills seemed to have dulled. He had to call his ability to perform effectively into question. This epiphany during the flight home helped solidify his resolve. The Chicago men left him no choice. That much was

true. But in Haldstad's mind, that fact failed to mitigate the disastrous circumstances. The acrid taste of fiasco churned like masticated lime pulp in his throat.

He continued to scan the near-empty concourse for a toilet as he moved toward his destination. The lack of people at three-thirty in the morning he considered a gift of the Gods. SFO was generally a busy place at all hours. He was moving faster as he neared the baggage area and at last, he spotted a men's facility. Haldstad practically ran through the entrance.

The smell of urine-tainted disinfectant permeated the empty tiled room. Haldstad set his attaché and collapsible umbrella on the shelf above the urinal and sighed. Sometimes the joy of urination was better than sex. His tall, broad-shouldered, rangy musculature made air travel a curse. The in-flight toilets were difficult, if not impossible to use and coach seating ... he didn't want to think about the tiny seats or cramped leg room. His mind drifted. Again, he anticipated the welcoming warmth of his bed, but the click, clack, click of luggage wheels ratcheting over the floor tiles put him on full alert.

*Damn my luck*, he thought.

The luggage carrier's irritating wheel noise interrupted his first pleasurable moments since leaving the United 747 that delivered him from Chicago. Over his shoulder, he glimpsed a small, dapper man, a passenger he remembered from the red-eye flight. Short and stocky, Haldstad guessed the man was near his age, but a few years older. The natty dresser disappeared behind the tiled partition separating the urinals from the stalls.

Haldstad's tired brain would not be shut off. Years of training saw to that. With one quick glance he observed expensive loafers with tassels, a rumpled silk suit, tailor-made Italian, for sure, and a large diamond pinky ring. The ring sparked fire as the man pulled a strange looking suitcase behind him. A platinum Rolex pushed at the French cuff of his left arm. The clacking noise stopped and Haldstad heard the squeak of a stall door.

He shook off and zipped up as two kids slouched through the doorway. They ignored him, but long years of smelling danger left him with a sensitive warning system ... and now it was screaming trouble.

*Mr. Silk Suit, Pinky Ring, Rolex is in deep shit*, ran through Haldstad's mind.

He saw the kids exchange a street smirk. They slow shuffled in the direction the older man took. Haldstad rubbed his tired eyes. "Son-of-a-bitch," he grumbled and grabbed his attaché and collapsible umbrella. He hoped he was wrong, but he knew damn well that wasn't the case.

The kid sporting dreadlocks was the smaller of the two and didn't look like much. Dreadlocks stood six-feet, maybe six-one in height, but to Haldstad that was small. The banger wore street gangsta baggies. The loose clothes emphasized his skinny frame. Deadlocks' buddy was a different story. Haldstad thought this kid looked like a monster out of a low budget movie. The huge man-child patronized the same tailor, but all similarity ended there. This kid stood an inch taller than Haldstad's six-five and his baggies couldn't hide the three hundred plus pounds he carried.

Monster kid was of Samoan descent, but to Haldstad's politically correct bosses, he was required to refer to Monster as a Pacific Islander. Department policy dictated Pacific Islander was the proper terminology for residents or immigrants of Fiji, Tonga, Hawaii, etc. He wondered if Samoans or other real people living in this idiotic political climate gave a shit. Before he made a final decision to step around the partition, he paused. Haldstad couldn't be more tired and he wasn't getting any younger.

*Do I really need this shit? Monster's a big boy. If I go in, I'll have to end it quick ... no Mr. Nice Guy.*

Haldstad shook his head. This deal had all the earmarks of more sloppiness and then some. His good sense told him to avoid the situation and walk away, but even as that idea took form, he knew it wasn't an option. The crash of a metal door and a terrified shout, followed by the wet smack of flesh on flesh, made his decision easy. The sounds of struggle reverberated off the tile walls as he stepped around the barrier.

"Get the ring, Shank, the fucking ring, man." Monster's bass voice echoed off the walls. The big Samoan's broad back blocked Haldstad's observation of the festivities. Then, like a jack-in-the-box, the dreadlocked kid called Shank, jumped into view. Haldstad grinned as he watched Shank hold the man's platinum Rolex high in the air.

"Yo, get the ring, Sammo. Yo see this mutha fucka? This a Roll-ee-x, man. This mutha fucka get our blow for a long time, Sam-ee-oh."

Shank's eyes swallowed the watch as he held it high, turning it, watching the gleaming platinum catch the light.

*The kid's blasted*, Haldstad thought. Crack, black tar, it didn't matter, with adrenaline pumping through his system, the kid was bopping, shaking and rolling where he stood.

Haldstad watched Shank's dreadlocks bounce to rhythms only he could hear. He felt like laughing out loud, but someone could get hurt at the end of this scenario. Otherwise, a Laurel and Hardy comedy routine came to mind.

Monster pushed Shank out of his way, but Dreadlocks didn't notice. He was busy doing his powwow dance. Shank shook the Rolex, laughing as each sparkle of light caught his eye. His right hand was busy with a bundle of three short pieces of concrete reinforcing rod. He tapped at the air as he danced; the steel rods, wrapped in black electrical tape, had the look of a lethal club.

*Not a bad beater if your victim's lying around waiting to get beat on. If your target's fighting back it's gonna be too damn heavy.* "Not good for quick work, sonny," Haldstad murmured.

The Samoan forced his way into the toilet stall. Haldstad heard a brittle pop followed by a weak cry. He was sure Monster had busted the old guy's pinky finger. He quickly plotted a diversion, hoping to refocus the attention of the two bangers, when he noticed Shank had stopped his little dance. The kid's eyes had finally zeroed in on the tall man at the end of the partition watching their action.

"Yo, Sammo ... we gots us another one," Shank said, sounding happy and high.

The Rolex disappeared in the voluminous folds of his pants. The skinny banger stepped forward and reached across his body, nudging Sammo's huge ass with the rebar club. "Hurry up, man. I'm thinking this other old guy's got more for us."

Shank stood in a wide-legged stance, the rebar club resting on his shoulder as he eyeballed Haldstad. His attitude shouted insolence and arrogance at the same time. Haldstad saw hate shine in Shank's eyes and bleed into a cold smile, thinning the banger's lips.

The kid's try at growing a mustache had turned out wispy. His soul patch was even more pathetic. Everything about this adversary indicated threat, yet Haldstad's brain was thinking how ludicrous these two looked. He forced his mind to take the problem seriously, but a lack of focus coupled with disjointed memories interfered. This happened as recently as Chicago, a far more dangerous operation dealing with far more dangerous people. He walked away from that job with The Old Man's message delivered, but left two dead and one crippled. There were no other words for the collateral damage but sloppy execution.

It all stemmed from wandering attention and loss of focus. Exactly, he realized, what was happening at this moment. How could he hope to continue operating in this kind of atmosphere?

The answer was he couldn't. Now, he was committed and there was nothing left to do, but deal with the situation as quickly and quietly as possible. In this business, to think about anything but the mission at hand, was an invitation to disaster.

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*Stick figures ... this dumb kid, with his baggie clothes and dreadlocks, brings back memories of stick figure scarecrows.*

Haldstad remembered the crude, cross-like forms he saw passing through Iowa and Nebraska. He had watched mile after mile of corn, bean and wheat fields go sailing by his window. He was on a bus at the time, the ride given courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps. May of 1950 or was it June. He couldn't be certain anymore.

*How does this kid survive, long hair in ropes, clothes three times too big, lots of stuff enemies can get a hold of and establish leverage? The kid was an idiot.*

He shook his head and flashed back to the two men in Chicago. They wore big, loose fitting overcoats and leather-soled shoes. Given those kinds of easy opportunities, Haldstad could cause considerable damage to an opponent's body parts. The damage he inflicted often times turned out fatal, based on his use or lack of use of certain skills. Each situation, of course, dictated its own terms of conduct. People with guns didn't live long around Haldstad.

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Pinky Ring, Rolex seemed to be fighting back. Monster, who Haldstad remembered was called Sammo, was limited by the confines of the toilet stall and having a tough time. The stall unit shook and creaked as the two men tussled. He heard the wet snap of a slap and the old man's scream, "Gino, Gino? Where the fuck you at? Get this fat piece of shit off me."

Sammo's head and shoulders appeared above the top of the stall. He had the old man by the lapels of his silk suit. Monster administered a head butt and the old man went limp. Sammo let his victim drop into the toilet.

Haldstad returned his attention to Shank and the kid grinned. One front tooth sparkled gold, the other had long ago been chipped, its edges brown and black. "What you say, Gino, you be Gino, right, old man? You gonna save your friend, Ginoman?"

The kid waved the rebar club in front of him and swaggered forward. Haldstad shook his head, not sadly, but to clear the fuzz. He considered his lack of sleep and realized his brain function would be slower.

*How much longer can I run on instincts? I'm so tired. He blinked sand-filled eyes. Old, I'm too old for this garbage. It's time. I swear I'm going to pull my ticket. Concentration's gone to shit, I'm wearing down ... I'm sloppy. Well, fuck this asshole.*

If these kids were fucking with him, Shank and Monster would be nothing more than a good laugh. He smiled anyway. His instincts kicked in ... big time ... like old times. They always did. A familiar icy-cold flooded his body. In his youth, he had referred to the cold feeling as his "maim mode." Haldstad put his scruples away as his humanity slid into a black hole of deadly havoc.

"I think I'll hurt this prick," he mumbled to no one. His smile slipped into a full-fledged Haldstad grin. Shank, apparently, didn't see the humor of the situation, but then the kid didn't recognize the smile some people said had the look of a rabid lioness ... Shank advanced.

Haldstad backed away. He made his eyes large, darting the pupils back and forth. He formed a little O of fright with his mouth. The show of fear brought a look of cruel happiness to Shank's face. With foolish confidence, the kid moved in, pleasurable anticipation in his leer.

*Was Shank planning a bust-'em-up, bash-fest with lots of blood? Sure he was.* Haldstad's grin stretched wider. He took a few more unsteady steps backward, again glancing over his shoulder, as if looking for an escape route. The heightened show of fear had the desired effect. Shank's eyes narrowed into slits, the look of cruel happiness morphed into a vicious, predatory mask. Pointing the rebar club like a sword, the kid rushed forward.

Haldstad stepped into the attack. At the last instant, he raised the attaché case and Shank's beater was effectively deflected to the left. Haldstad's pivot to the left was near perfect and his body moved in flawless time as he drove his right elbow into the kid's sternum. Shank's club dropped to the floor. The skinny banger's face turned white, eyes growing large with surprise. His diaphragm was momentarily paralyzed and he struggled for breath. For a split second, terror showed itself in Shank's eyes. He seemed to realize, with a terrible certainty, he had made a fatal mistake.

Shank's terror blew his already bulging eyes up even larger. Had Haldstad wanted to feel sympathy for the wasted life before him, it was too late. Instincts had command of his body. He dropped the attaché and bunched the kid's shirt in his left fist. Jerking Shank's body toward him, Haldstad drove his right fist under the banger's chin. The subtle crunch of neck vertebrae was loud in the quiet of the men's room. Shank's body went slack in an instant and Haldstad allowed the lifeless flesh to settle to the floor in a boneless-like puddle.

Haldstad picked up the attaché and focused on the Samoan. Monster had finished with the old man and stood with one big arm draped on top of the stall door. He stared at Shank's body scattered on the dirty floor. Haldstad had no idea how much Monster saw. He took a couple of backward steps and shrugged.

"I'm going to fuck you up, old man," Sammo said and pushed away from the stall, reaching for the small of his back.

GUN ... Haldstad's brain shouted the warning. If Monster came out with a gun, Haldstad would kill him quick, no playing around. Firearm countermeasures flashed through his head, but Monster produced a knife ... a big Bowie-like thing you might see channel surfing at three in the morning. Monster held it low and a little to the side, cutting edge up.

*You've seen too many Brue Lee flicks ... good.*

Haldstad backed away, providing more room to maneuver. Monster came slow, his eyes taking in every move his opponent made. Sammo was smarter than his former partner, but sometimes a guy could be too smart. Monster cleared Shank's body and Haldstad moved forward. He gambled Sammo saw most of the fight with Shank. Moving closer, Haldstad swung the attaché case in a low arc back and forth, moving slowly toward Monster's knife hand.

Sammo's eye movement and body language said he had it right. Monster saw him block Shank's club with the case. The knife came up, and at the same time, Monster reached across his body. Haldstad allowed him to swat the case away with his left hand. The move opened the big man's left side and Haldstad moved fast.

The collapsible umbrella he carried was fitted with a small chrome tip two inches long, its diameter the size of a cocktail straw. When Monster crossed with his left arm, Haldstad came over the top and shoved the umbrella's chrome tip into the Sammo's left eye.

Monster's scream ripped the air, but his big hand completed its travel and slapped the attaché against the granite-tiled partition. Haldstad jerked the umbrella free and a stream of blood

pumped from Monster's eye. He clamped a big hand over the wound and his right eye blazed with hatred. Monster brought his knife hand up again, holding tight to his weapon. Face streaked with heavy sweat, his large yellowed teeth clamped down hard against the pain, knotting the tendons that quivered in his jaws.

*The banger's got balls, no doubt about it.*

Monster appeared ready to resume hostilities, but Haldstad had no more time to waste. He hit a second perfect pivot to the left, throwing a solid kick to Monster's knee. The gangsta baggies weren't quite so baggy on Sammo. The huge knife clattered on the muddy tile floor and Monster went down, curling into a fetal position. Haldstad thought he looked a lot like a wounded bear.

"Shit. Nice ... real nice," he muttered.

If he didn't move, there would be a hassle with the local cops and all for an old fucker too stupid to put his ring and Rolex in his pocket. Haldstad knew time was short. He had to get the hell out of there.

He didn't check Shank's carotid; death was not a guess to him. Monster's knee had a new angle of articulation. He grunted further dissatisfaction. He had misjudged the force of the blow to Shank's neck and the knee kick was off as well. He watched Monster leak blood into the piss and toilet papered floor of the men's room. Sammo had started out with a growl, but now his growl had become an irritating wail. Haldstad needed his warm bed and the Monster needed to shut up. He paused an extra few seconds, not wanting further miscalculations. The kick he delivered to the side of Monster's head was of a minimal impact velocity, but more than enough to stop the wailing.

Haldstad checked his fellow passenger. The old man was breathing with no difficulty. He quickly grabbed a fist full of paper towels, wet them and tapped the little guy awake. The man mumbled something Haldstad couldn't make out while he propped Pinky Ring, Rolex against the side of the stall. For the first time, he got a good look at the old man's face.

He shook his head, *Dammed if Disney isn't right. It is a small world after all.*

The old man was the mob boss Haldstad was sent to explain certain realities and the consequences of involving the Presidential daughters in drugs. Instead of meeting like gentlemen, the old man had dispatched three of his men to deal with Haldstad.

"If you're looking for me, pal," he said to the semi-conscious old man, "trust me, you don't want to find me. Try to stay awake. Never can tell when you might want to upchuck. Ain't that right, friend?" He shook the old man's shoulder. "Hear me, old man. Try to stay upright until your man get's here."

Haldstad gathered his things and disappeared down the escalator. Nothing else would deter him from home, a cup of tea, and his warm bed.

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### [Carlos and Roger](#)

Ten-year-old Carlos Estaban raised his head from the pillow, sniffed the air and rolled over. The smells of breakfast teased his nose and his stomach grumbled. He smiled, stretched, yawned and crawled from bed. Across the room, the door to the cottage's only facilities stood open.

Filled with excitement, he grabbed his pencil from the nightstand. At the doorway, Carlos reached around the doorjamb and turned on the light.

The cramped square footage contained a washbasin set in a compact cabinet, a toilet, tub and shower. Doors with locks for privacy provided entry and exit and separated the cottage's equally small two bedrooms. The night before, Carlos had measured his height, marking the molding of the doorjamb. He couldn't wait to see how much he grew overnight.

Back straight against the doorframe, Carlos stood tall and placed the barrel of the pencil on top of his head. Moving the point back and forth, he scratched a new mark on the molding. Trembling with excitement, he turned and compared marks. He frowned when he saw the difference ... the fresh mark was lower.

"How can it be? I got smaller," he mumbled. Carlos threw the pencil against the back wall where it caromed off the corner and disappeared behind the toilet.

*Why can't I grow like the other kids in fifth grade class?* He wondered.

He relieved himself and moved to the sink to wash his hands. The mirror in the medicine cabinet door reflected the top of his head, showing a ruffled mass of straight black hair. Carlos bounced on his toes, up and down, hair flopping back and forth. He wanted to stretch his body and make it grow, but it refused to cooperate. He beat his fists on the porcelain edge of sink before hooking the step stool with his toes and pulling it between his feet.

Chocolate brown eyes sparkled back at him from the mirror. Carlos tried to look stern like papa at the dinner table, but it was no good. A smile stretched his lips and a big empty space mocked his good humor.

*Where are my permanent front teeth? They should be growing.*

"Growing ... growing ... nothing about me is growing," he hissed and gave his reflection a loud raspberry.

Carlos reached for his toothbrush and a half-squeezed tube of toothpaste, taking them from the shelf of the medicine cabinet. As the door swung shut, the mirror revealed a hand shooting from behind his right shoulder. Before he could react, the hand had smothered his mouth. Carlos tried to suck in a breath, gather a scream, but a second hand snaked over his left shoulder and gripped his neck. His howl of fright was choked off in his throat, the toothpaste and toothbrush slipped from his fingers, clicking and thumping as they hit the bottom of the sink.

His eyes blew up like tiny balloons; Carlos' eyebrows disappeared into the black bangs covering his forehead. A squirt of urine wet his pajamas, as a pale, narrow face, topped by a mop of thick, oily black hair, popped like a jack-in-the-box over his right shoulder. Relief flooded Carlos' mind and his body relaxed. Roger Morgan, the Patron's only son and his secret friend, was playing "the sneak game" with Carlos again.

Carlos stood rigid, watching Roger's reflection and waiting for his scary smile of satisfaction. Roger's pasty-white face was a slender rectangle, dominated by solemn dark eyes devoid of expression. Roger showed no sign of mischief or amusement in his eyes this morning or any time in Carlos' memory.

*Roger looks sad and gloomy ... sad and gloomy all the time.*

Carlos was about to ask his friend why he looked so gloomy, when he realized neither sad nor gloomy was how Roger looked. His friend looked empty. Roger was like the zombies in the movies ... they always looked blank and scary, but maybe a little sad, too. Carlos began to choke. Roger's thumb was pressing harder against Carlos' larynx. He saw Roger show his teeth, his lips stretching tight revealing pale pink gums.

Carlos felt the urge to laugh in relief, but it was hard to laugh with your throat pinched. He



squirmed in Roger's grasp, the wetness of his crotch uncomfortable and embarrassing. Roger leaned in, pinning Carlos against the sink. Roger's lips came close to Carlos' ear as he released the younger boy's throat.

"You were surprised, right? Roger whispered. "That look on your face ... that's how surprise is supposed to look, right? Don't talk loud when I move my hand, okay? Whisper, okay?"

Carlos jerked his head up and down and Roger took his hand away. Carlos gulped a deep breath and said, "What you doing, Roger? You scare the crap out of me ... woooo."

Roger's face grew crimson spots on his cheekbones. "You were scared? You weren't surprised? I didn't surprise you?" His questions were a soft hiss in Carlos' ear.

Carlos saw a cruel, scary look crawl into Roger's dead eyes. His red cheeks and the deep lines that appeared between Roger's eyebrows were danger signals Carlos recognized. He dropped his hand to the crotch of his pajamas, feeling the dampness there.

*Jeez, what if Roger sees what I did? He'll think I'm a big baby and maybe that will make him madder.* Carlos cringed inside and tried to push closer to the sink.

"No, Roger .... I ... I mean, yeah, you surprise me. Hey, I wasn't scared. I heard you coming through the window. Yeah. I didn't think you get behind me so fast. You really surprise me, Roger ... surprise ... yeah."

"That's good, that's really good." Roger showed his teeth once more.

Carlos was used to the grim stretch of Roger's lips. He learned over the months they'd played together, that was Roger's attempt to mimic a smile.

"I need to see real surprise," Roger whispered, "I need to see what it really looks like. I want to learn ...."

Heavy footfalls sounded in the hall. Roger hunched his shoulders and made a hushing sound as heavy steps stopped at Carlos' bedroom door. A short silence was followed by a sharp rap of knuckles on the door. "Carlos? Vamos hijo.... "

Carlos put a finger to his lips. "Si, Padre, ya voy ... I'm coming."

A double rap of knuckles signaled the elder Estaban's acknowledgment. The boys listened as Carlos' father continued down the hall.

Carlos jumped off the stool, shoved it to the side and stared at his friend.

*Roger is a head taller than me, but only two years older ... it's not right. Why does God make gringos bigger?* The thought sent a flash of anger through him as he scampered back into the bedroom. *Roger must not know how pissed I am.*

"I got to hurry, Roger," he said looking at the floor. "Papa waits for me. For breakfast ... you know? I'll see you after school, okay?"

Roger shook his head and slipped his arm around Carlos' thin shoulders. "No, Carlos. Listen. I've got something to show you ... something important. You've got to see it before school, okay?"

Carlos shuddered. At times like this Roger made him feel freaky. He shook his head and took a step back, but Roger crowded closer.

"Carlos, you've got to see this, okay? You can take it to school and get extra credit, surprise mama and papa, okay?"

Carlos slipped out from under Roger's arm.

*Roger's acting real freaky today.*

Standing at the foot of his bed, Carlos pulled off his pajama top. He looked over his shoulder and Roger stood by the open bedroom window.

*How did he do that?* Carlos was sure he locked that window the previous night.

"Okay, Carlos," Roger said, "last chance." His eyes had that flat, dead look. "If you want it, you'll have to keep it a secret until after school. Carlos? Okay? You're gonna meet me at the shed, right? But you can't tell anyone ... you promise?"

Carlos pulled a smudged tee shirt from a tangle of clothes at the foot of the bed. As his head popped through the opening, he giggled and whispered, "Okay, after breakfast. I won't tell nobody, is it really neat? Will it be mine after school, you know? Do I get to keep it?"

Roger ducked his head and slipped through the window opening, his thin body moving like water flowing over the sill. He dropped to the ground and put his palms on the window casing. Roger's chin settled to the back of his hands. He stared at his friend for a long moment, nodded and said, "It'll be all yours, Carlos. Now hurry, okay? I'll be at the shed."

Carlos dropped his pajama bottoms and searched for clean underwear. It was difficult to contain his excitement and he almost forgot to wash his face and hands. He remembered to brush at the last second; mama would check him before he was allowed to sit with papa. He closed one eye and then the other, examining his teeth in the mirror.

Carlos wondered what wonderful thing Roger had to show him. Roger always had something wonderful. The Patron treated his son with great favor. If Carlos did what Roger wanted, if he didn't argue, he got to keep one of Roger's wonderful things. He didn't like some of the strange things his friend made him do. Carlos often felt funny doing what Roger demanded. Sometimes his "tasks," as he called them, felt wrong, like they might be bad, but Roger said they weren't bad. He told Carlos they were ex-per-minting ... spear-minting? Something-minting.

He decided it didn't matter, when he did what his friend wanted, he got a prize. What he hated was playing with his prizes late at night, after mama and papa were asleep. If they saw his prizes, they would know about Roger and him. They would know they played together and that would be the end.

Papa had told him: *Never mix your blood with that of the Patron, Carlos. The Patron gives the roof over your head, the food for your table and a pillow for your weary head. You must give the Patron his day of work. You must give your respect, and most important, your loyalty. You must give your blood, Carlos, but never mix. Compende', Chico?*

Carlos knew papa must be mistaken, Roger promised they would be good friends forever. Roger was scary, but they were friends. Oh, yes. Carlos bounced through the bedroom door. He wanted to run all the way to the kitchen.

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The shed was old. James Bernard Morgan, Roger's father, told him he couldn't recall the exact date of construction, but it was plain to Roger, the shed held a place of honor in his father's heart. Morgan liked to characterize his afternoon walks with Roger as strolls. Roger made himself available every afternoon at four. The daily strolls with his father always ended at the shed.

James Morgan loved to examine the small out-building and Roger knew his father would find something, always something, about the construction to point out for his son's edification. Roger often wondered if the builder might be the parent of his father's boyhood idol, Matthew Postt. Morgan's preoccupation with the structure seemed reverential, a word Roger found in the Dictionary to describe how his father acted around the old building.

Special care was taken in building the structure. Components had long ago been fashioned

with crosscut saw and fine finished with chisel and plane. Morgan refused to allow the shed to be used for storage of tools or materials. His father's edict made it simple for Roger to use the shed to create a private refuge. Roger thought of the shed as *The Shrine*. It not only became his sanctuary, but Roger used it with confidence as his laboratory.

The heavy plank door opened with ease under Roger's hand. He maintained the hinge and latch mechanisms with religious fervor. Inside, he installed a sliding bolt; privacy insurance when his "laboratory" was in use. Leaving the door ajar, he crossed to the shed's only window. Looking eastward, Roger leaned on the sill and waited for Carlos to arrive.

In the distance, the massive roof of his father's house poked above a towering twelve-foot Arrowwood hedge. The hedge separated the maintenance sheds from the mansion with its formal gardens, pristine lawns and recreational areas. The hedge ran from northeast to southwest and spanned the width of the sixty-acre Morgan property. A hundred and fifty yards farther west, a row of eucalyptus marked the property line. General John C. Fremont planted the trees himself, it was claimed, in the days of rule by the Californios.

Beyond the stand of eucalyptus, thick, thorny vines, wild berry bushes and matted vegetation fought for space with several varieties of tree. Roger and Carlos explored the huge area for many an hour. The boys chose the feral land to build an elaborate fort over a summer. The forbidding acres were known in the region as the Low Breaks. This domain of nature served as a cushion between the Morgan property, California State Highway One, and the rugged, rocky cliffs standing guard over the pounding surf of the Pacific Ocean.

Sooner than Roger expected, Carlos darted through a trimmed arch in the hedge. He carried a brown paper bag in one hand, a small book satchel in the other. He skipped along as he cleared the opening and on seeing the shed, broke into a trot. Eagerness washed his face with the anticipation of a new adventure with his friend.

Roger moved behind the door, his rapid footfalls silent on the packed earthen floor. On a fire-block beside the door, he picked up a hard rubber mallet he'd stolen from the mansion's pantry. The anatomy book he studied indicated several points on the human cranium where short-term unconsciousness would occur if struck. Roger needed five minutes tops. A spot behind the ear in the mastoid area was perfect for his purpose. The area, he thought, would be the least likely to cause death, if his strike was harder than planned. Above all, Roger needed Carlos alive.

Carlos pushed the door open and entered the shed. Roger peered around the edge of the door and saw the boy looking to the right as he whispered, "Roger?"

Roger's hand descended in a vicious arc, coming into contact with the Carlos' head behind his right ear. The blow landed at the precise point Roger had researched. Carlos collapsed like a marionette with broken strings.

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The first sensation Carlos felt, as he regained consciousness, was intense pain behind his right ear. The pain caused Carlos to pull a breath. He wanted to cry, but it was hard. Now, he felt as if he were suffocating. He tried to open his mouth for more air, but his jaw wouldn't move. In the darkness, he heard the rustle of clothing and Carlos forced his eyes to open. Colors were mixed up and everything was blurry. He blinked and tried to wipe his eyes, but found his arms wouldn't move. Terror seized him. Panic produced a scream, but the only sound he heard was a muffled mewling.

Carlos tried to kick, but his legs and feet were bound tight. He raised his head to look and saw shiny gray duct tape circling his body. He began to cry ... and choke. He struggled, trying to use his strength to break the tape on his arms and wrists, but the tape was stronger. His feeble kick with both feet was more frustration than any attempt to escape his bonds. Gagging, choking, crying, Carlos recognized Roger crouching over him.

*Roger's staring at me. His eyes are so black. Why don't they blink? ... he's studying me like I'm one of his bugs pinned on his corkboard.*

Snot streamed from his nose. Carlos made another mewling sound, hoping to encourage Roger to cut the tape and set him free.

"You're doing well, Carlos. Is that futility you feel? Do you feel trapped? Is that why you're making those silly sounds?"

Carlos kicked again. He managed to bend his knee a bit and struggled against the tape, but it tired him and he couldn't breathe anymore ... he stopped kicking and lay still. Carlos gathered one last big breath and screamed, but again, the sound was more muffled mewling.

Wide eyed, he watched Roger approach. Carlos panicked when Roger covered his nose with a handkerchief. But his friend pulled one end of the tape away from his lips and spoke in a flat, toneless voice. "Blow, come on Carlos, blow, one more time now. Big breath ... good, good."

Carlos' eyes began to clear. He blinked several times. Roger hovered above him, wiped his nose for him, but before Carlos could form a word, he pushed the tape back in place. Snot covered Carlos' lips and the adhesive didn't stick well.

Most of his senses had returned. His eyes, clear now, darted around the room. When Carlos looked up, Roger showed his teeth. "Do you understand what we're doing? You don't, do you?"

Carlos searched his friend's face with trusting brown eyes and wagged his head.

"I admit I tricked you. This isn't a new game. You won't be able to take it to school. You will get extra credit ... from me. You're going to provide a very important service, Carlos."

Roger stood and moved out of Carlos' line of sight. Panic filled his mind and he twisted his head and shoulders. Roger heard the commotion, but paid no attention. He crossed the room and opened a small cabinet. He positioned his body to block any view Carlos might have of his activities. Carlos strained to see what Roger was doing, but it was no good. At best he could see Roger's arm moving back and forth ... up and down ... back and forth. Carlos gave up and relaxed against the restraints. Slowly, ever so slowly, the tape holding his arms, and feet seemed to loosen a little. Carlos could move his wrists and his arm, just a little.

*I will fool Roger. I will get loose and run. I will never play with Roger again. Oh, Holy Father, I promise.*

Carlos heard a faint scraping. A louder scratchy sound filled the shed and more fear washed over him. Carlos saw Roger close the cabinet. He turned and slipped his hands behind him before he crossed the little room to stand over Carlos again. Roger crouched, staring into his playmate's eyes. Carlos saw the same face he had seen that morning in the medicine cabinet's mirror. He pushed against the tape ... it loosened a little more.

Roger took one hand from behind his back. Using the tips of his fingers, he wiped the sweat beaded on Carlos' forehead, brought his fingers to his nose and sniffed. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

*Gringos ask such stupid questions.*

Roger toyed with the loose end of the tape covering his mouth. Carlos thought Roger meant to remove the tape. Hope set a shiver of excitement through Carlos's chest, but then Roger took his hand away.

*What is Roger doing?* Carlos didn't understand what was going on. Roger seemed to study every twitch of his face. He stared into Carlos' pleading brown eyes, but Roger failed to do or say anything. Roger shook his head and stood. He looked angry ... *at him at something he did?* Carlos wondered. *Did he see my wet underpants? Did he know I wet them when he scared me, not surprised me? Did he know that? How could he know that?*

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Roger's biggest failing to date, he was sure, was his lack of ability to positively interpret the movements of the human, facial muscles.

*How are those movements related,* he wondered. *It's essential I learn how this works. What each movement means and how it relates to what emotion.*

He had dedicated himself to getting it right. He stooped and studied Carlos again, especially his face; and then his body. Roger noted the boy's forehead was wrinkled.

*Is that a sign of confusion?*

He didn't know and couldn't recall seeing that emotion yet. At least, he didn't think he'd seen it. Roger realized Carlos was trying to show him something and, as if, the boy read his mind, Carlos shrugged and scrunched up his eyes, which also wrinkled his forehead.

Roger leaned in closer. "Are you confused?"

Carlos moved his head up and down.

Roger stood, wiped his hand on his handkerchief and looked toward the window. The experiment wasn't progressing as he planned. He didn't want confusion. Confusion could be a bonus, he supposed, but what he suspected in the Estaban bathroom that morning, he now knew to be correct. Roger's attempt to surprise Carlos only scared him ... just scared him. Carlos ... the little shit ... lied to him, how could Roger be sure what surprise looked like. Carlos lied to him. Wasted his time again.

A tingling heat began in his head and descended through his neck. It spread downward, into his chest, his stomach. Roger's head throbbed, sending pulsing waves of fury throughout his body. He learned long ago this heat signaled the emotion, anger.

In his case, he thought, rage was a better word ... rage was the only "feeling" Roger ever recalled experiencing.

Roger learned his condition was an anomaly ... he was a freak, essentially. That lesson he learned early in life and that's when he first felt the heat ... the anger at life's unfairness. His first memory of anyone's reaction to his anomaly occurred when his normally quiet and reserved mother burst into tears and shouted at him. Roger had been given some expensive toy. It was so inconsequential to his mind, he couldn't recall what it was, but it was a gift for his seventh birthday.

"Can't you even say thank you? His mother asked.

"It's a wonderful gift, son." His father had remarked.

"Are you unhappy today?" His mother asked

Roger failed to understand the questions and so he didn't answer. His mother burst into tears and shouted, "You're such an ungrateful boy."

Two years later his grandmother died. At the funeral home, after the service, his parents insisted he should be sad. He was nine then and still didn't understand what it was they expected of him. When he explained he had no opinion on the old woman's death, his father and mother confined him to his room.

That was his first experience with anger. The desire to destroy filled him and he followed his instinct and destroyed his playroom. After his tantrum, they referred to him as a troubled, angry boy. That time they got it right.

The words they threw at him were like punches and slaps: angry, happy, ungrateful and sad. He looked them up in the dictionary. All described emotional response, an important trait of human personality. A trait nature chose to withhold from Roger Morgan. For him, the tingly heat followed by hostility, near impossible to control, defined anger. His sense of burning up inside brought on his acts of irrational behavior. The heat compelled him to rip, smash and pound. The heat demanded he destroy whatever happened in his path or was within his reach.

It took time, but he learned to control this behavior. When the hot feeling overtook him, he practiced mental tricks that he learned gradually. His unrestrained tantrums earlier, however, brought the scrutiny of one doctor after another. Doctors were dumber than Carlos. He held all of them in contempt. They gave him pills. He refused to take them, but they forced them on him. The pills made him dreamy, but what they didn't understand, what they didn't even suspect, was the heat ... the boiling madness inside remained ... seething ... simmering ... waiting for its opportunity.

On his own, despite the drugs, he learned how to focus the madness. He put his remarkable mind to work, he studied and learned and in short order, he concluded his only option was to mimic others. He would study them, as he was studied, and one day he would find a way to achieve normalcy.

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Roger turned, staring at Carlos lying quietly on the dirt floor. The only color on his thin, pale, face were bright red spots on his cheeks, nose and ears. His oily black hair was scattered in wild clumps and ringlets around his narrow head. Ebony eyes, cold, deadly and blank before now danced with fury. With each step forward, Roger chanted in a whispering, raspy voice, "Liar, liarrrr ... pants on fire ... liar, liarrrr ... pants on fire."

He studied the face of his playmate as he chanted, crossing the packed dirt floor. As he chanted louder, the face of Carlos registered many different phases of fear. He was sure of it. With each step, Roger saw more reflexive movements of his captive's facial muscles. The reactions of Carlos were imprinted on Roger's memory. He wondered if Carlos realized, at last, the importance of his contribution to Roger's goal ... to attain normal status in society.

Carlos whimpered, and with every sound, Roger trembled. Carlos tried to scream, but only choked. Scrunching his eyes tight, Carlos' hot tears streamed across his cheeks and down the sides of his face.

Roger straddled his playmate's head and lowered himself, bringing his right hand forward just out of Carlos' view. "You're afraid now, aren't you, Carlos?"

Carlos jerked his head up and down. Little mewling sounds, escaped from beneath the duct tape covering his mouth.

Roger brought his right hand up, showing Carlos a gardener's cultivator. An old tool when Roger found it, its thick wooden handle was cracked and scarred. Its shank of chrome was pitted with rust, scarred and scratched. Roger had worked tirelessly on the tool for days after school. Its tines now gleamed, bright, clean and very sharp. Carlos' wide eyes were drawn to the three curving claws. Roger turned it over and around, giving Carlos a good view. Roger knew they were scalpel sharp.

Wan sunlight streamed through the window. Roger saw various indications of dread, fear and horror, all chronicled on Carlos' face, in his eyes and body language. Then, Roger saw something beyond mere dread, fear or horror take possession of the Carlos' face. He watched as the crotch of the boy's pants grew dark with urine. Roger's eidetic memory took note of every change.

"You would've learned, eventually, Carlos," Roger said after a long pause. "I'm not sure, but my guess ... ah ... maybe junior high school. Yes, in Biology class probably. Anyway, we have two arteries in our neck, internal and external, and they're called carotid arteries. One's on the right and one's on the left. They're very important, Carlos ... so important. The internal one, ah, that's the one that carries the blood to and from our brains. Isn't that interesting, Carlos? You know what happens if that internal carotid artery gets torn or cut?"

Roger wrinkled his nose and leaned back on his heels. "Carlos ... ooh ... Carlos. What did you do? ... pee-hewwww."

He leaned close, watching his playmate's face. Roger's dead eyes savored the terror on the face of Carlos as if it were a fine feast. The banquet of pure horror Roger saw in the eyes of his friend, fed his anger ... at nature. At being left out, and that in turn, allowed him to feel something.

"I'm going to show you what happens, Carlos. I've read extensively on the subject and I can tell you, analytically, what happens. When the carotid artery is opened ... ah ... you go out." Roger's head seesawed crazily, while his lips stretched tighter, revealing his light pink gums. His face took on a skeletal appearance. "Like a light," he said and giggled. "It's like turning off a light switch, Carlos ... BOOP."

Roger pushed the tines of the cultivator deep into the right side of his friend's neck. He jerked the tool upward before pulling it out. The first glut of blood almost reached the roof of the shed. The intensity and force startled Roger and he jerked backward, falling hard on his bony butt.

"Ouch ... damn," he said, though he was unaware he'd been surprised.

The following spurts weren't quite so dramatic, but Roger scabbled backward, away from the twitching boy's body. He found it intriguing. Carlos, so skinny and tiny, could produce so much blood ... so vigorously.

*It's amazing, Roger thought, the strength of a young, healthy heart is quite impressive.*

Roger stood and brushed at the back of his pants. He was satisfied with the experiment after all. He'd seen and catalogued several emotions. Dread, fear, and at the end, he saw what he thought must be raw terror. Yes ... he finally got a look at surprise, too, along with confusion. Roger was sure of it. All in all, he felt he had learned a great deal from Carlos.

He looked around, trying to decide how much he should clean up before school. He didn't like being late. Checking his watch, he decided on the blood. The body could wait until after dark. Roger had no fear of a worker snooping around the shed. Knowing the power of his father's edicts, that would be out of the question. Besides, he'd changed the padlock to one of his own and he had the only key.

He dropped the cultivator on the body's stomach and checked his clothes for any sign of gore. He looked fine, as far as he could see, but he would change clothes. To be on the safe side, he would see his clothes were laundered right away.

*Better safe than sorry. Father would be so proud, knowing I chose one of his favorite euphemisms.* He showed his teeth.

As he worked, he finalized his thoughts on this method of study. It was a cumbersome style of experimentation. Clean up and disposal took more and more precious time. He decided to

speaking with his father. Roger was sure he could convince him to convert the extra space in the basement to a home theater.

The entire range of human emotion displayed itself in movies. He could watch films as many times as he wanted and not be bothered with these messes. He could watch, and the photographic memory he possessed, would store everything away. He would watch ... he would study ... he would memorize and soon he would learn to be normal.

Roger mixed and tamped the sticky strings of blood into the dirt floor of the shed. He moved with efficient ease and practiced care. As he worked, his brain processed the day's events. With a maturity far exceeding his age level, he knew the discontinuance of this form of experimentation was the wisest decision. The analytical side of his unique nature prepared a cleaner, more efficient path to follow. A path, he had no doubt, would insure the normalcy he'd determined would be his. Yes ... he would watch films ... he would be normal.

Roger pushed a stream of air through his teeth. The silence of the shed was pierced by a tuneless, whistling sound.

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### A Police Action

**September 5, 1956**

John Tahlman's eyes snapped open. What he saw was the darkness of a cave. As his eyes focused, objects took form, the vague outline of lighter colored curtains, a dark rectangle indicating a shaded window. The battered chest of drawers next to a doorway, his doorway, but still he listened for sounds ... not quite trusting his eyes ... he waited ... and waited ....

No artillery explosions rattled the soft bed or hurt his ears. No bomb explosions or heavy weapons fire filled the air with a hissing buzz of death. No sounds broke the black silence until a cricket, somewhere in the dark, began to chirp. He laid back, his breath still caught in his throat. He was in his room, he realized, in the boardinghouse in Denver Colorado, USA.

Korea was gone ... a world away. Tahlman gulped several deep breaths of cool, dry air. He closed his eyes and felt his mind drift away ... back to sleep ... deep ... deep ... sleep ....

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Cold found its way under his parka. Gelid fingers of ice leaked past the collar of his field jacket and turned his spine hot with cold. The wind hit him like a broad, hard fist and he shook. He was back ... on the hill ... so cold, but this was a dream ... how could he be cold?

"Shit, how should I know?" Tahlman whispered and an artillery blast nearby pelted him with dirt, dirty snow turned to ice and pebbles. They rattled on his helmet like marbles on an iron skillet as he curled into a protective ball ... he was back ... he was back ....

The smell of death filled his nostrils. That same smell followed him up the hill. Gusts of wind whipped ice pellets through the air and the exposed areas of his face stung, like being slapped by a palm full of hot needles. He was amazed that odors, so strong, lingered at subzero temperature. The air stank of blood, feces, vomit, piss and rotted fish. The scents permeated the



fog, kissing the rocky ground before swirling in lazy, loopy tendrils. Artillery and air strikes continued to pound the hill above. Below his position, the roadblock was lost. It was now manned by North Korean Forces, but it was, at last, getting a share of the bombardment.

He jumped in a foxhole. The concussions from the blasts above and below were making his ears bleed. Tahlman hugged the side of the hole and dropped his head between his knees. The pre-dawn briefing flashed in his mind ....

*The Top roused the platoon assigned to C Company of the 6th Division Marines and double-timed them to the mess tent.*

*"The enemy is either dead, badly wounded or routed in full retreat. I guaran- damn-tee it,"* the Company Commander, Captain T.J. Lensdigg said, winding up his pep rally. He pointed with his swagger stick. *"Charlie Company will take the summit before noon and establish a command post ... clear? ... crystal ... that's all, men,"* he said.

"Just like that," Tahlman muttered, but it didn't work like that. Their fucked up plans never worked like that at all.

SNAFU ... Situation Normal All Fucked Up, that's the name of this fucking game, he thought. There's got to be a spy in the command tent, gotta be, and here I am freezing and praying my ass off.

He had prayed as he crawled up ... up a rock infested, Goddamn, slope. To what? This foxhole, that's what. How could he call in air strikes? He'd lost the radioman; he couldn't see shit from this hole in the ground ... a grave ... his grave, maybe.

"Two twenty-one? One twenty-two?" He muttered. "Shit. I can't remember the hill designation and I don't give a shit."

His teeth rattled. Tahlman raised his head and listened to the sounds of the bombardment. During the pauses, the lack of small arms fire was obvious by its absence. "They can't all be dead ... can they?" he whispered.

He shut his eyes and the early morning advance to secure the Chosin reservoir replayed in his mind ....

*Dawn ... oh, Christ ... dawn. I don't want to think about it ... Charlie Company. But he remembered ... We advanced up the slope. Out of nowhere bugles blared making the heavy, wet fog seem to vibrate. Apparitions floated forward out of the swirling mist. The forms were covered head to toe in white. At times, a cap's buckram was visible and a red star, sewn into the heavy fabric above the visor, stood out, but most had their parka hoods cinched up tight and the star didn't show. They moved through the snow like ghosts, all but invisible. ChiComs? Whatever they were, they spread death with their burp guns, satchel charges and grenades. The squad, then platoon, were ripped, shredded and cut to pieces by enemy fire. Six of my buddies went down before I could yell out a warning ... I swear it guys ... I tried ... they came too fast ....*

"Where's the rest of Charlie Company?" Tahlman mumbled looking around the foxhole for the answer ... a sign. He saw only shovel scarred, frozen dirt and B.A.R. shell casings. "I know where they are ... dead ... that's where. I'm alone up here. God. I'm scared shitless ... help me, Jesus," he whispered.

He listened. Several minutes passed. Silence. The kind of silence you can hear. Tahlman was sure he'd gone deaf. He scrubbed his boots on the frozen floor of the foxhole. A reassuring rasp made him grimace with relief.

His breathing slowed. His heart rate returned to a more normal pattern. The harsh, blasting sound of amplified bulges came again. Tahlman covered his ears.

*Oh shit. The bugles are back. They're blowing the fucking bugles again. We're supposed to*

*be fighting North Koreans. Who are these guys with their fucking bugles? Should I look? Oh, God ... I've got to do something. I can't go back. I'll get blown to shit by my own artillery. I'm afraid to raise my head over the lip of the foxhole.*

Tahlman forced himself to move. Keeping his head down, he rolled to his knees and peered over the lip of the foxhole. The wind blurred his eyes. The bugles blared, the sound coming from the left, the right and directly above him.

*I can't see shit ... the wind ... those fucking bugles. Oh, God. Get me down off this hill. Out of here ... please ... take me home. What's that?*

Twenty to thirty meters above Tahlman's position a large rock formation materialized. The mist swirled and thickened, but it was there all right. As he watched a smaller rocky outcrop emerged on the right. It molded with the formation on the left and formed a crude L shaped barrier. He needed a better firing position. He didn't like being in a hole ... he felt vulnerable in a hole. It felt like his grave.

Tahlman peeled his body over the edge and laid still. The amplified bugles were silent again and he jumped to his feet. He ran in a crouch and didn't see the patch of ice, his boots went out from under him and he fell hard on his stomach. A rock gouged his cheek.

"Oh, shit ... oh, shit," he spat ice daggers of alkaline dirt.

Tahlman pushed up and stumbling, clawing, gasping for breath, he found the rounded crotch of the L. He was so cold his hair hurt. He pushed harder, closer, crowding the corner of the L.

*I feel alone, he thought. I am alone. My squad, my platoon ... all gone. I'm going to die up here.*

"Jesus. I never dreamed this is how my life would end," he shuddered.

The off-key bugles started again. The irritating sound shot through the heavy fog like tiny sharp spears, puncturing his eardrums, sending shafts of pain through his head. "They're closer," he murmured and covered his ears. His skin felt tight and Tahlman ran a gloved finger over his cheeks. He found ice.

*Have I been crying?* He wondered.

Then he knew. "Oh, Christ. I'm crying. I'm going to die out here," he whimpered.

The fog blew in gusts around his rocky fortress. Tahlman pulled the collar of the field jacket up around his cheeks. He brushed at the frozen tears. He felt useless. He looked down at his rifle cradled in his arms, close to his chest and grinned ....

"Not useless yet," he whispered.

He put the barrel of the M-1 on his thigh and examined the trigger assembly checking for ice or dirt. The fixed bayonet caught a glint of light. Someone's equipment was reflecting a light source. Someone was behind him, somewhere over his right shoulder. He ducked and almost stabbed himself.

Tahlman had lost all track of time. He was sure he was dreaming, but this couldn't be a dream because this was Hell. There was no fire in this Hell, it was frozen. His hands and fingers burned and ached and he searched his pockets for the extra pair of gloves he carried.

His fingers were like icicles in the sodden pair he wore. The wet leather had frozen and now stuck to his skin. He pulled at the fingers, but the gloves wouldn't budge. Tahlman kept watch over his shoulder. He was sure his position was surrounded. He expected the gooks to sneak up the slope and attack from behind.

"I haven't seen anybody from C Company in a long time," he said reminding himself.

*What was that flash of light off my bayonet? What was it? Who was it?* He wondered.

"Where the hell are you guys?" His scream was lost in the wail of the bugles and the

thickening icy mist.

He found his spare gloves, the canvas ones with a fleecy wool lining. He set his teeth and tore the wet gloves off. His skin stuck to frozen patches of leather, Tahlman ignored the pain and shoved them in an empty pocket. The warm wool felt like a bonfire warming his icy fingers. He sighed and enjoyed the itchy burn of circulation returning to his hands.

Silence. The rasps of his breathing sounded loud in the sudden stillness. His heart dropped to the soles of his feet. It beat there ... thump ... thump ... terrified.

"Oh, Christ," he whispered. His raspy voice sounded like a shotgun blast in his ears. He turned, again, searching his back trail, but there was only the fog and mist ... and silence.

Something spiked a terror in his belly. He turned back and looked up. A white apparition came out of the mist. The apparition was rounding the short side of his boulder. Tahlman saw a bright red star. It danced through the mist demanding his attention. He dropped his gaze and saw intense, almond shaped dark eyes, thin lips, chapped, cracked and spotted with dried blood, but split wide in a predatory smile. The apparition's teeth looked big and straight and stained a caramel yellow.

The shrouded form carried a burp gun and stepped closer. The bore of the automatic weapon was a huge black tunnel swinging in Tahlman's direction. He realized this was his time. This was his place to die.

*I'm dead.*

Uncontrolled fear took him. Tahlman slammed his eyes tight shut, his hands squeezed the muzzle of the M-1 and he jerked upward, his body following the instinctive upward motion.

*I'm moving into the path of the enemy gun ... I know it. I must be insane with fright. I am insane with cold. I am insane ... and ready to die.*

His legs were under him somehow. He'd jerked upright and he realized his sphincter let loose. He felt warm fluid leaking down his legs. Tahlman screamed like a man in a padded cell. A whoosh of foul air hit him in the face and he opened his eyes. The M-1's bayonet was buried, cross-guard deep in the white tunic of the enemy. The weight of the body pulled him forward. Tahlman stumbled, following the dead enemy to the ground. He let go and regained his footing just in time. The body dropped at his feet.

The M-1 looked like a giant stake driven into the heart of a vampire. He pulled on the rifle's stock, but the bayonet was through the sternum and it wouldn't budge. Tahlman bent and grabbed the muzzle at the bayonet's hilt. His eyes shifted upward and he looked in the enemy's face. It was a soft unlined face ... the face of a child.

"He's a kid ... a boy." Tahlman howled with grief and jerked the rifle free. He straightened, hung his head and shook with silent sobs. He heard bullets hissing in the air around him, but he didn't care.

"He's only a kid," he slobbered. More rounds nipped the material of his field jacket. The brutal wind burned his face and iced his tears. He belched out great, racking sobs. The ricochet of enemy rounds gouged chunks of stone from the rocks, but nothing registered as danger. Tahlman could only see the brown, almond shaped dark eyes staring up at him. The boy's yellowed teeth and his rapacious smile, all locked in the rictus of death.

A bullet caromed off the boulder, shielding him from the north. Its altered path nipped the rounded portion of his helmet. His neck popped and he staggered to the left. Marine training is a forge. It heats the steel of a human being's survival instinct. It pushed the temperature of Tahlman's training ever higher, the heat reshaping his psyche into something new. The die of his life was recast. Old priorities were made malleable and reformed. His passive tendencies were

transformed into the aggressive instincts necessary for survival at all cost.

Tahlman learned his life was dedicated to survival. The methods he learned gave him the opportunity to achieve that goal where others would fail. Those methods were forever ingrained in him and he assimilated his lessons well during thirteen weeks of attitude adjustment at Parris Island.

Priority one, *Never Drop Your Best Friend*, ever strayed far from his mind. Priority one operated the muscles and tendons serving Tahlman's arms and warming fingers. His M-1 remained curled protectively to his chest when iron-like fingers grasped his field jacket and jerked him off his feet. The rifle stayed there. He didn't ....

Tahlman hit the slope hard on his shoulders. Breath exploded from his chest and the shock of the fall put an end to his crying jag. He was moving backward, pulled by a strong hand. Icy dirt, stones and broken plant material rushed by. Sound filled his ears and then there was nothing. The ground, sound, all disappeared as he fell ... fast.

He landed on frozen black dirt. The sledgehammer impact crushed the breath from his lungs and a black film covered his eyes. His senses came back slowly. He was surprised to see what looked like the same shovel marked sides of his former foxhole.

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Someone yelled in his ear. "Don't sweat it. I cried when I killed my first one, too, but you gotta do it in a hole, man. "Keep standing in one spot and you'll be dead. Maybe, I'll be the dumb asshole dead along with you and that's not my plan for today, so square yourself away. Are we clear, Marine?"

Tahlman eyed the guy who saved his ass. He looked too young to be a Marine, too young to save him, too young to order Tahlman to do anything. A hot flush of embarrassment heated his neck and face when he remembered what he'd done. Tahlman straightened his field jacket, pulling it down and hoping the dark stain at his crotch wasn't visible.

"Who the fu ...." Tahlman noticed the stripes of a first sergeant on the kid's bicep and drew a breath. "I'm sorry .... I ... I saw that soldier's face. He wasn't more than twelve or thirteen; he's just a fucking kid ... a baby."

Mortar rounds blasted the side of the hill further down, the sound deafening. The sergeant leaned close. He didn't reek of cigarette smoke and that stuck in Tahlman's mind.

"What's your name, sonny?" He asked.

"Tahlman ... John Tahlman." *Sonny*, he thought, *Jesus*.

"Okay, Tahlman, I'm Haldstad. You remember what I tell you and you'll live through this shit. We're all kids here. Get that straight. If you want to survive, live to see manhood, you'll have to leave the enemy's kids here ... and leave them dead."

Haldstad grabbed the front of Tahlman's blouse and pulled. "Let's move out," he yelled into the wind and din of mortar blasts.

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They crept down the mountainside and worked their way around the checkpoint. How Haldstad knew where to go and how to execute, Tahlman didn't know and didn't ask. He nearly cried again when a voice came out of the darkness of night, asking for a password.

Tahlman's outfit, what was left of it, was moved to the rear for R&R. Some of the guys

heard about his kill and slapped him on the back, saying he'd made his bones. He was so sick and scared, all he could do was mumble. He was looking for a place to hide when Haldstad found him. His savior had a shiny new bar on his collar; he'd received a battlefield commission.

"I'm your new CO, so square yourself away, Marine, and follow me."

"Sir. Yessir." Tahlman said and snapped to attention.

"Cut the crap, Tahlman. I'm just jerking your chain."

"Can I ask where we're going, Lieutenant?"

"In this man's Marine Corps, it's understood you don't ask questions, you just do, but since we're friends, I'll tell you. The Colonel wants to see you."

"Oh, shit." Tahlman whispered.

"Don't sweat it. He wants to hear about the soldier you killed. He's wants to know what you saw, specifically the insignia on the guy's cap ... what you remember about his uniform ... got it?"

"The red star." Tahlman said.

"The Red Star ... ChiComs, man," Haldstad said and nodded. "That's big news to command. You're the first man alive with the eyeball proof."

"You're talking 'Bad Bill' Daniels, right?" Tahlman said. "What am I supposed to do? Say? I've never met a Colonel before and this guy's 'Bad Bill' Daniels."

"He shits like you, pisses like you, puts his pants on like you. Only difference, he's got some shit on his collar and he's killed a few people. Salute smart and say, yessir."

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Tahlman sat up. The thin sheet and wool blanket dropped into his lap. Heavy, fear laden, sweat rolled over his forehead and skittered in rivulets behind his ears. Momentary panic produced big, black dots that danced in his field of vision and he couldn't draw a breath ....

I'm awake ... I'm safe ... I'm awake ... I'm safe. Tahlman hauled in a deep breath, the mantra worked yet again. Somewhere deep inside his brain, a key found a lock, teeth fell into place, tumblers rolled and the lock opened. He sucked in a second deep breath of fresh, Denver, Colorado air and he knew ... he was home ... alive and safe at home.

He threw the blanket aside, dropped his feet on the cold floor and looked around the small room. There was only one window. A paper shade, yellowed with age, covered the glass. Off-white sheers hid the flaking window casings on either side. The curtain hems sagged and a coffee stain paid its compliment to several moth holes. With all that, the window dressings somehow gave the room a homey feel.

A four-drawer chest of drawers hid part of the rose patterned wallpaper on the front wall. The door banged against it each time Tahlman entered or left. The chipped paint on the door and broken, worn corner of the chest, testified to the size of the small room. On the east wall, next to a wardrobe, a small desk occupied several feet of space. Squared on center, an envelope rested ready for the post.

Tahlman glanced at the framed reprints of Norman Rockwell magazine covers. He examined the nearest one, shaking off the terrors of the dream. His study of the reprints had become a ritual for him. Before leaving for breakfast and again before bed he scrutinized them, trying to absorb the cheaply framed reprints. Memorizing comical caricatures of "good old days gone by," he'd come to believe, helped head off his horrific dreams. He indulged in this bit of self-delusion and superstition daily, even though, most of the time it didn't work.

Tahlman thought of Haldstad. He always thought of Haldstad when he had the dream. It was Haldstad that saved his ass that day. Haldstad that grabbed his collar and dragged him down the hill to the foxhole.

He remembered how embarrassed he was, peeing his pants and crying. Then, he saw the badge of a first sergeant and a man with a boy's face. Haldstad was bigger, not taller, but wider and somehow more substantial, at least, that's the way Tahlman remembered him. He gave his knees a slap and stood.

"Haldstad," he said and smiled. "We had a good run, you and me. How the hell did we stay alive?"

On the seat of a rocker in the corner, his Levis were neatly folded and he reached for them. He was sure now. He would mail the letter today. Tahlman wondered if his would be the first "Dear John" letter written to a woman. Of course, it couldn't be the first, but he liked to think he could be that kind of innovator. His dream was to build something ... a business ... a corporation with hundreds of employees. "Maybe," he muttered, "an empire."

Empire was a little over the top, but he had made up his mind, it would be something big. He knew for sure he had no room for a wife, not right now, not at this time in his young life.

~ 0000 ~

2

Tahlman left the boarding house for the Post Office at eight-thirty. It was a forty-five minute walk if he wasn't in a hurry and he wasn't. He pushed through the lobby doors and wasn't surprised to find the usual line.

He glanced around the room letting his mind wander, thinking of what type of business he might invest his savings in. He glanced and read some of the various posters on the walls and began a study of the people in front of him. A guy two heads up in the line got his attention.

The man was in uniform and Tahlman could see the side of the man's face. He wore thick glasses with clear plastic frames. Tahlman guessed the man's age at about seventy. What had caught his eye was the shaggy, unkempt look of the old man's gray hair. Tahlman didn't need to see the man's front to know he was wearing a Marine uniform.

The color was winter green, a Corp color, but Tahlman would've guessed Marine anyway by the old guy's demeanor, if nothing else. He stood in line at parade rest. Each time the line moved his heels snapped together and he stepped off, as if he were in marching formation. The old man wore an overseas cap. As the line curved to the right toward the service windows, Tahlman noticed the side of the cap was covered with pins and insignia. The old man glanced back once and Tahlman saw the initials, VFW, and Honor Guard, stitched in gold at the front of the cap. The old man was a Marine through and through.

Tahlman grinned and wondered if he'd be doing the same thing fifty years down the line. He thought about the old Marine and his shaggy hair. Any retired Marine would make sure his hair was regulation before he stepped on the street in uniform. He wondered if the old guy had enough money for a haircut, when someone yelled behind him, "Hands up, get those fucking hands up. Nobody moves or I kill everybody."

Tahlman turned as he raised his hands. A young punk of a kid held a replica of a Colt

Buntline pistol aloft in his fist. He looked backward, left and right, everywhere around the room and started again. He jittered, making tiny twitchy movements, indicating extreme nervousness or a fresh dosing of some type of methamphetamine based drug.

*Huh*, Tahlman thought. *That was supposed to be a weapon used by Wyatt Earp to tame Dodge City.*

He and other men of this squad watched episodes of the Life and Times of Wyatt Earp while still on shipboard. It was the ship that would soon dump him and his Marine Division into a frozen Hell they called Korea.

The punk had the hammer cocked and the first few seconds he watched the kid, everything seemed to slow down. Tahlman was surprised no one yelled or screamed. Everybody stuck their hands in the air and stood still. The punk jumped around as if everyone was yelling their heads off. It was obvious to Tahlman the kid was high on something. He was acting nuts.

He waved the gun around. "Gimme the money ... gimme the fucking money," he screamed and aimed the long pistol at one of the Postal clerks. The sound of the shot was as loud as the canon Tahlman remembered. The bullet missed its mark and he saw the old Marine step forward and grab the kid's arm.

"Jesus," he muttered.

The struggle for the weapon began and continued for several seconds, but before Tahlman could push past an obese woman with a large package at her feet, he saw the punk kick the old Marine in the shin. The old man gave a grunt, but he was tough and hung on. The kid jerked and yanked, trying to pull free. He kicked out again, caught the old man in the knee and his leg collapsed. The old Marine's grip slipped off the kid's wrist as he went down.

Arm free, the punk slammed the pistol into the side of the old Marine's face as he flopped on the floor. The blow sent his glasses flying and a spray of blood trailed them looking like a comet's tail. Tahlman continued his struggle to get past the obese woman who seemed to think he was cutting the line. She did her best to block him and made squealing, squeaking sounds, as if someone with huge hands was squeezing her bloated belly.

Tahlman reached for the kid as the punk turned and straddled the old Marine. Tahlman's fingers clawed the air inches from the kid's back as he screamed, "You think you're some kind a tough motherfucker, huh? Let's see how tough, you old fuck."

The punk pushed the pistol into the old Marine's eye and Tahlman knocked the obese woman down, her package making a racket as the woman's weight crushed it. The second or two it took him to get past the great mass of fat rolling on the floor was enough. The punk pulled the trigger and a fountain of blood exploded upward.

Tahlman's left elbow snaked under the kid's chin, while his broad right hand gripped his forehead. A quick, sharp jerk and the pistol dropped to the floor, the kid went slack and Tahlman threw him away.

~ 0000 ~

It was bright, way too bright. It was so bright it hurt. His eyes felt grainy and they burned. Tahlman blinked and tried to focus on his whereabouts. The room was stark. The walls rough

troweled cement. From the floor to a height of three feet, the concrete was painted a sullen green. The dark paint failed to hide years of scuffmarks, gouges and dirt. Cold white fluorescents highlighted a stain of old vomit trailing to the floor in one corner.

Tahlman sat in a straight-backed metal chair. His arms rested on a metal table. Both table and chair were bolted to the floor. Tahlman's right wrist was cuffed to a thick eyebolt sprouting from the table's top.

He blinked again and scanned the room, turning as much as the handcuff would allow. The top portion of the room was clean and painted a light gray. Everything came back to him in a rush ... the murdered retired Marine. The cops pushing him to the floor. He had fought back and decked two of them before they overwhelmed him. He remembered the big black guy with a bigger fist in a black glove and then darkness. He was in an interrogation room, but where were the cops who put him there? His jaw hurt, but nothing serious. He'd seen tougher men than those cops, by a long shot.

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The prisoner looked eighteen, but Special Agent Milner knew better. He studied John Joseph Tahlman, who sat peering around the room, turning left and right, stretching the short cuff chain taut. Apparently, seeing enough, he leaned forward, left elbow resting on a metal table, his forehead cradled in his left hand.

Milner sucked his lower lip. When he took the call at ten-fifty-six a.m., he ran Tahlman through the system. A DOD file came back, but it revealed only fractional details of the prisoner's tours of duty in Korea.

Milner checked the time. He had watched the prisoner for an hour, impressed with Tahlman's self-control. He displayed no signs of nervousness, fear, remorse or discomfort. The man's physical presence, his bearing, growled attention, like that of a DI, Milner thought. The Agent knew Tahlman was discharged from military service in recent months. That would account, he thought, for the length of the prisoner's russet colored hair, close to a quarter inch in length.

Milner wore his brown hair in a regulation sixteenth inch buzz cut. He hadn't changed the style since boot camp ten years past. The F.B.I. man glanced at the Denver police detective sipping a cup of coffee in the corner. He moved to his left, looking for a better angle on the prisoner. Except for the bruise on his jaw, Tahlman's pose reminded Milner of Auguste Rodin's sculpture, *The Thinker*.

*That's some training, he thought. Not many have the self-discipline to remain relatively still for an hour. I wonder if Tahlman's had sniper training.*

The Special Agent thought the word "lean," best described the prisoner. Tahlman looked in excellent physical condition. Big hands, broad shoulders and arms roped with long muscle warned of a coiled strength. He heard a clink and scratch of a lighter and looked at Detective Lesterman. The cop stared back and blew a ribbon of smoke at the ceiling.

Lesterman didn't like him, but Milner didn't give a shit. He cocked his head. "Let's go see what the man has to say."

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Tahlman passed his large, thick-fingered hand over his head and cradled his neck for a



stretch. He straighten in the chair, flexed his shoulders and blinked in the harsh light. "Shit," he muttered.

He inspected the small room for a second time ... it was still rough troweled cement. The room reminded him of a brig outside Anyang, Korea, although that one was constructed of cinderblock. He had the pleasure of spending a weekend in that place and he counted the blocks in his cell walls several times. It was a hell of a fight, he remembered. That was before .... but he didn't want to think about the hill, the rock and the Chinaman.

The fact the straight-backed metal chair wouldn't move was an irritation. The table, he found, couldn't be moved either. His long legs cramped and he fought childhood claustrophobia. Tahlman jerked his right wrist. The steel cuff dug into the soft tissue of his heavy wrist.

Trapped feelings brought back memories of arctic winds and a foxhole that looked more like a grave. The wind bore the stink of blood, feces, urine and rotted fish. He heard the sound of burp guns and the hiss of their 7.63x25mm rounds. Tahlman fought the flashback and concentrated on reality. He was under arrest, that's all. It was a mistake, but his temper threatened to take over.

*In this case, he thought, getting pissed might be a good thing.*

He turned as far as he could, stared at the large mirror and yelled, "Okay. It's an interrogation room. Where are the cops? Let's get this show on the road."

He heard the snick of the lock and looked left as the door opened, admitting two men. The first had a long, narrow face and wispy, thin hair. He wore a wrinkled, white shirt and his tie lay bunched at half-mast on the paunch that spilled over his belt. The cop looked tired and pissed off.

The second man closed the door. He wore a buzz-cut similar to Tahlman's, but shorter. This man had a dress code, immaculate navy blue suit, wrinkle free. The white shirt he wore looked starched enough to be uncomfortable around the neck ... Tahlman knew starched shirts on an intimate basis. This man's narrow black tie, knotted in a single Windsor, hung straight without apparent stains.

"Mr. Tahlman, I'm Sheriff's Detective Lesterman," wispy hair said. "This man is our own Special Agent, Timothy Milner, fresh from the Denver F. B. I. office."

The detective pulled a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes from his shirt pocket and threw it on the table. The pack slid toward the edge and Tahlman let it drop.

Milner dipped his head, smiled and said, "I take it you don't smoke, Mr. Tahlman."

Tahlman settled back in the chair. "No, I don't." He looked at Lesterman. "Take this damn thing off my wrist ... please?"

Lesterman bent to retrieve the cigarettes. "That's for your safety, Mr. Tahlman, till we clear the mess you made today."

Tahlman slammed his free fist on the table. "What the hell mess you talking about? A punk asshole pulled a stick up and shot an old man. I got lucky and stopped the prick before he shot somebody else ... maybe me. What's to clear up?"

Lesterman brought his fist down on the table. In the close room, it sounded like a muffled gong. "What if I told you the man you killed was a Postal Inspector. What if I told you the incident was a scheduled security exercise? The public wasn't supposed to be allowed in the building."

Agent Milner settled back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the floor. The F.B.I. man shook his head.

"So the kid has a sore neck and a headache. The SNAFU is on that guy right there."

Tahlman pointed to Milner against the wall.

Lesterman leaned on the table shoving his face close, inches from Tahlman's nose. "Don't crack wise," he said, curling his lip in a feeble attempt to look menacing. "Understand?"

Tahlman didn't blink. "Fuck you," he said in a quiet voice.

"Fuck me?" Lesterman straightened. "That kid isn't going to have a sore neck or headache ever again. You killed him."

Tahlman looked at the detective and shook his head. "Don't feed me that bullshit. I didn't kill that kid. I just put him to sleep."

"You killed him, sonny." Lesterman said.

"I saw them put the kid on a gurney, with oxygen, and take him to the hospital. I didn't just fall off the turnip truck, detective. I was taught how to restrain and how to kill. I didn't kill that kid."

Milner pushed off the wall. "Detective Lesterman isn't kidding, Mr. Tahlman. The boy's name was Mason Joyce. He was an early bloomer, looked eighteen, at least, five o'clock shadow and tall. He looked like a grown man. He was a known meth and heroin abuser. According to the witnesses, he acted high. Crazy was the word used most ...."

"What the hell are you doing, Milner?" Lesterman said breaking in. "It could've all been a set up and Tahlman here might've shut his partner up when he saw their plan going south."

"This is a federal investigation, detective. If you'll excuse us, I'd like to speak to Mr. Tahlman alone. That means no eavesdropping in the viewing room, okay?"

"Fine," Lesterman said, putting a key in the locking mechanism. "If that's the way you want to play it. Get your suspect out of my interrogation room. I don't give a shit where you go, just clear off Sheriff's Department property."

The door opened and Lesterman was halfway out of the room when Milner call out, "Lesterman."

The detective stuck his head back in the doorway. "What?"

Milner pointed. "Your restraint, please. I can't move the suspect if he's cuffed to your table."

Lesterman released Tahlman without another word. Milner held the door open. "Come along with me, Mr. Tahlman, I don't think we're welcome here anymore."

To Lesterman, Milner said, "Thank you detective. I was impressed with your interrogation technique. I'm going to write this up for the F.B.I. manual on procedure."

Lesterman said, "Fuck you, Milner."

"Lot of that going around lately," Milner said and smiled. "Don't bother showing us out. I know the way."

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Once on the sidewalk, Milner said, "My car's in the lot out back. Wait for me by the driveway and I'll give you a lift back to your boardinghouse."

"That's okay, Agent Milner. I like to walk, helps me think and I'm used to it."

"Look," Milner said, "I don't think you had anything to do with Joyce or the holdup. I read your file. It's interesting, to say the least. Two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a little time in a Military Police detachment a few months before you shipped home. You served six years in the Marines, three of those in Korea during the war, but there your military career ends. Here we are in September, 1956 and you just mustered out. Where have you been for three years, Mr. Tahlman? What were your assignments for six years? Sniper training, maybe, or were you

recruited for Recon or Special Ops?"

"I did a little of everything during my time in the military. Now, if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon put that shit behind me," Tahlman said and looked down the street. "Thanks for your help in there."

"I might not have done you any favors. Lesterman's a bulldog and I have no doubt he'll keep you under surveillance, at least until his lieutenant starts to bitch about budget and overtime."

"That's fine with me, Milner. I've got six years worth of savings to invest and I'm not going anywhere. I plan on starting my own business, right here in Denver. You guys are welcome to tag along wherever I go. Oh, one exception, I'm not a monk. If I get a date, I'd appreciate you guys leaving me alone."

Milner offered his hand. "Good luck. I'm a Marine myself, got out in 49. Went to college and that's where I spent the Korean War days. I guess I was lucky. I heard it was a hellhole over there. Thanks for your service, Tahlman, whatever you did."

"Semper Fi, Milner," Tahlman said, shaking his hand.

Tahlman turned and walked up the street. When he got to the corner, he looked back and Milner was gone. He turned the corner and saw a park up ahead. He looked at his watch and saw it was a little past three in the afternoon.

*Too early for dinner. Maybe I'll get a paper, look at the business for sale ads. That park looks like the perfect place, shady and cool.*

Up ahead he saw a drug store on the corner on the opposite side of the street and a paper stand outside the door. Tahlman continued walking to the corner where he waited with a few others for the light to change.

*No sense jaywalking and giving that detective or Milner a reason to harass me one more time, he thought and smiled. Milner knows for sure. Lesterman might think he knows, but he's not sure. I knew what I was doing. I killed that punk. Made damn sure I killed him. That son-of-a-bitch killed a fellow Marine ... no way he walks away from that ... not with me around.*

~ 0000 ~

## [The Wake](#)

### **Manning Township, California**

**July 22, 1998**

The mourners filled their stomachs, pockets and purses with my food. In some cases the smaller bottles of liquor found new homes as well. When I stopped restocking the bar and replacing the food supplies an exodus occurred. My plan worked and I considered that a small triumph. Ten days ago I lost the man I idolized most of my life. His death left me morose and overwhelmed with feelings of guilt I could not shake.

A man I didn't recognize found me and pumped my hand, whispering his sorrow at my loss. I nodded, mumbled, and thankfully, he went on his way. I would have mourned my father's passing alone, but a few relatives living nearby made that option impossible. So there I stood,

wearing guilt like an old suit, too big and heavy for my body on which it hung. I felt like an inadequate little boy during the funeral. That was a laugh, I being well into my sixty-second year. I began to wonder ... am I cursed? The answer was yes, and deep in my soul, I knew well the source of the destructive black magic I allowed to dominate me.

The smell of old clothes, old sweat and mothballs permeated the air in the bedroom where I'd found a measure of privacy. I pulled in a lungful and listened to the murmur of voices coming from the kitchen. A short burst of laughter made me wince. I thought the freeloaders were gone. I had lived a long time and attended a few funerals. Why, I wondered, was it necessary for the bereaved to wine and dine the living after saying goodbye to the dead? This wake, this ritual, this part of the funereal process, was it just me? To my mind, it was idiocy personified.

A nudge at my elbow summoned me from my woolgathering expedition. Sidney Chin offered one of two tumblers filled with an amber liquid. His wrinkle-filled face wore a tentative smile. "How're holding up, Buddy?" he asked in a whisper.

Sidney Chin and I began our friendship on a day much like today, fifty years ago. He was a boy of ten at the time. I was twelve. Over the years, Sid and I grew close. Culture made no difference to us ... we clicked; we looked on each other as brothers, if not in blood, in spirit.

He studied me. Puffed slits of skin tried to hide the warmth of his rich brown eyes. Sid's gray eyebrows, yellowed with age, arched upward waiting for my answer. They looked like something McDonald's might have retired after decades of service in the nastiest of weather.

I took one of the tumblers and gave him a grateful nod. "I think I counted thirty people eating my food and drinking damn near all my liquor," I said. "What's on your mind? Get me drunk and borrow money?"

"If you had any money, damn straight, I would," Sid said. "To Sam." He raised his glass high; "he was a hell of a guy."

I bumped his glass. "Hell of a guy," I choked.

The bedroom where we stood belonged to my mother and father. They slept in this cramped space for twenty-three years. Here, in this small, shabby, doublewide mobile home, my parents lived out the final weeks of their lives.

I tipped my glass for a sample of Sid's offering and tasted smooth hot bourbon. "I didn't put BYOB at the bottom of the funeral notice," I said. "My booze ain't good enough for you?"

"It wasn't a funeral notice, you ignorant clod," Sid said. "It was a funeral invitation."

"Who're you calling a clod? And who'd be dumb enough to call a funeral notice an invitation?"

"That would be me, I guess." Sid touched his glass to mine. "I thought you deserved the best today, first your mom and now Sam."

My old friend's devastated puss put a burn in my eyes. I started tearing up. I felt sorry for myself and it pissed me off. "I don't deserve shit, Sid." I chugged the last of the whiskey and choked. My breath swept away with the alcohol burn.

"Buddy ... Buddy ... Jesus, man, slow down." Sid slapped my back. "Breathe, Buddy. I don't want to carry you out of here, too."

Sid's face collapsed as he understood the effect those words could have on me. I blinked water-filled eyes, shook my head and coughed again.

"Ah, shit, man," Sid's voice cracked. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded." He rubbed the base of my neck with his rock-hard slab of a hand. "Come on, Buddy."

Six years ago, Sidney Chin became Manning Township's Chief of Fire Services. The night Dad suffered his heart attack, fire dispatch recognized the name and called me; it's a small

township. I arrived minutes behind the responding Engine Company. Sid stood in the driveway looking like an escapee from a mental hospital. His sparse white hair stood on end, his bathrobe billowed in the wind and his flip-flop slippers slapped the concrete as he hurried toward my car.

I thought I was prepared, but each word from Sid's mouth fell like a hammer blow to the top of my head. "The EMT's are with him, Buddy, but Sam's gone. He died before we arrived. I'm so sorry ... so damn sorry."

My throat opened. A little gag cleared the last of the temporary paralysis caused by the bourbon. I could breathe again. "I know what you meant, Sid," I croaked. "Don't sweat it, okay?"

Sid took my glass. A few minutes later, he returned with a refill. "What're you feeding me, Chief?" I said.

"It's Elijah Craig single barrel bourbon, oldest bourbon whiskey money can buy. He nodded and we toasted the lives of my mother and dad. This time I sipped with care.

"You remember the time your dad let us help build that extra room on your garage?" Sid said. "Remember? I lived in a converted garage with my mom. I thought I knew everything about garage construction," Sid said and laughed.

"Yeah," I said. "We were teenagers. We thought we knew everything about everything, but we didn't know shit."

"Ain't it the truth? He sat there listening to me tell him how bathroom studs should go. He showed more patience that day than I would've given me." Sid sighed. "I gave him a ten minute lecture on where the shower closet should install. When I'd finished sounding like an ass, he sat me down and explained why my configuration wouldn't pass Township inspection. After he took me down a peg, he lifted me up by telling me I should always keep thinking and trying. Keep thinking and trying, Sid." I'll remember those words till the day I buy it.

We sipped our drinks in silence for a time. I realized I'd received my share of positive reinforcement from my father. Yet I felt a pang of envy. Sid had taken dad's encouragement to heart. He graduated high school and went on to college. I managed to get kicked out of high school. At the time, I laughed at the idea of college. Only later did I have enough sense to go back to school and earn a high school diploma. Now, instead of a career, I worked as a courier to supplement my social security and my wife's meager pension.

Sid interrupted my introspection. "Your dad taught me how to show respect for the opinions of others, even those of a brainless teenager."

When I didn't respond, he emptied his glass and clapped me on the shoulder. "You need anything, night or day, give me a call. Your mom and dad were a hell of a team. Hold on to that, brother."

My friend turned away and I blurted out, "I failed him, Sid. I failed them both."

Sid stopped, turned and stared at me so long I felt the heat of his eyes swell my neck and fill my face. He took the glass from my hand. "Wait here," he said.

*Why couldn't I learn to keep my stupid mouth shut?* I raved at myself.

I heard murmured conversation coming from the kitchen followed by the voice of my wife. "Are you sure, Sid?"

More conversation followed. Cupboards closed, doors opened, but I tuned everything out and wallowed in self-flagellation.

"Buddy."

I jumped. Sid's voice came from the direction of the living room. Leaving the bedroom, I walked through the short hall. The living room was like every other room in the mobile home, small. A floor lamp my parents had for years shed weak light in one corner of the room. Sid

indicated my dad's chair and took a seat on the couch where my mother spent her last days.

"Let's talk," he said, "and I'll get right to it. What's with this I failed them, shit?"

Dad left his mark on the old platform rocker where he read his paper and watched his ball games. I could feel the shape of his body imprinted on the cushioning. My head dropped on the worn lace doily my mother crocheted so many years ago. The essence of my father filled my nostrils and I choked back a lump in my throat.

"This isn't the time, Sid," I said.

"That's bullshit, Buddy."

"I disappointed them in so many ways. You don't know the half of it."

"You made some mistakes. We do that ... human beings screw things up." Sid shook his head. "Buddy ... think ... you've raised a beautiful family. You gave your mom and dad five grandchildren. The last few years you've taken your parents for doctor appointments. You spent Sunday morning checking their fridge and buying their groceries. You spent your Saturday's trimming the shrubbery, washing the mobile home, the car they could no longer drive. Need I go on?"

I sat forward, my stomach fluttering, my hands shaking. "I worried them right up to the end, Sid. You don't know what I put my family through."

"Are you talking about the drinking?"

I stared at him. Sweat broke out on my face. Rivulets of it trickled from under my arms and ran down my sides. "How ...."

"Did I know?" Sid finished my sentence. "Sandy called me a few months ago. She's been worried and I worried, too. Every day you went on the road we worried, but I told Sandy nothing could be done until you were ready."

I could no longer hide the shaking. I dropped back into my dad's chair. "I never took a drink until I was done for the day, Sid. I would never jeopardize my home and family for a drink."

"But you did, Buddy. There's no doubt in my mind you did. When you drink as much as you do your body can't process the alcohol. Chances are if you stopped drinking, at say eleven or twelve in the evening and hit the sack, if you left on a job at ten the next morning, you were probably driving under the influence. That would be true even if you didn't have an eye-opener in the morning. Look me in the eye and tell me you've never had a drink in the morning."

I felt my temper flare. I stood and my lifelong friend followed my lead. I glanced at him and walked into the kitchen. I ran the water cold and scrubbed my face. Sid's heavy hand settled on my shoulder. I stared at the sink drain. Water dripped, making tiny dapples on the thin sheet of moisture coating the scratched aluminum surface.

"Did Sandy tell you everything about our private life?"

Sid's voice sounded soft in my ear. "She didn't have to, Buddy."

"Then, how the hell do you know all this shit? Do you guys take some Fire Department First Aid program on how to handle drunks in the field ... something like that?"

"I know because I've been there. I'm an alcoholic, Buddy, but a dry one. I'm sober twelve years now."

I straightened, water dripping on my tie. "What ...?"

Sid handed me the damp dishtowel hanging from a hook on the side of the cupboard.

"What was I drinking? I was drinking cold coffee. You were helping me get rid of a very expensive bottle of bourbon. That makes me an enabler, but it's just for tonight. There's a good outpatient clinic in Morristown, thirty minutes away. If you're ready to find yourself again, I'll help. You graduate the rehabilitation program and I'll sponsor you at AA."

Sid's McDonald eyebrows arched and a smile wrinkled that puss of his. "So? What do you think?"

He followed me back to the living room where I dropped into dad's chair. The eyebrows hadn't changed their arch. The essence of my father surrounded me again. I stared at Sid and heard the voice of my father: "Keep thinking. Keep trying, Buddy ... keep thinking ...."

"Okay, Dad," I whispered, "hope you're sitting in on this. I'll give it my best shot ...."

~ 0000 ~

### Endnotes

Hi and thank you for your purchase of *Doors to Perdition*. My name is Jim Bergstad. I hope this Ebook provided you with a memorable reading experience. If you came away thoroughly entertained, then I know I achieved my goal. Perhaps you might even be encouraged to spread the word by writing a short review and posting it on the [smashwords.com](http://smashwords.com) website and Amazon if it's not too much trouble. Spreading the word among your friends and family is another great way to help us get to know each other.

I'd like to take this opportunity to persuade you to email me with questions or comments regarding my Ebooks or writing in general or what's coming up in the future. You can contact me at [woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com](mailto:woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com) but perhaps a better way to start the process of building a relationship with you, my invaluable reader, would be to tell you a little about me. I like to characterize myself, J B Bergstad, as a writer, sometime novice oil painter, husband and father of five, grandfather of a passel of wonderful grandchildren and great-grandchildren ... yeah, I know, whew.

I've enjoyed a varied working career including trucker, firefighter, Supervisor of the Guest Relations Department of a major television network and thirty years of management and entrepreneurial pursuits in the field of transportation and logistics to name a few. I retired for the last time in 1998 and began to seriously consider a new career writing genre fiction. To that end I have studied and worked hard to improve my craft.

Late in 2006 my wife and I escaped to a small community in South Carolina where I hoped I would spend my days writing, painting and playing a little golf. After five years of heaven, however, I've been dragged, kicking and screaming, back to California where my wife and I have renewed our relationship with our three sons and eight grandchildren. Our two daughters remain in Florida with their families which include four more grandchildren who in turn have produced two great-grand children. Four additional great-grandchildren reside in Arizona with their families.

My work has appeared in Literary Journals like *The Jimson Journal*, *Midwest Literary Magazine*, *The Quill*, *Indie Searchlight*, *Scissors and Spackle*, *Pedigru Review*, *The Monarch Review* and *The Feathered Flounder*.

Please take a look at [Book I - No Man's Land](#) the first in the Hyde's Corner Trilogy series and [Screwing the Pooch](#), both available at [smashwords.com](http://smashwords.com) as free downloads. This promotion will end June 15, 2013.

Coming soon, Book II - A Family - A Redemption, the second of the Hyde's Corner Trilogy series; in this edition, the saga continues as Selmer Burks raises his bastard grandson while increasing his despotic, if munificent rule over Sundowner County and Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma ... the monster develops in the years, 1928 through 1946.

Book III - A Study in Retribution will complete the Hyde's Corner Trilogy. I hope to have it ready for release late 2013 or early 2014, but please keep checking in for updates.

Don't forget ... I love questions, comments or even a little friendly banter, you're welcome anytime. <mailto:woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com>