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JIGGS AND OTHER STORIES

by

VONDELL C. JONES

B.A., Communications, Westminster College, 2005

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2014

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My sincere thanks go to University of New Mexico's (UNM) entire English Department faculty, with special thanks to professors Jerome Shea, Julie Shigekuni, Dan Mueller, Marissa Greenberg, and Sharon O. Warner. These educators have had a noticeable and lasting impact on my writing as well as my desire to write. The guidance I've received at UNM has elevated my writing. I've benefited from courses such as professor Shea's *Writing with Tropes* and *Stylistics Analysis* classes in which I was introduced to rhetorical techniques designed to improve style and clarity of thought. Creative writing workshops and one-on-one sessions with professors Shigekuni and Mueller have given me a wider perspective of my own work as well as for the work of other writers. Professor Warner's instructive novella class taught me how to apply effective principles regarding character development and plot structure. Under this guidance, I now better understand the craft and forensics of writing. My UNM experience has given me confidence and increased my desire to write and enhanced my ability. Part of my motivation to write will be to justify the gifts given to me by so many UNM professionals.

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Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, University of New Mexico, 2014

Abstract

Jiggs and Other Stories represent a diverse sampling of my work as a University of New Mexico graduate student and a writer of fiction. The works presented here are a pastiche of genres that include magical realism, tragedy, absurdist fiction, and fantasy and adventure. Beyond those significant categories, however, these stories are the product of my imagination. The power of fiction itself—I'd like to believe—depends upon the capacities of the mind. When knowledge, experience, restless imagination and bold creativity are combined—good fiction supersedes the boundaries of literary categorization.

My intention, in part, is to have these stories serve as an homage to many of my preferred authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Carson McCullers, John O'Hara and other American writers as well as a panoply of African, British, Irish, French, German and Russian novelists, short story writers and playwrights.

The collection is prefaced by an introduction intended to give a full sense of what kind of enrichment these stories hope to achieve. Each story is summarized and examined to present an overview of the theory and the craft that defines it.

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Preface

Jiggs

The title story, *Jiggs*, is a novella that was composed prior to my enrollment at UNM in 2010. However, *Jiggs* has benefited from a very special graduate creative writing workshop taught by Professor Julie Shigekuni, where ideas such as ethos, pathos and dénouement were thoroughly discussed.

Jiggs' storyline speaks to American racism from the historical perspective of the modern civil rights movement. The novella blends some of the methods used by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), two celebrated writers known for using magical realism as a dominant literary mode in their novels. My novella replicates the form and content of magical realism. Magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. Such are the elements found in my novella.

“Jiggs” is set in 1955. A seventeen-year-old African American girl is murdered in the normally sleepy, rural Village of Stone’s Throw, NY, a community settled by African Americans fleeing Southern oppression, hatred and bigotry. The novella’s protagonist, “Cockeyed Bill” is the village sheriff who is both gentle and strong; he is down-to-earth yet worldly, easy-going but nonetheless complex. Cockeyed Bill must solve the crime amid powerful resistance from institutionalized and colloquial racial intolerance. When the black sheriff puts several white derelicts into custody, events heighten to a harrowing pitch, threatening his family and testing his legal authority.

Stone’s Throw villagers and surrounding communities of white farmers are riled over the murder and the arrests; state troopers and young African American ruffians exacerbate the conflict. All the while, our narrator, the sheriff’s son, 11-year-old Billy Brewer is struggling to comprehend and cope with hard realities such as death (including his mother’s death some years before) and racism. The story ends transcendentally when the white men thought to have committed the murder actually are the ones who solve the crime by exhibiting unearthly power that connotes an otherworldly intervention, thereby invoking my

use of magical realism as a storytelling mechanism.

Jiggs is more than just a *Twilight Zone*-type murder mystery. Its ethos is meant to capture a moment in time by pointing a finger toward one of the most heinous crimes in American history: The murder of Emmett Till, an African American teenager who was slain horrifically in Mississippi in 1955. The story is not about that specific crime but draws from the tumultuous national pre-civil rights zeitgeist that arose from it. *Jiggs* presents a morality tale that pierces the heart of verisimilitude and its pathos is applied using the techniques found in magical realism.

In his article on “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction,” writer and literary critic Angel Flores chronicles 1935 as marking the literary birth of magical realism, a term originally conceived to describe visual art. Flores credits the works of Argentine, Cuban, and Mexican writers as having advanced magical realism as an efficacious literary approach that is being more commonly used by American writers.

A significant symbol of magic realism is apparent when a character in the story continues to be alive beyond the normal length of life. On the surface, however, the story has no clear magical attributes. To convey an aura of realism, the author may give precise details of the real world such as the date of birth of a reference character or the army recruitment age, but such facts belie the notions of abnormal occurrences like someone living for two hundred years.

Throughout my story, the men who are suspected of committing the murder in Stone’s Throw are actually ghosts who appear as wandering transients addicted to rot-gut wine. They appear in real time as seemingly lost souls, downtrodden, throwaway human beings. In actuality, they represent powerful forces from the cosmos. In literary terms, they are character conventions of *prosopographia*, a rhetorical trope introduced to me in Professor Shea’s English 520 classes. In his textbook, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, Richard Lanham defines the trope as “...a type of Enargia, which vividly describes the appearance of a person, imaginary or real, quick or dead. Real but dead...” (Lanham 122).

It seems to me that the term “magical realism” is broadly descriptive rather than critically rigorous. In other words, magical realism is a genre where magic elements are a natural part in an otherwise realistic environment. Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* is one of the models I’ve consciously drawn from to shape my novella. She uses magic, folktales, and the supernatural in her novel as a way to suggest that life is often cryptic, inexplicable, spooky and spiritual.

In *Jiggs* the magical realism effect is enhanced by the mysterious emergence of numerous bottles of cheap wine that seemingly come from nowhere. This puzzling aspect bedevils the sheriff whose efforts to confiscate the alcohol from his wino detainees are constantly frustrated because when he thinks he’s seized it all, more bottles of wine show up. The highlighting of continually replenished wine is a literary device endemic to the tenets of magical realism. It’s a bizarre effect devoid of clear magical attributes because everything is conveyed in real time. The character, Cockeyed Bill, along with the readers, expects that a rational explanation for the unending bottles of wine will be provided. Eventually, however, we realize the rules of our real world rules have been broken and our sensibilities have been invaded by something enigmatic and queer.

Also germane to this discussion of magical realism and its use in my novella is the significant role of community, a feature that theoreticians believe is inherent in the genre. “Magic is communal,” writes Wendy B. Faris in her book, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (183).

“Magic realist texts may encode the strengths of communities even more than the struggle of individuals. Societies, rather than personalities, tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction” (10). Throughout their experience, she says, black people responded to the cruelty of the modern world not only as individuals but also collectively. Despite the slaveholders’ efforts to separate people of similar lineage in order to prevent communication that could lead to rebellion, a spirit of resistance rose, fostering a sense of black community. Faris’ explanation connecting the symbolism of magical realism to the camaraderie of community is endemic to my portrayal of the fictional Village of Stone’s Throw, where its

African American residents share common faiths and taboos.

In an interview from *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, by Danille Taylor-Guthrie, Morrison states:

“...no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they are afraid of it – which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four The collective sharing of that information heals the individual – and the collective (248).

In *Jiggs*, the residents of Stone's Throw strengthen their bonds because one of their own was killed and it was thought that white outsiders committed the crime. My novella, however, includes a slice of postcolonial irony when it is eventually learned that it was African American teenagers who killed the girl, not the white suspects. This paradox converges on theories of racism-induced self-hatred, rebellion turned inward, the loss of identity and the posttraumatic stress created by horrific hegemony. While the memories and sharing of traumatic experiences also bond human spirits (slavery for instance), they also can foster anomalous, difficult to explain behavior and aberrant psychological manifestations. In *Jiggs*, the fact that the killers are African Americans becomes moot because the magical reality of the ghosts and the ascending apparitions bring the question of murder and conflict into a higher level of scrutiny.

My narrative crafting in *Jiggs* is influenced by “African American oral culture and mythology adapted from the piquant, black language-based storytelling of techniques of Zora Neale Hurston. Using the lessons I've learned from reading Hurston, my novella uses African American syntax to enhance the telling of a regrettably common American saga. The African American residents of Stone's Throw, who had migrated to the North, brought their black Southern brogue with them. For example when one of my characters hears that the African

American sheriff has taken a white man into custody, someone in the crowd says that "...sho' do make a difference." "It sho' do," Old Man Henry replies. "It sho' do."

On occasions when it seems appropriate, I try to re-create African American dialect the way Hurston does in her 1937 publication, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her classic novel that celebrates the rural, southern African-American experience of the twentieth century, Hurston skillfully uses "black-speak" expressions such as "dees (these), dems (them), and dos (those)" to construct lyrical, poetic dialogue that adds beauty, innuendo, and impact to her groundbreaking story.

It is my intent and desire that with the use of magical realism and the tone of authentic colloquial dialogue, and the alluding to inner turmoil caused by postcolonial racism, Jiggs will help lift the veil on a the debilitating issue of historical racial animus that keeps America churning in a vicious cycle of mistrust and animosity.

* * *

The White Lie

"The White Lie" is a short story that applies the storytelling techniques found in the tragic tradition, a literary invention born in the roots of Oedipusan and Dionysian tragedies. The story employs many of the classical tropes and idiomatic strategies found in the doctrines of revenge tragedy, a rhetorical format that justifies all manner of theatrical horror in which the rich and powerful are compelled to act out agonized, gruesome fates. The formula for the "The White Lie" was devised with help from concepts found in John Kerrigan's book, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. The story was written to fulfill the requirements of a UNM English 587 course. Professor Marissa Greenberg instructed the course which explored the craft of writing tragedy.

My short story tells the saga of a modern day family that is ultimately destroyed by a 150-year-old curse. The story of how the Hampton family falls from the pedestal of pomp and privilege is ingrained in the aesthetic theories of Greek and Elizabethan drama, where anger-induced curses often forecast future doom.

Greg and Janet Hampton are heirs to the fortunes amassed by an ancestry that accumulated enormous wealth from the wages of sin, dishonesty, exploitation, corruption and fraud. The money that buys them exclusivity and societal favor is tainted with a simmering curse that has smoldered for seven generations. The Hamptons' story is a fatal kismet that spells the brutal termination of a family's lineage.

To better understand how the Hamptons are damned for all time, one must travel back to the year 1859 and consider a string of precious pearls that will become a family heirloom. The pearls serve as the talisman for a revenge curse placed upon the unborn family members of slave trader, Hiram Hampton, who sired two sons by one of his African concubines. When Hiram wants to purchase the rare pearls as a wedding gift for the vain and pampered Southern belle he's chosen to become his legitimate bride, he trades the two boys he's fathered with his African mistress, Hannah, in return for the coveted gems. The man to whom Hiram sells his own miscegenational flesh and blood is a notoriously wicked slaveholder with a reputation for sadistic cruelty. When the boys try to escape from him, he ruthlessly tortures them until they die. Grieving and crazed with hatred for Hiram, Hanna steals the pearls and hexes them with an evil curse that will take more than one hundred years to ratify. Hiram recovers the pearls and mercilessly kills Hanna in a fit of fuming retribution. The family pearls are passed down from generation to generation. In the year of our Lord, 2007, the ancient curse unravels when Janet Hampton tells her five-year-old daughter what she considers to be a harmless "white lie" about a part of her baby brother's anatomy. That "innocent" lie causes a chain reaction of events that lead to fratricide, accidental filicide, and double suicide, thereby eliminating all chances of sanguineous continuity for the Hamptons. Hanna's ancient curse has come to fruition. It is then and only then that the ferocious Dionysian prophecy of vengeance comes full circle, bringing a gory end to the Hampton family bloodline.

The genre of tragedy is rooted in the Greek dramas of Aeschylus (525-456 B.C., e.g. the *Oresteia* and *Prometheus Bound*), Euripides (ca. 480?-405 B.C., e.g. *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*) and Sophocles (496-406 B.C., e.g. *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*). I contend that there is a strong association between my short story and the antiquated tenets of Greek tragedy. “The White Lie” skillfully uses the pathos of argumentum ad odium (appeal to hatred and revenge) to render a gripping short story, told in the manner of the classic tragedy with its inevitable payoff of ruin, remorse and bloody death. But the most obvious influence that traces *The White Lie* to the tragic tradition can be seen in the techniques found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Aristotle’s influence on the lore of plot within short fiction theory has affected creative writing in general. I’ve chosen to discuss only how Aristotle’s *Poetics* (2011) has impacted the way that plot is defined within *The White Lie*.

Sometimes Aristotle talks about plot and tragedy as if they are different, but mostly, he addresses them as if they are the same. For example, Aristotle states, ‘tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality’ (12). A few pages later, Aristotle writes, ‘the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that as a whole, the structured union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed’ (15).

I take these somewhat differing definitions to mean Aristotle did not see tragedy as belonging to a monolithic dogma that spells doom only because of the evils of one individual character. The great thinker understood that the drama of tragedy’s cause and effect might come about simply out the action or events of a plot construction over which the characters have no control. In my story the omen of tragedy is introduced by the evil of one man, Hiram Hampton. But the bloody deus ex machina of the plot feeds the ensuing ugly revenge on Hiram’s descendants.

According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, classical tragedy involves a protagonist of high estate (“better

than we") who falls from prosperity to misery through a series of reversals and discoveries as a result of a "tragic flaw," generally an error caused by human frailty. In *The White Lie* greed is the tragic flaw

The White Lie depicts dog-eat-dog characters caught in a culture of greed that extends through multiple generations. For Aristotle, the downfall of an evil protagonist is not tragic (Shakespeare's Macbeth would not qualify nor would Hiram Hampton, the morally corrupt slave trader I write about in *The White Lie*). But what my story has most in common with Aristotelian tragedy is that it evokes pity and fear in the audience, leading finally to catharsis (the purgation of these passions).

In my story, Hanna is the underdog acting out her hatred for her oppressor by casting a curse on his family that takes more than one hundred fifty years to fully execute. Hanna—Hiram's enslaved concubine—calls on both God and Satan to help her obtain justice from the unspeakable treachery and ghastly abuse of a cruel slave owner who sold their two sons for the price of a string of pearls and tortured her with a horrible, awful, painful death at his brutal whipping post.

The key to crafting this story lies in the meaning and purpose of "revenge!" Dark, raw, violent and profound torture sets the stage for "The White Lie." It is a brutal and callous tale of torment transferred, of anguish and retribution, of myth and black magic, of ominous omens, cursed oaths and spiritual resurrection. Hanna will have her revenge against Hiram Hampton and as her story unfolds we see that its premise is built upon the foundations of a dramatic tradition of tragedy that was invented in ancient Greece.

I am aware that the main characters I create in *The White Lie* are archetypes, clichés. Both master and slave, twisted into inhuman objects of hatred and revenge by a destructive system of domination and submission that continues to drive our nation crazy. I admit that the archetypes of Hanna and Hiram are obvious, convenient inventions fashioned to carry out my intention to use tragedy as a social critique.

Tragedy is commonly thought of as a tool for making political statements. One of the under appreciated aesthetic aspects of the ancient genre is its ability to craft powerful social messages. Circa

414 – 412 BC, Greek tragedian Euripides wrote a tragedy titled, *Ion*, in which he railed against Greek society’s ambivalence toward illegitimate births and its treatment of orphans. With *The White Lie*, it is my intent to establish an opportunity to torch truths about the metaphysical and moral battle between good and evil, a contemptible clash in which black folks lose their dignity and white folks lose their souls.

The White Lie is a harsh indictment of America’s racialized fabric. It is a horror story that howls like wild dogs crying out in the night, a suitable metaphor for a tale that mimics a literary genre designed to illustrate the voracious human thirst for bloody revenge.

* * *

The Town of Insanity

“The Town of Insanity” is a fictional account that uses absurdist literary theory to tell the tale about a small Mormon community in Utah that is visited by a massive rain cloud from outer space. The cosmic cloud travelled billions of miles from the farthest regions of the galaxy; its misty extraterrestrial vapor acts like a super potent aerosol aphrodisiac. All Earthly matter—cats, dogs, birds, insects and even an inanimate object—that comes in contact with the infectious substance are thrown into bizarre, salacious behaviors where they must perform uninhibited, out-of-control, non-stop public sexual intercourse.

After being exposed to the cloud’s red rain, a dowdy schoolmarm and an uncouth garbage collector—who meet after being involved in a minor traffic accident—fornicate compulsively because they’ve been drenched with the outer space love juice. A middle aged bachelor and an escaped kangaroo are attracted to each other and are then compelled to commit deviant sexual acts that ultimately result in the birth of an offspring that is half human, half kangaroo. The coupling of the man and the animal and their bestial, sexual activity inspires onlookers to join in a public orgy in the town’s cemetery. In an

excess of total and absolute absurdity, the story creates a scenario in which a 500-pound bronze statue of Mormon leader Brigham Young miraculously comes to life and snatches a homeless woman from the park and runs off into the woods with her. All who are touched by the cloud's red rain are forced to involuntarily participate in an outrageous concupiscent bacchanalia of sexual revelry.

It turns out that the cloud is made up of intelligent beings the size of microscopic particles that have visited our planet specifically to play a prank on Earthlings.

“The Town of Insanity” is written to serve as a humorous, absurdist metaphor for religious hypocrisy and pretentious social sanctimony. The story is greatly influenced by works by authors such as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. I consider the story to be part metafiction (Romantic Irony) and part philosophy of nonsense.

Thematically, this story focuses on creating an improbable but not necessarily impossible scenario depicting what Albert Camus termed as “individual metaphysical and historical rebellion” in the face of the absurdity of human existence. Camus was a twentieth century writer, philosopher and human rights activist. His important contribution to philosophy was his conception of the absurd, the paradigm of bizarre hypothetical logic, which he saw as the ultimate expression of human desire for clarity and meaning within a world that offers neither. *The Town of Insanity* presents my cockeyed point of view of man's obliviousness about the speck of universe he occupies.

I find the scope of the absurdist genre appealing because it permits wild conjectures that extend the definitions of the conventional world. My story allowed me to disrobe the rituals of human behavior. Absurdism sanctioned my urge to treat the most serious of social covenants with silliness and vulgarity. In my story, the discarding of clothing, the release of sexual restraint and uninhibited passion become the butts of the jokes that the universe plays on man's hubris and his need to feel private and emotionally sequestered. From the time I first read Camus' *The Stranger*, I've been drawn to absurdist writing. Camus' story is about a man whose apathy toward existence is so pronounced that he commits a senseless

crime for which he is given a death sentence. His ambivalence toward life is so profound that he never appeals for mercy and he looks upon death as a continuance of life's unsolvable, existential puzzle. In other words, Camus' character just flows along with the impersonal force of nature while absurdly flawed human evaluations impeach his sense of self-worth to the extent that he becomes emotionally mute.

In my story, the absurdity begins when an extraterrestrial cloud invades a small town, catapulting its residents into acts of wild sexual abandon. Or, perhaps, my story insinuates that the absurdity is already present before the alien invasion of the Utah town. Are we not already occupying a world that's gone totally, insanely absurd? Think of the wars, the murders, the greed, the child abuse, the hunger, the poverty, and the religious hypocrisy that define human existence on this planet. And yet, do we not live in "...the best of all possible worlds," as Voltaire's Dr. Panglos from *Candide* would have us believe?

There are many opinions on what constitutes absurdism, but I believe Camus writings are a field guide to the art of absurdity.

Aside from attempting to entertain, what is the purpose of telling a story about people being drugged by an alien cloud and fornicating until they lose their minds? For me the real question is: Why does every story have to have a purpose when real life doesn't always provide tidily summarized conclusions? Is it because we think that man's *raison d'être* is to always search for meaning?

The absurdist genre has pricked audiences with the productions of plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna*. For instance, in writing *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett did not intend to tell a story. He did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with not doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend. *The Town of Insanity* demands the same kind of blind observation.

"When the plays of Ionesco and Beckett first appeared on the stage they puzzled and outraged most critics as well as audiences," writes Martin Esslin in his book, *Absurd Drama*.

“And no wonder,” he continues. “These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play.”

I submit that my story, *The Town of Insanity* (while not a play) seeks a similar outcome as do the works of Beckett, Ionesco and other writers of absurdist art. My story allows readers to react and to think as they will. It is a story intended to provoke readers’ moral convictions yet offers little or no justification. Furthermore, I assert that my absurdist story follows the historical and aesthetic objectives of storytelling.

In his book, Esslin—who was an award winning playwright and Stanford University professor—discusses how absurdist art is a direct offspring of classic literature.

“Yet, however contemporary the Theatre of the Absurd may appear it is by no means the revolutionary novelty as which some of its champions, as well as some of its bitterest critics, tend to represent it.” Esslin writes that absurdist art can best be understood as a new combination of a number of ancient, even archaic, traditions of literature and drama.”

I see the absurdist genre as a composite fused with the tradition of miming and clowning that goes back to the *mimus* of Greece and Rome, the *commedia dell' arte* of Renaissance Italy, and such popular forms of theatre as the pantomime or the bawdy music-halls in Britain.

It is against this background that I ask readers to view my work on *The Town of Insanity*. The story presents an outrageous set of circumstances. It mocks sexual acts by presenting unlikely comedic couplings between a school marm and a garbage collector, a mamma’s boy bachelor and a kangaroo, and a statue and a homeless woman. Even dogs, cats, birds and insects revel in whacky sexual recitals as if mindless copulation is the legitimate answer to life’s riddle.

The Town of Insanity has clear links to the nonsense literature of Lewis Carroll (*Alice in Wonderland*) and Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*). The

use of neology bending portmanteaus like “undulates asperatus” and “manbit” contribute to the koo-koo atmosphere of the story. It is an outrageous story that asks the reader to be outrageous, too. A bronze statue comes alive and is driven by the need to copulate ridiculously. That is absurd and that is the point.

Nonsense literature is a subgenre to absurdity and elements of it are apparent in my story. Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot*. The action of *Godot* centers around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait but who never arrives.

Absurdist plots may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change, or shift in the laws of physics. For example, in Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, a couple must deal with a corpse that is steadily growing larger and larger; Ionesco never fully reveals the identity of the corpse, how this person died, or why it's continually growing, but the corpse ultimately – and, again, without explanation – floats away.

All types of characters can inhabit the world of absurdity. In my story, I've used a half-human and half-animal character that takes the story into the realm of ancient Greek mythology where centaurs and mermaids were common in folktales. Joey—half human, half kangaroo—is another absurdity that sprouts from the story.

Given the idiosyncratic definitions of absurdist plots, the events in *The Town of Insanity* make sense or non-sense as the case may be. As an author, I have no worry whether I've created a piece of weird fiction or an example of profound absurdist literature. It is not a story but a lemon squeezer for squashing noise out of the brain. It is a story engineered to make readers gag on a spoon, come unhinged and laugh and laugh and laugh.

* * *

The Clay-born

The Clay-born is my final selection. This short story straddles some of the dividing lines between fantasy, science fiction and adventure. It is a story about a team of scientists searching for a primordial life form that was thought to exist billions of years ago, in the predawn of Earth's tumultuous birth.

The Clay-born is a new kind of fiction story that employs a subtext of anthropological underpinnings to weave a tale that defies today's overdone, tired, paternalistic hero/heroine racial stereotypes so commonly found in Western literature.

The Clay-born tells the story of how Yale University geologist Thor Tillman is recruited to embark on an improbable expedition to East Africa to search for an incredible living specimen known as the Clay-born, rumored among African natives as the spooky mud-man who is the subject of periodic sightings that inspire lore and legend in much the same way Big Foot has captured the imagination of Western civilization. The Clay-born is a pre-historic life form that emerged from the swarming protoplasmic goop that gave birth to all life during Earth's tumultuous, eruptive formation more than 4.5 billion years ago.

Tillman joins with the granddaughter of Sir Robert Hest, a renowned anthropologist who is too old and too feeble to undergo the African expedition; so he sends Minkah, the daughter of his son-in-law, also a famed anthropologist, who was killed by the Clay-born. Despite a chilly beginning, Minkah and Thor eventually fall in love during an adventure that zooms them back to the natal time of our planet and forces them to endure a series of harrowing, life-threatening events.

This unique story presents a new, refreshing allegory about the origins of life on Earth. It is a provocative sci-fi/fantasy/adventure that stimulates curiosity about how life on Earth began.

I believe there is an audience thirsting for stories that portray characters that don't always conform to the typical "white protagonists" who generally rush in to save the naive, people-of-color from danger and extinction. Additionally, this story contains educational messages about geology and anthropology.

Inspired by Sci-Fi/fantasy writers, Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of the *Tarzan* and *John Carter* stories

and *Journey to the Center of The Earth* author Jules Vern, *The Clay-born* follows the rules of fantasy/adventure story writing. *The Clay-born*'s craft elements are:

- It is set within an imaginary world
- It uses real or imagined scientific language and/or technology
- It has characters that travel between realistic and make-believe settings
- It has an adventure-oriented plotline
- It involves a grand struggle against supernatural or evil forces
- It has scientists-as-hero protagonists

Of course, story elements are not enough. As with all worthwhile stories, a strong plot, fascinating characters and engrossing setting is needed.

Theoretically, *The Clay-born* holds to the guidelines that connote fantasy/adventure storytelling. It re-imagines the past, taking its characters and its readers back in time by bending pseudo scientific jargon into fantastic episodes of suspension of disbelief. Its stock cast of archetype characters includes a trio of brainy Renaissance scientists who are as brave as they are bright. The plot involves challenges from a unique creature and there is danger, death and romance.

The Clay-born's only objective is to entertain. I think it accomplishes that goal by adhering to the classic default settings required of fantasy and adventure stories.

Last Thoughts

I think it is absolutely essential that a writer understand that “stories” are the ambrosia of humankind. Stories, with their blends of sweet and sour, sweat and blood, drive the human psyche and find their place just above food, shelter, clothing and love on the hierarchy of needs. I believe in storytelling. I believe the stories in this collection aspire to the best of the tradition.

JIGGS

CHAPTER ONE

The day after Sheila Shepard was found floating face down in the Hudson River, Old Lady Bailey discovered Jiggs hiding under her front porch.

"I smelled 'im before I heard 'im. And I heard 'im before I saw 'im. And when I saw 'im, I said, 'Lordy, Lordy, what have You done to this poor man?'"

It was 1955 and Old Lady Bailey, a bony, sinewy spinster who'd already lived nearly 75 years, had a reputation in the Village of Stone's Throw, New York. It was widely known among the nearly eight hundred souls who lived there that she kept her double-barreled shotgun loaded and leaning against the wall next to the front door. And most folks knew that, even though she was a poor aim, she'd shoot at a trespasser just as quick as she could say, "Amen."

But miracles do happen. She didn't shoot at Jiggs that day and for the rest of her years, Old Lady Bailey was fond of recalling how she felt when she discovered him.

"I took pity on 'im. I don't know what it was about 'im. I just felt bad for the man," she'd say. "First thing that hit me was the stench. Cheap wine. Putrid Muscatel mingling with puke, old sweat, sickness and God knows what.

"Child! Child! Child!" she'd exclaim. "The odor was so rank and rotten, you could almost see it rising up around the edges of the planks in the porch. The poor man. Old Man Anderson's got pigs that smell better'n that."

Invariably, before she could tell the next part of the story, Old Lady Bailey would hesitate, swallow hard like she was trying to get her breath, fan her face with one hand, widen her eyes and

whisper in a conspiratorial tone.

"Then there was this low moan, like somebody wailing, only deep down and far away. But I played it cool. I went out to the yard and started fooling with my flowers. You know I love my flowers.

"I bent over and made like I was picking weeds and snails out of my garden. And just like never you mind, I looked up under the porch where it was dark and damp.

"And there he was... curled up in a ball like a baby not born, shivering and shaking, and holding his knees up against his chest. And I said, 'Lordy, Lordy, what have You done to this poor man?'

"Shoo! Normally, I don't play around with no old tramps, hiding under my porch. Hell, I could'a shot 'im with my gun an' been within my rights."

"But I ain't no fool, now. I knew they'd found that Shepard girl stabbed, choked and dead, floating in the river. So, I just moseyed back in the house, like nothing was wrong and I got right on the telephone and called Cockeyed Bill."

Cockeyed Bill was my father and the Sheriff of Stone's Throw. He was awarded his nickname because his eyes were crossed, a congenital condition that he passed on to my sister, Edna, and me. He earned his job as sheriff because he was the toughest man in the village. Everybody knew that you'd "rue the day you messed with Cockeyed Bill."

When I was a child, Stone's Throw was a sleepy village nestled inconspicuously in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, where the mighty Hudson River slithered through the verdant valley like a gigantic water snake, brown and green, twisting and flowing. The settlement got its name because, many, many years before, the diaspora of freed African slaves who migrated North would describe its location by saying it was just a "stone's throw" from the river.

When I lived in Stone's Throw, there wasn't much to the village, just four paved streets, a

network of dirt roads and clusters of shingled shacks clinging to a tree-lined slope on the river's west bank.

Most of the village men worked for Adirondack Railway, the sprawling railroad system that served a 1,200-mile region of upstate New York. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, black laborers had helped build the railroad. Once it was constructed, they stayed on to work for the company as porters, conductors, and train engineers. Several generations later, the railroad still provided the primary source of income for Stone's Throw residents. Some of the village's women worked as maids and cooks in the wealthy white households scattered on the edges of Albany. Each weekday, before sunrise, dozens of women, young, middle-aged and old, gathered at the end of the platform, boarded the caboose and traveled the twenty-five miles or so to, as they put it: "Clean white folks' houses, cook white folks' food, and raise white folks' children." They were strong, spirited women who worked until dark before riding the caboose back to Stone's Throw. Villagers who didn't work for the railroad or for the "white folks" lived off the land.

There was a General Store in Stone's Throw that mostly served as the village's only liquor store because, aside from a few sacks of flour, sugar, and corn meal, Old Man Wicks didn't sell much of anything else.

"I keeps a stock of high brand spirits cause you know people 'round here just ain't gonna spend much money on nothin' else. They makes they own bread, grows they own string beans, collards an' potatoes. If they need milk, a chicken, eggs, bacon, chops or sump'em like 'at, they can buy it fresh from Old Man Anderson," Old Man Wicks was fond of saying.

Old Man Anderson had the biggest farm in Stone's Throw. He lived in a shack but he had two barns and nearly thirty cows, a parcel of pigs, and a yard filled with chickens. He had 12 dogs that barked all night and howled at the moon; and all summer you could hear hundreds and hundreds of bullfrogs croaking in the pond behind his shack.

"Say what you want but them frogs is good eatin'," Old man Anderson would often say. And anyone within ear shot would chant, "You right. You sho' is right."

In summer, children picked wild strawberries by the bushel; women made jam, preserves and short cake. In autumn, acres and acres of wild apple orchards, tangled grape vines, and blackberry thickets provided a bounty of fruit. In winter, there was rabbit and quail to hunt in the woods and plenty of catfish in the county reservoir all year long.

Stone's Throw had one school and one church. The school was located in a three-story, wood frame structure that served as the educational facility for all the village children, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The Mount Olivet A.M.E. Zion Baptist Church was situated in a converted horse barn. Each Sunday, the kids who were forced to go, and those adults who thought of themselves as spiritually enlightened, congregated there; they sat on hard wooden benches and shouted "Praise the Lord," as Reverend Larkin told biblical stories in sweaty, sing-song sermons that lasted upwards of three hours.

Bucolic, pastoral, rustic Stone's Throw was populated by easy, uncomplicated people who shared their surroundings with butterflies and bees, woodpeckers and hummingbirds that darted in and out of purple lilac groves. It was a place where long, lazy days ended with crimson sunsets and where the crickets clicked all night.

But that summer, when Sheila Shepard was found floating in the river and Jiggs was discovered hiding under Old Lady Bailey's front porch, Stone's Throw was the site of more commotion than anybody in those parts could remember.

* * *

My father stood in the front yard, holding his Brooklyn Dodger's baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head, when the telephone rang inside the house.

"Well, gentlemen," he was saying to the three men who had come up from Albany to question

him about the murdered girl.

“Old Doc Simone’s got her down at the funeral home. All I can tell you for sure is that we found a knife poked into her chest and dark bruises around her neck, like she was choked.”

“Are the state police in on this? How’s this thing gonna be handled?” asked one of the men. He was a huge, beefy, red-faced man.

My father didn’t answer right away. He didn’t like people questioning his authority. Slowly, he put his cap on his head so that it sat almost sideways, with the bill pointed at an angle. Using his most icy, crossed-eyed stare, he studied the man who asked the question. My father only stood five feet, five inches tall but he was broad-shouldered and muscular. He didn’t wear a uniform like most other sheriffs. He always dressed like a farmer, with heavy work boots, dungarees, and a red, plaid shirt. His highly polished badge was pinned just above his heart. His stunning complexion was as black as the berries in the woods. He looked like he was going to pounce on the questioner, who fidgeted nervously.

“Now, who are you all, again, and what is it that you all do?” my father asked with a hint of suspicion in his voice. “Tell me, again, now.”

“Well, I’m, I’m Michael Muskal, a reporter with the *Knickerbocker News*, Albany’s largest morning newspaper,” the red-faced man said, sniffing like he’d said something very important.

“Yes and I’m Brad Brannigan, Channel Six Television News in Albany,” said the second man, who was tall and wiry and wearing a brown tweed suit that made his pale, white face look like a scoop of vanilla ice cream sitting atop a giant waffle cone.

“This here is my camera man, Alan,” he continued, referring to a short, stocky, yellow-haired man holding a big, black box with a huge, telescopic lens and long wires attached to something that looked like a car battery.

In the mid-1950s, there couldn't have been more than a half-dozen television sets in Stone's Throw. My father talked about buying one but decided to wait to see if the "contraption" would catch on with the public. Besides, people in Stone's Throw generally acquired local information through the village "grapevine." As my father put it: "The gossip mill is always up and running in Stone's Throw."

"Well, suh," my father began cautiously, "to answer your question about the state police. I see this as a local matter. The girl was from around here. She was found in my jurisdiction. And folks around here don't cotton to strangers snooping and looking for bad things to say."

The big man who'd asked the question was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like he didn't know if he should stay or go, when Edna opened the screen door and yelled: "Pa, Old Lady Bailey is on the phone for you."

That evening, I joined nearly a dozen other Stone's Throw residents who gathered to watch the news on the television set in Old Miss Saunders' barbershop.

"There he is! Well, I'll be shucked. They said he was gonna be on this thing, but I never thought I'd live to see the day when one of our own would be pictured on the television," Old Miss Saunders exclaimed.

"Shhh...now. Shhh," Old Man Wicks admonished. Everyone in the room inched closer to the oval screen and peered at the black and white images of my father pulling a long-legged man out from beneath Old Lady Bailey's front porch. The newscaster's voiceover reported on the events taking place.

"Stone's Throw Sheriff Bill Brewer today arrested a man in a possible connection with the murder of Sheila Shepard, the seventeen-year-old colored girl found yesterday floating face down along the river bank near the village.

"According to the Sheriff, the man, 24-year-old, Jeffery Jiggs, is a transient who may have come to the area by hopping Adirondack Railway freight trains..."

The television watchers issued a collective gasp and Old Man Wicks said: "See, I tol' you it was sump'em like 'at. I said it, sho' nuff. 'Probably one'a them tramps comin' through here,' I said. 'They gone an killed that girl.'"

"I hear there's a whole camp a them tramps settlin' 'round Old Pokey Pond, just a couple a miles from here," Old Miss Saunders said.

"Cockeyed Bill ought to take a couple a boys and go on out there and clean 'em out," she said.

"You sho' ought a be proud of your Pa, Billy," Old Man Henry said, rubbing my head with a big, rough hand.

"Amen to that," Old Man Wicks said.

Just then the little bell over the barbershop door jingled and my father walked in and was greeted by a chorus of "Howdy do, Cockeyed Bill, howdy do?"

My father acknowledged the crowd with a nod of his head and walked toward the big, swivel barber chair that Old Miss Saunders had ordered from a special catalogue and had shipped in from some place all the way in Pennsylvania.

He removed his cap, sat down and rotated to face Old Miss Saunders who stood staring at him like he was Jackie Robinson or somebody.

"How about a trim, Old Miss Saunders? I'm getting a li'l raggedy here."

"Why, sho' Cockeyed Bill. You know we gonna keep *you* looking good. We was just watchin' the television here and they said you arrested the man what killed that girl." Old Miss Saunders bent down to turn off the television, then reached for the white cloth she used to cover her customers while she gave haircuts. She threw it over my father's head so that it snapped, billowed, floated and settled like a bib, covering his shoulders, chest and lap.

“Naw, we ain’t jumping that far ahead, now.”

“Well the man on the television said...” Old Man Wicks began.

“Oh, don’t go believing anything you hear on that old thing,” my father interrupted.

“Old Lady Bailey found the man under her front porch. I went over there and determined he was a vagrant. But he’s sick, mighty sick. I think he got the rum fits. He’s down at the can right now.”

The “can” my father referred to was the rusty old railroad boxcar that served as the village’s jailhouse. At my father’s insistence, the village had purchased an old, abandoned freight car from the railroad and he converted it into a makeshift jail, although there was seldom any occasion to use it, except, perhaps, when some of the men would get drunk and start fighting over one of the village’s widow women. A few holes were punched near the top of the metal box for ventilation. My father put in some old army cots, and he placed heavy iron locks on the wide, side doors to prevent detainees from escaping.

“No, he was in bad shape alright,” my father continued. “He stank so bad...Man you ain’t never smelled nothing like that. I had to damn near peel his clothes off him. I hosed him down, too. Just took the hose and sprayed the water right on him. He just lay there on the grass, naked, shaking up a fit.

“I had Edna bring some of my old clothes over for him to wear. Old Doc Simone came by and took one look at him and said: ‘That man there has got the horrors from drinking rot gut wine.’ I figure it ain’t no use trying to question him for at least a week. It’s going to take at least that long to bring him around.”

“You know, I couldn’t rightly tell from the television, an’ with him being so filthy dirty an all, but he a white man, ain’t he Cockeyed Bill?” Old Man Wicks asked.

My father hesitated like he was thinking about whether he should answer. Finally, he softly said,

“Yep, he is. He’s white.”

“Oohh, now that adds a new dimension to things,” exclaimed Old Lady Saunders.

“It sho’ do,” Old Man Henry said.

CHAPTER TWO

The dead girl’s father, Old Saul Shepard, sat on the stone steps of Simone’s Funeral Home with his face buried in the palms of his hands.

My father pulled his truck to a stop and sat for a moment before turning off the ignition. The truck, a 1947 Chevy pickup, was the village’s only official police vehicle. My father bought it used in 1952, the year he became Sheriff. He’d restored the partly rusted chassis and used three gallons of red house paint to cover up the blemishes. He polished the nickel-plated grill and bumpers to a sheen that reflected sunlight like a mirror. The big, round headlights sparkled like a child’s eyes caught in a state of perpetual surprise. It smelled like old leather and axle grease. I loved that truck and I loved riding in it when my father took me with him on his rounds through the village. But I wasn’t thinking about any of that on the morning I sat in the front seat beside my father and he pulled to a stop in front of the funeral home.

The funeral home was majestic compared to most of the other hardscrabble buildings in Stone's Throw. It sat at the dead-end of one of the village's four paved streets, a striking, three-story structure that sported an elegant red-brick facade and four, huge, white Doric columns supporting a mock veranda. A dozen long and wide granite steps elevated the double-door entrance. It had always reminded me of an ancient Greek temple, hushed and hallowed and haunted.

“Stay here, now,” my father said, lightly patting my knee. My father was a tough man but he

could be remarkably gentle, also. Two summers before, when I was nine years old, I saw him take on three men; they were thick and sturdy farmer types brawling over a crap game at the General Store. My father grabbed them one by one, slapped each one so hard they spun around, and then he pushed them down like they were unruly children; but when he saw Saul Shepard sobbing uncontrollably, his quiet strength emerged. The old truck's door gave a faint screech when he opened it and my father winced as if the feeble noise had caused him immense pain. He slipped from the seat and effortlessly lighted upon the ground without making a sound. Cautiously, he walked up to the steps like a cat that didn't want to wake its owners.

“Old Saul,” he said in a voice that sounded like he was praying, “I can't tell you just how sorry I am. I'm sorry too, that you wasn't here when she was found.”

Saul Shepard was the Chief Conductor for the Adirondack Railroad's Saratoga-to-Buffalo line. He was slightly better educated than most of the villagers. He'd actually finished high school, a distinction that earned him his conductor's position with the railroad, a job that took him away from home for several days at a time. He was still wearing his black conductor's uniform. He sat hunched over like a man caught in the pangs of terrible stomach pains. When he raised his head toward my father, I could see his eyes were as red as pimentos.

“I heard about it last night, but I couldn't get back to see her until now,” he sobbed.

“Yeah, I know, Old Saul. I called down to the Albany station after you. They told me it might be a spell before they could get in touch with you, what with the train schedule and all.”

My father looked up toward the blue sky like he expected some kind of answer to come floating down.

“Well... you know Old Doc Simone's taking good care of her, now. But we got some things to do,” he said lifting his baseball cap and scratching his head.

“Old Doc Simone’s taking good care of her alright. I just came out of there. He’s got her sliced up. I could hardly tell it was my little girl.

“I know you know how it is Sheriff, us both being widowers and all. She’s my only child. All I have left. I raised her all by myself. Just like you’re doing with your two young ‘uns.

“Who found her? When...?”

“The Larkin boys found her, two mornings ago, Old Saul. They went down to the bend, gone fishing. They came ripping through them pine trees, screaming like they seen Jesus. I was driving down the road when I saw them. I got out the truck and ran back down there with them.

“And there she was. Her dress caught on a river stump and kept her from floating away. Look like she been there some time. That’s why I came by here today, to see Old Doc Simone. See what he figured out.”

As if on cue, Old Doc Simone opened the double doors of the funeral home and stood at the top of the mighty stone steps looking down upon us like the Lord on Judgment Day.

Old Doc Simone cut quite a figure. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He was dressed as he usually was: wearing a black suit and an immaculate, stiffly starched, white shirt and a black bow tie. He was in his forties, brown as a coconut, and balding, with a horse-shoe-shaped fringe of coarse gray hair tapering into distinguished-looking mutton chops sprouting on either side of his face. He was the most educated man living in Stone’s Throw. He’d been to medical college. He served as the village’s doctor, coroner, and undertaker.

“When I’m not giving birth to them, or healing them, I’m burying them,” he was fond of saying.

Solemn and dignified, Old Doc Simone descended the steps. When he reached the bottom, he faced my father, put a hand on his shoulder, and gazed at the ground. After a long moment, he asked:

“How’s that prisoner doing?”

At the mention of the prisoner, Jeffery Jiggs, Old Saul quickly stood, heaved his chest forward, and clenched his fists like he was trying not to explode.

“Now tell me true, Cockeyed Bill, did that tramp kill my girl?”

“I don’t rightly know, Old Saul. I don’t rightly know. There are some things I don’t quite understand right now. That’s why I came by to see Old Doc Simone.” “We can talk later, Sheriff.” Old Doc Simone never called my father by his nickname; instead, he always referred to him by his title. In fact, he never referred to anyone the way other villagers did. In Stone’s Throw, everyone always addressed other adults and spoke about them as “Old so-and-so...” It was just a way of showing respect, a tradition deep-rooted in the evaporating black culture of the South. Anyone in the community who’d survived long enough to have the venerated appellation “Old” preceding their last name was honored because it meant they possessed a wisdom provided by long life; it punctuated superlative admiration for suffering and perseverance; it served as a noble title of meritocracy and high regard.

My father’s moniker, on the other hand— “Cockeyed Bill”—was an anomaly. No one would dare make fun of my father. He loved his nickname. He knew it was an affectionate reference to his ophthalmic impediment and he also knew that it was meant as a tribute to him as a unique and beloved individual who’d earned everyone’s trust and esteem. Old Doc Simone was the only villager who didn’t give in to the colloquial custom; he was worldly but not stuffy, sophisticated but not gauche; and although he always called my father “Sheriff” and he addressed adult villagers as “Mr., or Miss, or Mrs.,” he never lost the common touch and we all knew that he was blood-linked and devoted and caring and needed. Now, he had switched from being doctor / coroner to being an empathizing, grieving friend, a bonding spirit; he put an arm around Old Saul’s shoulders and the two men meandered along the street.

My father watched them, shook his head sadly, looked toward the blue sky and wondered aloud:

“Who killed Sheila Shepard?”

The sky did not answer.

* * *

“Mississippi Murder!” shouted the headline of the newspaper Edna had been reading.

That headline was blazoned across the top fold of the *Schenectady Gazette*, the weekly newspaper that served Stone’s Throw and other communities in the area. Beneath the horrible headline was a ghastly picture of a dead boy, who’d been pulled from a Southern swamp, so brutally beaten that his grotesque remains barely looked human.

When my father and I returned home, we found my sister, Edna, sluggishly swaying in the big wicker rocking chair on the front porch. Her eyes were moist and she stared off into the distance like she was in a trance. The newspaper lay unfolded across her lap.

She didn’t even flinch when my father put his hand on the back of the chair to stop its to-and-fro motion.

“Edna, girl, wha’cha got there?” he asked.

The headline and picture in the newspaper made him freeze.

“Oh, my, my,” he eventually breathed. “What they done, now.”

Quietly, I moved closer so I could better see the newspaper, too.

At the sight of the shocking photograph of the gruesomely slain boy, I shuddered involuntarily, like I was experiencing an earthquake inside my body.

My father picked up the newspaper, folded it in half and put it under his arm.

“His name was Emmett Till, Pa,” Edna said, coming out of her trance. “He was only 14. They killed him, Pa. Cause he smiled at a white lady.”

Just about everybody in Stone’s Throw said my sister was beautiful. She resembled our mother more than I do. True, she possessed the family trait of having permanently crossed eyes, but somehow that only made her more attractive, even mysterious, like she could look right at you but see past you with glittering eyes that searched your soul. She was soft-spoken, and emotionally sensitive, nut-brown and full-lipped. Also, she was born with one leg smaller than the other. It was her left leg that was deformed; it caused her to walk with a noticeable limp, but still she managed to move gracefully, poetically. I’d always thought that she moved like a beautiful ship safely moored in a harbor, rolling soothingly, from side to side, with the tide.

Stone’s Throw didn’t have a real sheriff’s station; our living room served as the headquarters for local law enforcement. When anyone wanted my father for official business, they came to our house or telephoned our home. Edna and I were instructed to answer the phone by saying: “Sheriff’s office.”

The telephone rang all afternoon. Dozens of residents called to find out if my father had heard about the dreadful murder of that “Till boy.” The murder in Mississippi was causing quite a stir around the country because festering wounds were coming to a head over whites’ mistreatment of blacks in the South. But the murder of Emmett Till, which stood at the cusp of the American civil rights revolution, was hitting home in the North, too, especially in Stone’s Throw, New York, where a white man was suspected of slaying a black girl. After a while my father stopped taking the telephone calls.

“I’m going down to the can to check on the prisoner,” he told us. The “can” or jailhouse sat on a foundation of cinder blocks in a clearing surrounded by towering evergreens, a couple of hundred feet behind our house. It could be reached via a slender footpath, strewn with rust-colored pine needles.

Early that evening, all hell broke loose in front of our house.

The first sign of trouble appeared when a bulky green Packard raced past our house, honking and kicking up clouds of dust off the dirt road. The car was crammed with young black men, who shouted obscenities and shook their fists out of the windows. After passing the house, the car spun to a stop, turned and sped past again, going the other way. The Packard repeated its dizzying, crazy cruising several more times before being joined by three other cars, each filled with angry, vocally caustic black men. Apparently, the shouting, the snarling automobile engines and the deafening, squawking horns, alerted my father, who was attending to Jiggs down at the can. Edna and I were in the living room, standing behind the locked screen door when my father startled us.

“What’s all this ruckus about?” he demanded.

“Those guys aren’t from around here, Pa,” Edna said shakily.

“Yeah, I know some of them characters. They’re from around Schenectady and Troy. I had to run a couple of them off a few weeks ago, drag racing on the river road.” Unlocking the screen door, my father went out and stood on the front porch with his hands knotted into fists.

“What you gonna do, Sheriff?”

The question came from the driver of the Packard, which had come to a sudden, exploding-cloud-of-dust, stop in front of the house. The questioner was a very dark-complexioned young man, wearing a black do-rag. As he spoke, he opened the car door and emerged from the vehicle. He was enormous. He stood over six-feet tall; brute muscles rippled beneath his tight-fitting t-shirt.

“Oh, I know him,” I whispered to Edna. “That’s Sylvester Huggins, Troy’s best high school football player.”

The other cars lined up and stopped behind the Packard. The drivers and their passengers formed a crowd of nearly a dozen, athletic, young men. They were angry and obviously spoiling for trouble.

My father stepped off the porch on to the hard ground; he remained silent, serious and stern.

“So, what you gonna do, Sheriff?” the Huggins boy asked once more. He was standing outside of the four-foot high picket fence that enclosed our small yard.

“About what?” My father’s voice was low and calm.

“About that whitey you got holed up in your stupid little jail. About that whitey who killed one of our sisters. That’s what! We’re tired of these whiteys just killin’ us whenever they want to. It’s about time we started killin’ them.” Sylvester Huggins was a notorious ruffian and he was clearly acting as the leader of the group.

My father said nothing. Instead, he held up one hand, and in a friendly, relaxed manner, he motioned for the stalwart questioner to come forward.

In one stride, Huggins jumped over the fence and swaggered up close to my father.

What happened next was so sudden and so amazing that it seemed like magic.

Without speaking or changing his facial expression, my father threw a detonating right-handed upper-cut and hit the big, robust boy square under the jaw so hard his brawny, strapping body left the ground like a rocket ship taking off. He landed on his backside with a terrible thud; he was left dazed and stunned like he was seeing stars.

“Got any more questions?” my father asked. Sylvester Huggins sat on the ground, reeling, still trying to figure out what happened.

“Anybody got any questions?” my father asked addressing the group on the other side of the fence. There were some whispered murmurs, but nobody moved.

“OK, then. Get the hell away from my house. If I catch your asses back here I’m a bust loose real big. You all hear me?” my father growled.

Still no one moved. Like animals caught in the headlights, they clearly wanted to run, but were petrified. It was an eerie moment. My father broke the spell.

“Scat! Hot-damn-it,” he barked, and stomped his foot.

The spellbound pack jumped in unison, like they all just realized they were standing on burning coals; they scrambled back to their respective cars. Sylvester Huggins struggled to his feet. My father made a quick but fake move, as if he was going to leap into the air. Huggins back-peddled so fast he fell backwards over the fence.

“This ain’t over, Sheriff,” he said, spitting blood and rubbing his jaw.

“It is for now, boy,” replied my father.

Edna and I ventured from the house and stood on the porch and watched as the procession of cars roared away, leaving dust and exhaust roiling in the air.

The dust had barely settled when Stone’s Throw Mayor, Old Duncan Durante, drove up in his brand new, bright orange, 1955, 2-door, convertible, Lincoln Custom Sports Coupe.

Old Duncan had served as village mayor for as long as I could remember. He was a flashy, “high-yellow” man with processed, straightened hair, and two dazzling gold front teeth. And like Old Saul Shepard, he worked as a railroad line conductor. His duties as village mayor were largely ceremonial; he presided over the monthly village council meetings and he signed my father’s paychecks.

“Hey, now, Cockeyed Bill. Looks like some excitement finally come to Stone’s Throw,” he said as he walked through the gate.

“Hey, now, Old Duncan. Yeah. I know you heard by now. About the murder and all.”

“I got in from my three-day run this afternoon. Heard all about it,” the mayor said, gently patting the shimmering, processed waves in his hair.

“From what I hear Cockeyed Bill, you got a white fella down at the can.”

“I do. And he sick as a skunk in bath water.”

“Well, I don’t know about this situation developing here, now,” the mayor began slowly. No one in the village liked being on the wrong side of one my father’s bad moods. Not even the mayor.

“I think this situation calls for higher authority. They found that Emmett Till boy murdered down South. Folks all over are pretty upset about that. Now we got a black girl dead here, in the village, and they think a white man did it. Sooo, I... Well, I called the state police in to handle this thing we got going on here.”

My father’s eyes widened and the lines in his forehead furrowed so deeply you could have planted corn in the rows that formed.

“Hey, now, Cockeyed Bill...” The mayor took a couple of steps back as he struggled for the right thing to say. But before he could say another word, two black and white state trooper cars, with red lights flashing, came barreling down the dirt road and screeched to a halt behind the mayor’s buffed Lincoln. It was near the day’s end. The pink sunset mingled with the purple twilight and long, red-streaked evening shadows pulsed and rippled into twisted, lurid shapes. The world seemed hollow, like a hallucination, like a dream.

My father stood in the front yard, holding his Brooklyn Dodger’s baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head. Four, white state troopers emerged from the two patrol cars.

“Well, now, the Mayor say you come to take charge of my prisoner,” my father said to the approaching law enforcement officers. From his tranquil, composed demeanor, one would never have guessed that, only moments before, he’d cold-conked one of the meanest bullies in the tri-county area.

“Yes, Sheriff. That’s exactly why we’re here: to pick up your prisoner and take him to a safer

place of confinement,” said one of the state troopers.

To me, the officers were daunting, intimidating. Their “Smoky” hats sat evenly on their heads. Their severely starched uniforms were accessorized with thick, black leather utility belts, equipped with rounds of ammunition and hand guns stuffed into shiny holsters, and outfitted with sleek black batons, and silver handcuffs glinting in the fading light.

“You all got papers for him? ‘Cause I need to see some kind of court order before I can turn him over. Now, I’m sure you all understand that.”

“Well, Sheriff, it’s like this...,” the lead trooper patronizingly said. “You’re holding a white man in that rusty, tin carton you call a jail. It’s not safe for him, and quite frankly, it’s not safe for you or your family.”

“Well now, I sure do appreciate your concern. But like I’m saying now...” “Sheriff!” The state trooper shouted like he wanted my father to snap to attention. He put a hand on my father’s shoulder and continued.

“You’re holding a white man, charged with murder, and we’re here to...”

“Now you hold it,” my father interrupted. “Who say he’s charged with murder? I’m holding him as a vagrant.

“It ain’t no matter to me that he’s white; and it shouldn’t be no matter to you all. This is my jurisdiction. Old Duncan here ain’t had no right calling you. He’s the mayor. I’m the sheriff. I was elected and I’m going to do my job. Now, get your god-damned hand off of my shoulder.”

“Now Cockeyed Bill...” Old Duncan began.

“Goodnight Mayor! We’re done here.” Just like that my father dismissed them.

“We will be back, Sheriff,” the lead trooper said.

“Well, I can’t say you will be welcome,” my father said. He stood in the yard and watched as the state troopers and the mayor got in their cars and drove away. Night fell like a widow’s veil over the village. My father turned to Edna and me.

“You got ten minutes and you best be in bed.”

“Now Pa, it’s Billy’s bedtime. But I stay up like I want to.” Edna protested because she was going to be a senior in high school in the fall and my father had already started treating her like she was a grown up.

“Now Edna,” my father wearily said, “everybody tells me what a smart girl you are. Now, show me how smart you really are. Go to bed! Both of you!”

A half-hour later, I was in bed, tired, but still awake. All the lights in the house were off. I heard my father shuffling around in the kitchen. He wasn’t alone. He whispered and fumbled in the dark. I heard the trap door to the cellar squeak open and flop shut. There was muffled movement beneath the floor. Lying on my back with my bedroom window opened, I saw the velvet sky. A zillion stars sparkled like diamonds.

The next morning my father didn’t have to tell us he was keeping Jiggs in the cellar. We could hear the sick man, thrashing about and wheezing and groaning.

“I’m thinking about sending you both down South to visit your Auntie Mayda,” my father said when Edna and I came into the kitchen. He was making us a breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast.

“No, Pa, we can’t go anywhere,” Edna insisted as she poured cold, refrigerated water into the glasses on the table. “School starts in less than three weeks. My teachers say I have a chance to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test they give to white kids before they go to college. Colored kids don’t get many chances to take those tests. I think I can do really well, Pa. But I’ve got to be here.”

“Honey, now, it’s getting dangerous around here. I’m afraid for both of you. I don’t know how this thing is going to come out with this murder and all. People are getting awful upset over this thing. I got the prisoner in the basement. I’m going to stay around the house for a few days. I ain’t going to be making my rounds in the village. In fact, I got Old Doc Simone coming over here in a few minutes to talk about the dead girl, and when she’s going to be buried and all.

“I just think you all will be safer away from around here, down South with your Auntie Mayda.”

“That Emmett Till boy was from up North, Pa,” Edna said softly. “He was visiting relatives down South, in Mississippi, and white folks killed him.”

My father fell silent. Edna’s logic was too much for him. He put sizzling bacon strips and heaps of steaming, intensely yellow, scrambled eggs on our plates and said:

“Sit. Eat.”

My father didn’t join us for breakfast. Instead, he poured some boiling chicken broth into a mug, lifted the trap door to the basement, and disappeared beneath the kitchen.

When Old Doc Simone arrived, Edna tapped the broom handle on the wooden floor.

“Pa, Old Doc Simone is here for you,” she said.

“Send him down,” my father yelled.

“Thank you, Miss Edna. Billy. How are you doing?” Doc Simone patted my head, and put his black doctor’s bag on the floor next to the trap door.

“How are you children holding up?” he asked as he lifted the trap door and began his descent.

“Fine,” Edna said.

“Well, your father’s a good man; a strong man. He’s going to take care of things, so don’t you

worry.” Old Doc Simone’s polished, balding head was still above floor level when he reached for his black bag and towed it with him beneath the floor.

Edna and I hurriedly tip-toed to the living room to stand by the grated floor vent, so we could better hear my father and Old Doc Simone talking. Their voices were muffled, but when we put our ears close to the openings in the vent, we could make out what was said.

“He’s still delirious, Sheriff. Has he eaten anything?”

“Not much. I tried to get some of this here broth down him, but he just heaved it right back up. The rum fits got him so bad I can’t question him.

“Don’t know much about him. All he had on him was a pocket knife, and some old, ragged Army discharge papers. Had his name, serial number and the unit he served with. He was a lieutenant. I think he fought in the war ‘cause the papers say he got some kind of medal for bravery. I was busy yesterday, but I managed to get some telephoning done. I’ve been calling all over Albany, and Washington, D.C., and I got a call into Fort Bragg, the Army base in North Carolina. The Mayor’s going to love me when I give him the phone bill.”

While my father and Old Doc Simone were talking, Jiggs was moaning and gagging.

“It’s been a couple of days since he’s had a drink. It is going to take a couple of more days before he’s un-stewed. This is about the worst case of alcohol poisoning I’ve ever come across. I’m going to give him a shot of morphine. That’ll calm him down awhile.”

“Whatever you think is right, Old Doc. What about the Shepard girl? How’d she die? Was it the stabbing, the choking or the drowning?”

“Well, I’m not a forensic specialist... I can tell you that the knife punctured just beneath the sternum but it wasn’t a fatal wound. There wasn’t any water in her lungs, so she was dead before she was

put in the river. Her larynx and trachea were crushed. It took a good deal of strength to accomplish that. My best bet is that she was stabbed first, choked to death and then thrown into the river. “

“You know Old Doc, that Shepard girl was a good li'l girl. Regularly went to Old Reverend Larkin's church. Her and my Edna were classmates 'til the Shepard girl dropped out of school a couple years back. I ain't never heard nothing bad about her. That in itself is strange. You know this village, if you sneeze, folks around here tell it like you gone and got pneumonia.

“That's the truth, Sheriff. Speaking of gossip, now Sheriff, what I'm going to tell you next is kind of ugly. We're going to have to keep this to ourselves for awhile.” Old Doc Simone was silent for a long time. Eventually, in a low voice he said:

“She was raped... Probably by more than one... She fought back... Whoever killed her probably has some deep scratches on his arms or back or somewhere because her finger nails were broken.

“Well, your prisoner man here is resting now. I don't know what else I can tell you.” We could hear Old Doc Simone putting things back in his bag, preparing to leave.

“You ain't said nothing about the girl's funeral.”

“The day after tomorrow.”

Old Doc Simone's bag snapped shut. Edna and I rushed out of the house and onto the front yard so we could pretend we hadn't heard anything.

It was a morning when the brilliant summer sun showered our country village with radiant, golden light. But for me, it was a counterfeit glow, forged and false, because it did not expunge the blue and gray gloom I felt.

* * *

It rained on the day of Sheila Shepard's funeral. Big, torrential drops of water fell from the

heavens and washed over the ground like tears on a baby's cheeks.

"The Lord knows how to show sadness," Old Lady Bailey said. She was at Simone's Funeral Home, dressed in black. More than half of the village was there: Old Miss Saunders, the barber; Old Man Wicks, owner of the General Store; Old Duncan Durante, the Mayor, Old Man Henry, and other folks, the people you hardly ever saw, unless you stopped by their shack because you heard they were ill or they needed help or something.

My father was conspicuously absent but everyone knew why. He was attending to his duty as sheriff, guarding the man who most people said they thought had killed Sheila Shepard.

Sheila Shepard was in a closed, smoky-gray casket that sat on a silver funeral bier, surrounded by dozens of young, tender, red roses. Her father, Old Saul Shepard, sat on a folding chair next to the coffin and sobbed. People were packed into the first-floor viewing room. They stood on the carpeted stairs that led to a second-floor balcony. They leaned over the railing so they could see and hear.

Old Doc Simone, regal and somber, elegant and stately, stood like a sentinel, protecting the building's double-door entrance.

Old Reverend Larkin, wearing his green and black preacher's robe, walked among the hushed throng. When he reached the front of the first-floor viewing room, he stopped, lowered his gaze, stretched his arms wide, raised both hands above his head and, by all accounts, gave the shortest, most eloquent prayer he'd ever delivered.

He said:

"Dear Lord, we are so sad that this tragedy happened to one so young, still so new to the world. We are bruised because it happened here, in Stone's Throw. We are reminded about how much we need to love one another. The blood that was lost must be replenished by the hope in our hearts. Today we lay this young soul to rest and we look to You, Dear Lord, for justice, for comfort, for mercy. Amen."

At the cemetery, the rain fell in sheets that slapped the black umbrellas.

The gray casket was lowered into the dark ground and the rain fell.

But the rain could not wash away one man's pain. Old Saul Shepard looked up toward the weeping sky and called his daughter's name.

Even now, on random rainy summer mornings, I recall the day Sheila Shepard was laid to rest beneath the lonely lawn.

CHAPTER THREE

I finally had the chance to meet Jiggs.

I slept late on the morning after the funeral. When I awoke, the sun was shining. I smelled breakfast. Silverware clinked against porcelain plates.

I went to the kitchen in my pajamas, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

My father and a ghostly, string bean of a man were seated at the table. Edna fussed around the stove.

"Jiggs," my father said, nonchalantly, "this is my boy, Billy. Billy this here is Jiggs." With that introduction, the sleep flew from my eyes and I stood staring.

The emaciated-looking, thin, white man gave me a half-hearted wave and I noticed his hand trembled. He was trying to fork some grits and lift the food to his mouth, but his hand shook so badly

that the chow fell back on to the plate.

“Well, Billy if you can’t say good morning, at least go and get washed and dressed and come on back and eat some breakfast.” My father was acting as if everything was normal, like we always had scraggly white men over for breakfast.

I stood where I was momentarily because the gawky stranger in our kitchen mesmerized me; and because I was shocked that my father would let a man thought to be a murderer sit at our kitchen table. But I did as I was told and a few minutes later I returned.

Jeffery Jiggs struggled to stand. He put both hands on the tabletop and pushed himself up. I almost burst out laughing.

Wearing my father’s clothes, Jiggs looked like Lilliputians had dressed him. Jiggs was very skinny and very tall. My father was very robust and very short. My father’s old trousers looked like high-water, Capri shorts on the long-legged Jiggs; and his elongated, scrawny, chalk-white arms looked like oversized pipe cleaners poking out from the all-too-short sleeves of my father’s old, tattered, plaid shirt.

My father jumped from his seat to lend support to the lanky, weakened man who was swaying like a high-rise in a Tokyo earthquake.

“I’m taking him back to the cellar,” my father told Edna. “When Old Doc Simone comes over, I want you to come down with him. Bring a pencil and some paper ‘cause I need you to take down what we say.” When Old Doc Simone arrived, Edna told me to wash the breakfast dishes and she went to the cellar.

I started clattering the dishes in the sink, acting like I was busy washing them. But I couldn’t stand it. I had to know what they were talking about down in the cellar. I tip-toed to the living room and took up my position by the grated vent, so I could hear into the cellar.

This is what I heard:

“Well, there, Jiggs,” my father began, “you know we got to get to the bottom of some things. Now that you feeling a li'l better.

“This here is Old Doc Simone, he's been tending to you these past few days. He's here as an official witness to hear your statement. My Edna here will take it all down. She knows shorthand, and she's good, too. So, she can get it all down.

“Now, do you know why I'm holding you?”

“For being drunk in public?” Jiggs' voice sounded dry and tired.

“Yeah, well, I got'cha on that. You're right. But we got a girl gone dead here in Stone's Throw. Now, be careful about wha'cha say. Do you know anything about it?”

“No, no. I don't even remember how I got here. How long have I been here?” I could hear a stitch of panic creeping into Jiggs' voice.

“I don't rightly know all the answers to that, but I pulled you out from under Old Lady Bailey's porch about five days ago. Where did you come from?”

“I've just been traveling. For a long time.”

“I called the Army folks about you. Ain't heard nothing back yet.”

There was a long pause.

“I...I've been having a bad time since I came back from the war. I drink myself to sleep most nights. We lost a lot of good men over there, damn it. Damn it.”

“Ok, now take it easy there. Just about when do you think you came to this area?” My father only had a fifth-grade education but he had what I came to call “world wisdom.” He impressed me with

the way he was handling Jiggs.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I met up with a couple of men and we were drinking and hopping trains. I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t care.”

“Were they white men? How many men?”

“Yes they were white. There were three of us. I can only think of one guy’s name. It...It was Skeet. I didn’t know either one of ‘em before but I remember they told me they served in World War Two, just like I did. So we talked about the war and we drank wine. They kept coming up with more wine. So I hung around with him and the other guy for a few days, I guess.

“I have killed people. A lot of people.”

“Now what do you mean by that? Are you confessing to murder?” My father asked incredulously.

“They made us kill. We had to kill.” Jiggs’ voice had completely flown off the octave scale until the word “kill” scratched the air like a painful screech from a madman’s violin.

“Well. You’re talking about the war? You killed people in the war?” My father’s whispered, calm voice restored sanity to the discussion.

“Yeah. Yeah,” Jiggs sobbed.

“OK. That’s enough for now. Old Doc, can you give him something to calm him down?”

“Sure, Sheriff. He’ll be asleep in a moment.”

After a couple of minutes, when I sensed things were concluding in the cellar, I started back toward the kitchen so my father would think I’d been washing the dishes.

As soon as I took a couple of steps, there were several loud thumps at the front door. Startled, I

jumped, ready to run and hide behind the sofa.

When I spun around I saw a familiar-looking State Trooper through the screen door. I recognized him as the Trooper my father had summarily dismissed a couple of nights before. He had a sheath of papers in his hand.

“Get your Pa, boy?” he demanded, pulling at the screen door as if to open it. But it didn’t budge. Old Doc Simone had thought to lock it when he came in.

I gulped and nodded.

“Well, go get him. We have business.” The same four officers who came with him before accompanied the brazen State Trooper.

I got to the kitchen just as my father was coming up from the cellar, followed by Edna and Old Doc Simone.

“Sta...State Troopers!” I whispered hoarsely.

My father winced and cursed under his breath. He motioned for Edna and Old Doc Simone to go back down into the cellar. They lowered the trap door softly after them. My father took a moment to compose himself and pasting a wide, cheesy grin across his face he stepped lively into the living room.

“Gentlemen, what can I do for you?” he said approaching the locked door.

“Well, Sheriff,” the lead Trooper smugly began, “You said something the other night about court papers. Well, I got ’em.”

“Well now, ain’t dat sump’n?” my father said, scratching his head like he was just a simple, confused colored man. He was deliberately dumbing-down, portraying the kind of black man bigoted white people could relate to.

“I don’t rightly know how helpful I can be to ya’all. That ol’ boy done gone. Sho’ did. He gone. Ain’t nowhere ‘round here, no mo’.”

The Trooper attempted to open the screen door. My father made no move to unlock it.

“What are you saying, Sheriff?”

“I’m sayin’ dat he gone. Escaped. See, we had the funeral the other day. I had to go to de funeral and some’a dem ol’ tramps, friends’a hisin, must’a come’n sprung ‘im out’a my jail when I was grievin’ with de other folks.” My father was clearly fibbing. He’d stayed at home the day of the funeral, guarding Jiggs.

“You can go on down to the can and look if you want to. Ya’ll know where it is. He ain’t there.”

The lead Trooper motioned to the other officers and two of them jumped off the porch and started running down toward the “can.”

“How’d you let that happen, Sheriff?” The Trooper’s face was getting so red I could see him change color through the gray screen.

“Ya’ll Troopers ain’t never lost a prisoner? Seem like I remember a time when ya’ll did.... Wasn’t it last year...?”

“Yeah, well that wasn’t a suspect in a murder case,” the Trooper interrupted .

“The man I had wasn’t held on murder, either. I told you that I arrested him on a vagrancy charge. I ain’t never charged him with murder.”

“Well, we’re coming into your house and see if you got him stashed in there.” The Trooper angrily slapped the screen door with the papers he was holding.

My father dropped the dumb black man act and turned deadly serious.

“Oh no, no. No you’ ain’t coming into my house. Now you all can look in my jail. That’s public property. This is my home. I got my family here. You can’t come in here without a search warrant. Now don’t be messing with me. I’m a Sheriff and I know the law.

“You can wait on the porch ‘til your Trooper boys come back, then I’ll be expecting you to leave.”

The two Troopers who left to look at the “can” came back to the porch out of breath. They shrugged, indicating there was no one at the makeshift jail.

The lead Trooper crumpled the papers he held. Once again, he was frustrated and foiled by my father.

“We’ll be back, Sheriff,” the Trooper vowed, growling.

“You all take your time, now, you hear,” my father chuckled.

After the State Troopers left in a huff, Old Doc Simone and my father stood on the front porch talking.

Edna and I decided to do our weekly chores of sweeping and dusting in the living room. The truth was we were trying to stay close enough to hear what the men were saying.

“Sheriff, I have a lot of faith in you but I sure do hope you know what you’re doing. Telling those Troopers that Jiggs escaped may come back at you in an unpleasant way.”

“To hell with them, Old Doc. Sanctimonious white folks don’t scare me.

Besides, that Jiggs boy didn’t kill that girl. I know it just as sure as I know I’m black and the sun glows.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Jiggs had his jack-knife on him when I pulled him out from under Old Lady Bailey’s porch. The

knife we found stabbed into the girl was a switchblade, the kind of knife used in a street fight down in the city.

“Plus that Jiggs, I know he’s shell-shocked from the war and all, but he probably was too drunk and too weak to be attacking anybody. He’s been suffering the rum fits for a long time.”

“He did say he was traveling with some other men,” Old Doc Simone reminded my father.

“Yeah, that do be a problem. Tonight, after dark, I’m going on down there to that hobo camp by Pokey’s Pond. See if I can scare them boys up enough to get some information out of them.”

We had two guns in our house: The walnut stock, Winchester Model m-100 was my father’s rifle, which he taught me how to shoot when he started taking me on hunting trips when I turned 10-years-old; and the other gun was the Walther, P-22, semi-automatic pistol, which my father used for shooting practice and kept locked in the bottom drawer of the bureau in his bedroom.

That evening, he got the hunting rifle out of the living room closet, loaded it, and leaned it against the sofa. He went to his bedroom and strapped on his brown leather hip holster and shoved the loaded pistol into it.

“Billy, I’m leaving the rifle here for you. You’re my deputy, tonight. But you ain’t to touch the rifle unless it’s critical, now. You understand?”

“Edna, I need you to tend to Jiggs in the cellar. He’s harmless to you. I’m convinced of that. So, in about an hour, see if he can get some hot cereal down him and some milk.”

The orange sun was slowly slipping behind the mountains when my father slid behind the steering wheel of the red Chevy. Once again, the shadows and the night waltzed into the world.

My heart pounded. I was afraid for Edna.

“Hush, Billy,” she said, waving me off. “Pa said he’s not dangerous and I believe Pa. Besides I was down there with him today. I saw his eyes. He’s sad and he’s sick.

“You stay up here and watch the house like Pa told you. And if anything looks wrong, even a little bit, you get on the telephone to Old Doc Simone. I’ll be alright.”

Edna lifted the trap door and climbed down into the cellar to attend to Jiggs. I went out to the front porch and sat in the wicker rocking chair. The summer night sizzled. A crickets’ chorus sang a shrill song. Lightening bugs blinked lime-green lights, on-again, off-again. The humid, hypnotic night lulled me to sleep.

Suddenly, I felt as if something dreadful was near. Panic pushed me to run and hide behind the picket fence, but it was too late. The thing I dreaded saw me, shivering, shaking. It was ugly hatred stalking—dark-hearted, wicked and withered. It was hideous human hatred carrying death in a sack slung onto its hunched back.

My instinct screamed: “Get away! Run!”

Instantly, I was on my bicycle, madly peddling along the gloomy, dirt road. The fear-filled forest folded around me.

“Here... Here... Here...” A cool wind whispered, cleansing the sullied air.

A soft light, a lucid lake and the most beautiful lady I’d ever seen appeared. She smiled. Suddenly, I felt safe.

“Mom,” I breathed, “is that you?”

My beautiful mother kneeled and spread her loving arms. I ran to be embraced but stopped in my tracks when I saw she was not alone. Two other figures came into focus.

There was a slender, bloodied boy. His face, oozing puss, was puffed and bloated. One eye was

missing, the other swollen shut. Blood trickled from a bullet hole in his forehead like wine from the mouth of an uncorked bottle spilled at the table's edge. He was the dead boy in the newspaper: Emmett Till.

The second figure was a girl, slightly older than the boy. Her dress was torn. A knife protruded from her bosom. Her broken neck caused her head to loll loosely. Her wide-opened eyes stared at everything, but seemingly saw nothing. It was Sheila Shepard.

"Mom?" I cried, groping. But she was gone. The hate-monster returned, still hunting, hot, horrible, green, red-eyed. Sharp teeth gnashed. In the frigid heat of fear, I knew this omnipresent, omnivorous hating fiend wanted to devour me, snap me up, wolf me down, spit me out and watch me squirm on his slimy platter of loathing.

"Billy, Billy," a soft voice called. "Billy, Billy, wake up."

Edna was bringing me back to the sizzling summer night, the electric singing crickets and the lightening bugs' blinking spasms.

"Come on, Billy. Let's get you to bed."

In the darkened distance, a truck engine rumbled. Two bright, yellow lights, round with wide-eyed wonder, flew through the thick night. The red truck appeared gray in the white moonlight. My father was home.

"Edna? Billy?" he called, leaping from the vehicle. "Everything OK here? You all go on in the house. I got business to tend to."

I couldn't restrain myself. I leaped from the porch, ran like a fool, snatched the gate open and circled my arms around my father's waist. Burying my face in his abdomen, I hugged him with all the life I had in me.

“I saw Mom. I saw her,” I sobbed.

“OK, Billy-boy. OK. I know you did. I see her, too, from time to time.” His voice ricocheted like he was standing in an echo chamber.

“Your sister is waiting on the porch. You go along, now. I’ll come to see you when I get through here.”

That’s when I noticed them, lying on their stomachs in the truck’s flatbed with their hands tied behind them: two men, skinny, sallow, jaundiced. Stringy, dog-like hair, matted with sweat, clung to their skulls. Dark-ringed eyes sank into depressed sockets. Filthy, ragged clothes barely covered their skeletal bodies. They smelled like death on toast: puke, urine and rot-gut wine.

Reluctantly, I let go of my father and watched him hustle the men out of the truck and herd them along the path leading to the “can.”

I was in bed when he returned to the house and came into my room. “How are you doing deputy?” he asked quietly and sitting on the edge of my bed.

“I had a dream. Mom was in it—and Sheila, and the boy who was killed down South.”

“Well, Billy-boy, it’s only natural for you to have bad dreams. All this talk about killing. Everybody in these parts is taking the Shepard girl’s death hard, real hard. I can see how that’ll make an impression on you.”

“When I close my eyes and think real hard I can see Mom. She was really beautiful, wasn’t she?”

“Oh, yes, yes, son,” he said after a moment. “She was. You were a lot younger than you are now. I worked for the railroad back then. I couldn’t be home. The night she died, I was stoking coal into the belly of a train engine.

“You just turned four when she took sick. Old Doc Simone did everything he could. It didn’t

take a year and she was gone from us. Oh, my heart was so heavy. I thought I'd never go on. If it weren't for me having you and Edna to lean on, I most likely would have ended up like Jiggs, a lost soul drowning in a bottle. It don't seem like it sometimes, but the Lord don't put nothing on good folks that they can't carry."

My father wanted to comfort me, but I still felt anxious and confused. For a moment, we were silent, serenaded by a cacophony of night sounds: Crickets chirping loudly off-key; Old Man Anderson's dogs baying at the moon; a haunted train whistle.

"Why do white folks hate us so much?" I asked.

I think my father knew I was struggling with a gnawing awareness of the vicious power of racial prejudice. For all practical purposes, Stone's Throw was a segregated "colored" community, even though it was located in the integrated North. My exposure to racist venom and abject bigotry had been limited. But the brutal slaying of Emmett Till, a harmless teenager; and the flap that was made about my father holding a "white man" prisoner, and the contempt exhibited by the white State Troopers, were forceful, fearful signals.

"You ain't had to experience too much of the shame in this world, Billy-boy. Lord knows, if I could, I'd make it so you never had to know about it. If I can't protect you from it, I can try to prepare you for it.

"Not all white folks hate colored folks; but those that do go out of their way to make things difficult for you. I count it up to their fear. See, they're afraid that if they treat us rightfully, we'd prove good enough to stand alongside of them. For some reason, a lot of white folks are afraid of that. What's scares them even more is that some of us will prove to be so excellent that we'd get to stand ahead of them. And for some white folks that notion makes them shake like a polar bear skinned naked in the winter."

“But you aren’t afraid of anything.” I said. My esteem for my father approached mythical proportions. He was the strongest person I knew. I felt that if Hercules ever met my father, he would admire him, too.

“Oh, no,” my father chuckled. “Don’t you believe that. Plenty scares me. But you can’t go through life afraid. Fear is like quicksand. You have to take that fear and lift yourself up with it or you can sink in bitterness.”

I struggled to stay awake, but sleep stood heavily on my eyelids, forcing them shut. I slipped into a world of half-awareness. My father lingered quietly for a while. When he left the room, I felt his absence.

Stories about the new prisoners spread like wildfire.

“No jive, Cockeyed Bill’s got two mo’ white bums in de can. Sick as rats,” Old Man Wicks told Old Man Henry.

“Yeah, well I heard dey gang raped dat po’ girl,” Old Man Henry told Old Miss Saunders.

“Cockeyed Bill chased dem tramps on down. Dey tried to cut ‘im. Like I always say, ‘you rue de day you mess with Cockeyed Bill,’” Old Miss Saunders told Old Man Anderson.

“Yeah, I heard dey cut Cockeyed Bill sump’em fierce, but he brought ‘em in. He sho’ did,” Old Man Anderson told Old Duncan Durante, the Mayor.

Old Duncan Durante knocked at our front door. It was almost noon, the day after my father apprehended the two, transient men. My father spent most of the morning talking over the telephone.

“Come on in, Mayor,” my father said, unlocking the screen door.

“Well Cockeyed Bill, you know I’m concerned. I’ve heard a lot of things. They say you got cut up.”

“Do I look cut up?”

“No, you’re looking fine as a fiddle,” Old Duncan admitted.

“That’s the Stone’s Throw gossip mill. You can depend on it,” my father chuckled.

“I’ll tell you just what happened. I went to Pokey Pond last night. Now you know that Pokey Pond is a place where mostly colored hobos camp out. You know America frowns on whites and coloreds socializing and mixing. Even white tramps don’t usually hang out with no colored bums. It just ain’t Kosher. But I got to thinking that maybe them white bums figured nobody would look for them among the black bums.

“I hid in the bushes and watched and sure enough there they were, sitting like two onions in a bushel of carrots. There must have been thirty colored tramps and those two white bums, sitting around a fire, all of them farting and drinking wine.

In fact, they had so much wine and did so much farting, I was afraid the alcohol fumes and the human gases would blend with the fire and start a combustion.” My father laughed loudly.

Old Duncan didn’t laugh.

“The funny thing is that the white bums seemed to be supplying the booze for the rest of them. Don’t know where they got it but they kept coming up with a fresh bottle. At one point, I think almost every tramp in the camp had his own jug. I didn’t think there was that much cheap wine in the whole county.”

Old Duncan rolled his eyes like he didn’t want to hear the gritty details. My father ignored the Mayor’s demeanor and continued with his account of last evening’s events.

“When I got ready, I just walked up and announced myself. ‘I’m the Sheriff of Stone’s Throw,’ I said.

“Not one of them tramps made a move to try to get away. In fact, most of the colored bums started laughing so hard they rolled on the ground.

“The two white tramps just sat there looking up at me, swooning and swaying like they was sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Well, I got the two white bums to the truck. When I patted them down, I found eight pints of wine. They had bottles stuffed into their back pockets, stuck in their waist bands and taped to their legs.

“I could have swore I got all the wine they had. But when I got them back to the can, I found two more bottles. And this morning, when I went to check on them, they was drinking from yet another bottle of wine.

“I poured it all out on to the ground. I don’t want all that rot-gut around my house. Wasn’t no label on any of the bottles but it looked like that sinful Muscatel shit winos drink. You know, dark yellow, like piss soaking in the sun.”

“Well, be that as it may, Sheriff, what’s all this got to do with the dead girl? Are we any closer to solving this here murder?” Old Duncan, the Mayor, was clearly agitated.

My father stood in the middle of the living room with his Brooklyn Dodger’s baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head.

“Well, now Mayor, to answer your first question: the two white bums I brought in last night are the ones who hopped a train into the village with Jiggs. So I thought I needed to question them.

“To answer your second question: No! We ain’t no closer to knowing who killed Sheila Shepard. I guarantee you them white bums ain’t had nothing to do with it. They been skunked so long they

couldn't kill a chicken."

Edna, who was attending to Jiggs, had just come up from the cellar when Old Doc Simone knocked at the door, opened it and came into the house without being invited.

"Sheriff," he said, "You've got company."

My father went to the door. Edna, Old Duncan and I went to the window.

A crowd was gathering on the dirt road. Sylvester Huggins and his raucous pack of juveniles from Troy and Schenectady were out there. Their cars weren't in sight, which meant they parked down the road because they hadn't wanted to attract my father's attention until they had assembled.

Seemingly out of nowhere, five battered pickup trucks pulled to a stop so abruptly they created a swirling ball of dust. At least a dozen fuming, white-cracker farmer-types disembarked from the vehicles cursing and carrying sticks, baseball bats, and pitch forks.

As if that wasn't enough, two State Trooper patrol cars dashed along the road, speeding toward the men gathering in front of our house. Red lights flashed, sirens wailed. I sensed the danger.

My father sucked in his breath through clenched teeth, went to the living room closet, grabbed the loaded Winchester and went out on to the front porch, alone.

"What's going on out here?" he asked. He held the rifle in his arms like he was cradling an infant.

A big, bearded farmer wearing soiled overalls spoke up.

"I ain't speaking for them," he said, pointing to Sylvester Huggins' group.

"The rest of us came to notify you that we take exception to you rounding up white folks and holding them in that oversized sardine can you call a jail."

“Fuck you, whitey,” Huggins shouted.

“Fuck you, black boy,” the farmer shouted back.

A loud “pop” made me flinch.

My first thought was that my father had shot someone. I soon discovered that a State Trooper had fired his pistol in the air. It was the same Trooper who came to the house with a warrant to take Jiggs.

Everyone froze, immobilized into a tableau of anger and hatred. I held my breath.

“Break it up,” the Trooper commanded. He held his pistol with the barrel pointing skyward and began walking through the mass of menacing men.

“My boys are calling for back-up. If I have to, I’ll take all of you in for disturbing the peace. Got it?” he barked.

It took a few moments, but the cluster scattered. The white farmers got in their beat up trucks, cursing and swearing revenge against everyone involved. Sylvester Huggins and his crew left the scene shouting anti-Caucasian epitaphs.

My father stood on the porch facing five State Troopers who stood shoulder-to-shoulder outside the picket fence. The scene was reminiscent of a gunslingers’ showdown in an old Western movie.

“What can I do for you all?” my father asked.

“We came for your prisoner. We know he’s here. I’ve got ‘papers’ as you call it. They’re in my patrol car,” the Trooper said smugly.

“How’d you all know he’s here?” my father queried.

“It doesn’t matter how we know. Come on, Sheriff. Give him up. You’ve got your family to

think about. Somebody's bound to get hurt. Could be your boy. Or your girl. This situation is out of hand."

My father turned toward the window, where Old Duncan, Edna and I stood watching.

"Ok, you can have him," my father relented.

"Edna, go on down to the cellar and get Jiggs up here," he said loudly.

"But, Pa, he didn't...", Edna protested.

"Go on and get him, girl!" My father had that certain sound of firm finality in his voice. It was a tone that Edna and I knew meant he wouldn't tolerate any more discussion.

Old Duncan rushed out on to the porch.

"Now, that's better, Sheriff..." the Mayor began.

"Shut up, Old Duncan. You got your way. I know you told them Jiggs was here. Maybe it is best," he said resentfully.

The Trooper who did all the talking stood at the gate with an arrogant, I-gotcha-now look on his face. My father made a big show of spitting on the ground like he was trying to rid himself of a bad taste in his mouth.

It wasn't long before Edna came back into the living room.

"He's gone, Pa," she said loudly through the screen door.

"What do you mean he's gone? This ain't no time for games, now, Edna."

My father pulled the screen door open so fast and hard that it flapped back and slammed shut before he could step into the house. Old Doc Simone, who was standing just inside the door, jumped like a cat with

a firecracker tied to its tail.

When my father did get in the house he was followed by the bossy, talkative State Trooper.

“Is this one of your tricks, Sheriff?” The Trooper was furious.

My father didn’t answer. He rushed into the kitchen, lifted the trap door and jumped down into the cellar. When he re-surfaced, he had a puzzled look on his face.

The Trooper stared at him in disbelief.

“Look for yourself if don’t believe me,” my father insisted.

“What kind of shit are you pulling here, Sheriff?” the Trooper asked as he climbed down into the cellar. When he came back up, his face was as red as a ripe tomato.

My father was already going out of the back door, headed toward the “can.” Everyone followed him. My father was followed by Old Duncan Durante, who was followed by Old Doc Simone, who was followed by all of the State Troopers, with Edna and me bringing up the rear.

When we got to the boxcar jailhouse, the big sliding door, which my father swore had been locked, was opened wide. The “can” was empty. The two hobos my father brought back from his trip to Pokey Pond were gone and there was no sign of Jiggs.

My father stood with his Brooklyn Dodgers’ baseball cap in his hand, scratching his head.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said. “I know I put the padlock on that door.”

Just as my father made that observation, one of the Troopers picked up a silver padlock from the ground.

“You mean this padlock, Sheriff?”

“I don’t know how they did that.” My father fished around in his pockets and pulled out his

jangling key ring. “I still have the key. The one and only key.”

“This padlock hasn’t been pried open or tampered with in any way, Sheriff. In fact it is still securely locked,” the Trooper said.

The lead Trooper was frustrated and foiled again.

“What kind of law enforcement officer are you? You can’t even keep a couple of drunken hobos locked up overnight,” he said with disgust.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something sparkle in the grass.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing.

My father went over to the object. Looking down, he gave a soft whistle of amazement. He removed his cap and scratched his head again before stooping to pick up a pint bottle filled with amber-colored liquid. He removed the gold cap and put the opened bottle up to his nose.

“Ughh. Cheap, rot-gut Muscatel.” My father dropped the bottle like it had suddenly turned into a deadly rattlesnake.

The hot, noon-day sun was like an egg frying in the sky. Not a single breeze stirred. A strange stillness fell over the land, a quietness that had the texture of a hum and an echo, like the sound preceding a cyclone. The leaves on the trees rustled. Since there was no wind, we all looked upward to see the force that moved the branches.

We saw nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The mystifying morning stretched into a sweltering summer afternoon.

Lusterless leaves dangled from limp tree limbs like lifeless withering hands, their darkened palms living only by sheer willpower in air so hot, so moist and thick, it caught in the throat and labored normal breathing. The surly state troopers had left in a huff. My father was busy calling military bases and veteran's hospitals around the country, vainly trying to find information about the vagrants who'd slipped from his custody. Edna was cleaning the cellar and Old Doc Simone had left to make his rounds; he promised to return to have supper with us.

For me it was a puzzling afternoon of loneliness and longing. Sitting on the front porch, I couldn't help but think about the morning's strange events. What happened to Jiggs and his friends? Where did they go? How did they replenish the bottles of endless wine? Why were the troopers so disrespectful to my father?

Grotesque thoughts whirled like a crazy carousel gyrating out of control. The chimera of demons and the pulsing confusion lingered from the nightmare I'd had the evening before. I was still stunned by the thought of seeing the graceful aura of my dead mother and the gut-wrenching image of the murdered Emmett Till and the sad, broken shadow of Sheila Shepard; all the while, I relived the pursuing hatred and fear the dream had evoked. I'd let myself get lost in an echoing canyon of calling memories, tumbling recollections that were somehow driven by the pummeling heat. Mostly, I couldn't help but remember the hot summer days when my mother lay sick and dying.

Summers in upstate New York were sometimes more horrible hot than Down South, at least that's what the old folks said. Folks like Old Lady Bailey who was born in Georgia so long ago no one thought about keeping birth records for "colored" babies, she often said.

"Mamma told me I was born somewhere around 1880, best she could recollect. Pappy say it was before that. Don't nobody know for sho'."

Old Lady Bailey wasn't much for keeping company with other villagers.

"Don't like folks much," she'd declare. "Can't trust 'em. Everybody wants sump'em."

But my Pa was one of the few people whom she admitted to really liking. When Mom was sick she came to our house nearly every day, nursing her and caring for Edna and me. When Pa had to work on the trains, and he'd be gone for several days at a time, Old Lady Bailey would stay over to "make sho' they gets cared for."

I was little but my memory had already begun to take hold. I remember Old Lady Bailey and Old Doc Simone busying themselves at my mother's bedside.

Old Doc Simone was a good doctor, he'd attended medical school; he'd even practiced medicine in the Army, on the battlefield and in an Army hospital in Albany.

"I'm just a country doctor. But even so, there's no cure for what she has." I heard him whisper to my father one night when Mom was coughing uncontrollably and spitting up blood.

When I got a few years older, about nine years old I guess, I kept pestering my father to tell me about what took Mom away. At first he said he didn't know and he didn't want to talk about it. He saw the puzzled, hurt look on my face and finally he sat with Edna and me and told us what Old Doc Simone had told him.

"Your Momma had some kind'a rare lung disease." He said Old Doc Simone had only seen it once before.

"A soldier's wife got hold of it. No sense trying to tell you the name of it, he said. It got a name so long that nobody could ever remember it. The Army sent for military doctors from all around the country. They tried to help the soldier's wife, but they couldn't. They even had one doctor come all the way from Germany."

Old Doc Simone had attended the soldier's wife but it was the other doctors who identified what was wrong with her. He said Old Doc Simone told him that when he got a chance he looked up the disease in all the medical journals, he read case reports, and he studied the disease the best he could.

It turned out it was an ailment that strikes only women; women between the ages from twenty to forty, Old Doc Simone told him.

"Your Momma was only thirty-two years old when it hit her. Only about one out of one million women get it," he said.

"I couldn't believe it! No! A million women, and your Momma was the one, out of all those women, who got it. She had all the symptoms, the coughing, the chest pains, blood spit and she had terrible trouble breathing. Your Momma suffered so... She suffered so...much.

"I cursed God. Old Doc didn't know what to do. Nobody did. She suffered so... I prayed for the Lord to come and rescue her. And He did."

Edna and I cried and my father cried, too.

Sitting on the hot porch, I remembered those times when Mom was sick. The house was always shushed and gentle. I was little when it all happened, but I remembered how Old Lady Bailey was with Edna and me then. She was tender and calm, quite the opposite of her public reputation as being cantankerous and tetchy.

Indoors and out, Old Lady Bailey wore a stiff black straw hat with a flat-topped crown encircled by a ribbon and a flat narrow brim. She was toothless, so her lips folded into the inside of her mouth. She could only eat soft foods like soup or finely chopped collard greens, mashed yams and white potatoes, boiled turnips, and bread sopped in gravy or water. She was as black as a licorice stick and as thin as one. Behind her back Edna and I often joked that she was so skinny that when she turned

sideways she looked like a walking cane. But she did show us kindness and we were fond of her, too. Though she wasn't in the habit of talking to too many people, she loved telling us stories about her life.

After Mom had been bathed, given her medicine and had settled into a fitful sleep, Old Lady Bailey would sit on the front porch and tell Edna and me stories about growing up in Georgia. Her mother had been a Mammy, nursing two white children and living on a plantation, even though the Civil War had been over nearly thirty years by the time Old Lady Bailey was born.

“Even tho' the war was done, my Mamma and my Pappy stayed on with the Bailey's, that's the name of the white folks what owned the whole shebang. That's how I got my name.... Henrietta Bailey...that's the name they give me,” she recalled.

“What was they gonna do? Wouldn't nobody hire 'em. They had ta eat and take care of me.

Old Lady Bailey told us how her mother had raised a white boy and a girl, giving them most of her time and affection.

“By time I were born the white children was nearly already growed, weren't long before they went off and left the homestead. The girl, she went ta Chicago and married some doctor. Don't know what happened to the boy 'cept when his Daddy died, next thing we knowed they went and sold the place, everything gone, and we had ta go, too.”

She told us how her family went to Atlanta and fell on hard times. Sometimes her father worked killing and gutting pigs; sometimes he'd find a job caring for horses and other kinds of work as a farm hand or a street sweeper or hauling garbage. Her mother took in white folks washing, and when Old Lady Bailey was a young girl she would help bleach and scrub sheets, pillow cases and undergarments. She'd hang the heavy wet laundry on the line to dry in the sun while her mother pressed the dried sheets and things with a hot flat iron heated on a cast-iron, potbellied, coal burning stove.

“It was hard work an’ we only got pennies for a day’s wash,” she’d say, wiping her furrowed brow. “But we did it ta help Pappy keep food on the table and pay the seven dollars-a-month rent on the shack we lived in. Yes, suh, times was hard. But we was a family, altho’ my Mamma and Pappy never was married, proper.”

With that Old Lady Bailey would stop talking, sit back in her chair, and with a faraway look stuck in her eyes, she’d fan her face with an open hand.

It was always Edna who would break the trance by asking her to tell how she almost got married and how she had to leave Atlanta before it could happen.

“Oh, child, you know I don’t hardly think about that no mo’,” she’d say. But after a few deep breaths, she’d wrap her dark, thin arms around her chest and, invariably, she would begin the story of how she’d once loved a “superior” man.

“He was a man of ambition, he was. He learned ta read and write and wanted me ta learn, too. And I did learn some. I learned to write my name and read the signs “For Colored,” “For Whites” just so I wouldn’t git in no trouble. I learned ta read the newspaper and the Holy Bible.

“He taught me how ta count, too. How ta count my money change, so I’d know when white folks was cheating me and so I’d know not to trade with them no mo’.”

Old Lady Bailey told us that the love of her life was a man named, Robert Simms. He drove a mighty wagon, drawn by two fine, strong horses, delivering fresh milk in the morning to all the rich white people living in high priced Atlanta neighborhoods such as Tuxedo Park, Buckhead, Sugarloaf and the like.

Robert Simms courted her for about two years. She was a young woman and it was about time for her to get married. Always with his hat in his hand, Robert Simms would bring her huge bouquets of

dandelions that grew in the pastures where the dairy cows grazed; and sometimes he brought freezing-cold bottles of refreshing buttermilk, iced all day in his big, beautiful milk wagon.

On his days off, he'd go fishing and come by with a mess of catfish and one time he brought a five gallon pickle jar crammed with butterflies of every speck and hue; there were red-spotted purple wings, goatweed-gray-leafwings, spangled sparklers, milkweed monarchs and queens and True Bushfoots like green commas, painted ladies, question marks and red admirals. Old Lady Bailey told us how, many years later, she'd found a book with the pictures of all the butterflies of Georgia printed in it.

"I looked at them pictures. I studied them and remembered the names of all the butterflies Robert had caught and brought to our house.

"That's why I like your Pa like I do. He reminds me of Robert. Robert was like your Pa, strong but soft and quiet, too. He used ta tell me that from the time he was a boy, catching butterflies wasn't nothing ta him. He say he put his hand out and them little creatures just come right ta him, set on his hand and never fuss when he put them in the jar. That's what he used ta tell me and I believe him."

Her father fried the catfish Robert brought and her mother served it with boiled corn, covered with butter. Robert stayed for dinner and he let the butterflies go free to flit around the room as they ate the catfish. After dinner, Robert took out his harmonica and let loose with tunes he'd made up. Some of the songs, she said, were so soothing and fetching that every now and then a butterfly or two would alight on his shoulder, or rest on his head, or land on one ear, its colors blazing, its beautiful wings fluttering slowly as if listening to a melody that told the story of their short lives.

Once again, Old Lady Bailey would pause and look into the distance with watery eyes. Then like a bright day dissolving into a storm, her luminous countenance would darken like a gray sky, brooding and menaced.

“Pappy was working a farm and a mule kicked ‘im in the head. The white farmer what hired him made him work the rest of the day but wouldn’t pay him. Say he didn’t give a good day’s work. He came home staggering... couldn’t hardly stand. Pappy died that night,” she said. “We didn’t have enough money ta bury ‘im. But Robert and some of his friends pitched in and we got a box and put ‘im in the ground.”

Then came the Atlanta race riot of 1906.

“This is history. Y’all kin look it up. It happened,” she said with insistence.

Years later, I did “look it up.” It was true. In September of 1906, “Atlanta had erupted in racial violence,” according to reports I found in old copies of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Time has blurred the reasons why white mobs attacked blacks in the streets or dragged them from their homes or violently pulled them from moving trolley cars. None of the reports agreed about the number of innocent black men who were shot or beaten to death. The accounts also disagreed about the number of lynchings that took place in the three days of rage and death. The whites claimed it was because black men had been sexually assaulting white women. Other reports assert that the carnage occurred because white men were unnerved by the “economic and social success that certain blacks were experiencing in Atlanta.” Georgia newspapers reported that sixteen “Negros” were killed. Northern papers I read said more than forty guiltless black men were killed in the massacre.

“Pappy been dead only a few short weeks when it happened. Atlanta was on fire,” Old Lady Bailey lamented. “Robert came ta the house in the middle of the night. He give Mamma fifty-two dollars. He say he had been saving it so me and him could get married. Told us ta get in his wagon. We left Atlanta with nothing but what we was wearing.”

She told us how Robert took them to a town outside of Atlanta and waited with them at a remote train stop. “There’s a place up North where colored folks is settling. Go there.” He gave Old Lady Bailey a piece of paper with the name, “Stone’s Throw,” written on it.

When the train came, he hurriedly ushered them aboard the caboose and told the black conductor to see to it that they got to Stone’s Throw in upstate New York.

“I cried: ‘Oh, Robert, come with us! Please come with us!’” He told her he had to stay and help his friends but that he would join her soon, real soon. And then he was gone. “Swallowed up in the night.”

The conductor instructed them regarding which trains to switch to and two days later, Old Lady Bailey and her mother arrived in Stone’s Throw. They got jobs cleaning houses for wealthy whites who lived in Albany. Old Lady Bailey said she “waited and waited” but Robert never did come to her.

“He just slipped away from me,” she’d say.

Later that summer, when my mother died, it was Old Lady Bailey, who held my hand at her funeral. When it was all over, she knelt down and held me tight against her.

“Don’t give up, child,” she whispered. “There’s a light in you. You are loved.”

I sat on the sun-drenched porch, thinking about Old Lady Bailey and the day my mother was buried and what my father had told me the night before about not being afraid, when the jangling telephone in the living room made me jump.

I ran inside, picked up the receiver and said: “Sheriff’s office.”

The caller said: “Tell that nigger Sheriff Daddy of yours to let them white men go or he’ll be sorry for the day he was born.”

* * *

The full moon, round and yellow, made the night sky look like the Lord punched a hole in the dark universe just so a shaft of pale light could funnel down to Earth.

There were so many questions. I was with my father, and Old Doc Simone, who came to our house for a late supper. The two men were trying to find answers. They sat on kitchen chairs on the front porch, talking. I sat in the wicker rocker, listening.

“The thing those tramps have in common, other than being drunks, is that all three of them served in the Army,” my father said. “Each one of them had old, ragged discharge papers on him. I spent most of the afternoon on the telephone, calling every Army base from here to Kalamazoo. I gave their names and serial numbers, but I got nothing.”

“Well, that’s the government for you, slow as January molasses. I’m sure someone will contact you soon,” Old Doc Simone said with assurance.

Edna finished up in the kitchen and brought a chair so she could sit out on the porch, too.

“Pa,” she asked, “where do you think those men went? When I came up from the cellar, Jiggs was still down there. A few minutes later, when you told me to go get him, he was gone. He was still too weak to go very far.”

“It’s not your fault, Edna,” my father said. “Don’t you worry none.”

“It’s strange all right,” Old Doc Simone said, perplexed. “Seems to me like somebody in Stone’s Throw would have seen three white tramps staggering around. They couldn’t have even gotten as far as Pokey Pond without somebody seeing them and calling you, Sheriff.”

We sat in silence for a while. The nonjudgmental moon watched over the world, an unblinking eye floating above us.

“Pa?” Edna began. “Last night, and even this morning, when I was tending to him, that Jiggs fellow just kind of talked out of his head.”

“What did he say, Edna?” my father asked.

“I couldn’t make out everything, but he was having nightmares, I guess. He kept saying things like: ‘No more... No more! I’m tired of killing. I’m tired of dying.’ He said things like that over and over and he cried.

“And, oh yeah, he kept calling out two names. He kept calling, “Skeet! “Jo Jo!” Like he was warning them, telling them to watch out for something.”

“Hmm,” my father mused. “The names on the Army papers I found on them two hobos from Pokey Pond were Ted Skeetsky and Joseph Johnson.”

“Hey, yeah, didn’t Jiggs say one of the guys he was traveling with was called “Skeet?” Old Doc Simone was rubbing his chin and thinking aloud. “And Joseph Johnson, “Jo Jo,” for the first two letters of his first and last names.”

My father’s brow wrinkled like he was trying to fit pieces into a jigsaw puzzle.

“Far as I could tell, Jiggs must’ve have known the other two during their military service. They all were in the Army and they fought in World War Two.”

“Was that the only things he said?” Old Doc Simone asked Edna.

“Yeah. Pretty much. He moaned a lot and every few minutes he’d cover his ears and start shivering and shaking all over.”

“I was an Army medic during World War Two. I was in a colored regiment, but when those boys, white boys included, came in all bloody and torn up, they didn’t care who provided relief.” Old Doc Simone stared out into the dim night as if he expected someone to come out of the darkness. “I

served a year in France,” Saw a lot of wounded, dying men. I doctored men who survived gory, bitter battles. Long after their physical wounds healed, they ended up wishing they had died. But they didn’t die. They lived to take the war home with them.

“There is a look they carry in their eyes. It’s a look that says the human soul is a barren place, where nothing grows. I saw that look in Jiggs’ eyes.

“People call it being ‘shell-shocked.’ I think there’s more to it than that. War changes a man and nothing is able to change him back to the way he was.

“I think that’s what happened to Jiggs and his two buddies. They’re forever scarred. Medicine can’t cure them. They say ‘time heals all wounds.’ Hell, even time can’t cure what ails them. That’s why they drink the way they do.

“It’s easy for people to look at a wino like Jiggs and condemn him without knowing his story; never realizing he fought while they slept in safety; never understanding how he sacrificed and suffered so they could be free to go shopping.”

Tears filled Edna’s beautiful, crossed eyes until they shimmered in the moonlight.

* * *

Jittering specks of light jumped and danced on the living room walls. Smoky shadows scurried across the floor.

I was running into the living room when my father scooped me up in his arms and took me into Edna’s bedroom.

I didn’t understand what was happening. I vaguely remembered Old Doc Simone saying goodnight and my father putting me to bed. Cursing and the smell of burning wood awakened me.

“Stay here with your sister, deputy,” he whispered. “I’m going to be right outside the door. Shhh... Don’t be afraid.” My father closed the bedroom door.

Edna pulled the window shade down.

“What’s happening, Edna?”

“Shhh...”

“You bastards need some lead in your asses!” my father shouted. The front screen door opened and slammed. I jumped at the sound of rifle fire. One, two, three shots. Then, except for burning wood crackling, all was silent.

After what seemed like an eternity, my father whispered through Edna’s closed bedroom door.

“Edna. I need you to get on the phone. Call Old Man Anderson and get him over here with the water truck.”

The water truck my father referred to was the village’s only firefighting apparatus: a 1940’s, 1,000-gallon, mobile tanker that Stone’s Throw purchased from Schenectady after that city acquired modern firefighting equipment. The truck-mounted tanker, which was kept at Old Man Anderson’s farm, was outfitted with a pressure pump that spewed water through a canvas hose.

I followed Edna into the living room. From the front window, I could see a blaze roaring at the edge of the road. My father returned to the front porch, guarding the house and watching the burning cross.

“Those chicken-shit bastards. I couldn’t make out who it was, but I saw three jerks running into the woods,” my father told Old Man Anderson when he arrived with the water truck.

Old Man Anderson and my father doused the flaming wood cross with water and dirt until it smoldered like a gigantic candlewick.

Dawn brought fire to the morning sky, turning it into an inferno-red roof that morphed into deep orange sheets dappled with pink and yellow patches vanishing into a vast, icy, blue canopy. And there were billowing clouds: mammoth, silver-white, fluffy islands of cumulus vapor magically suspended above the earth.

The morning brought another showdown in front of our house.

Old Man Anderson came with his .22 caliber squirrel-hunting rifle. My father had his pistol strapped on and the Winchester was propped against a tree. Old Doc Simone drove up in his big, black hearse with Old Man Wicks and Old Man Henry as passengers. Old Doc Simone wore his pearl-handled .45 ensconced into a leather holster strapped to his waist. Old Man Wicks and Old Man Henry carried their hunting rifles.

Old Miss Saunders, and Old Duncan Durante, the mayor, who left his new Lincoln at home, headed a pack of about twenty other villagers who came on foot, carrying guns, sticks, sling shots, and other weapons. Even Old Lady Bailey was among them, precariously waving her double-barreled shotgun.

“We heard about the cross burning, Cockeyed Bill. We came to help,” Old Duncan Durante said.

Soon after the villagers assembled, about forty white farmers came out from the wooded areas surrounding our house, where they had surreptitiously assembled during the night for the cross burning. They came into sight gradually, in twos and threes, seemingly appearing from behind the trees and from the bushes until they formed an ominous crowd milling across the road. They, too, were armed with an assortment of rifles, pistols, baseball bats, sticks, and pitchforks, anything that could be used to do bodily harm.

Before a confrontation between the villagers and the farmers could ignite, Sylvester Huggins and his band of about a dozen, rowdy teenage boys showed up in their growling, souped-up cars. They

jumped out of their vehicles, swinging heavy chains, flashing knives and proudly packing pistols stuck in their waistbands, gangster style.

“We gonna rumble, today,” Huggins announced.

My father turned, frantically searching the faces in the crowd around him. When he finally saw Edna and me standing on the front steps, he yelled:

“Edna! Billy! In the house. Now!”

We went back in, but we stayed by the window so we could see.

Sylvester Huggins and some of his crew removed their t-shirts, exposing rippling, athletic torsos.

“What? We supposed to be scared cause a nigger takes his shirt off?” laughed a loud-mouthed farmer.

“You ain’t going to be livin’ long enough to be scared, white motherfucker,” Huggins taunted.

I hoped the state troopers would show up. But they didn’t come this time. Instead, something else happened. Something remarkable: something that, to this very day, fills me with awe.

My father stood in the middle of a swirling circle of angry people who were ready to shoot, stab, and club one another to death.

We smelled them before we saw them. Even from where we were in the house, Edna and I got whiffs of the mercilessly awful, pungent stink of cheap wine and sour body odors. Appearing out of thin air, three, ghost-white, sick-looking tramps stood next to my father, reeling on their feet and skunk-drunk. I recognized them. It was Jiggs, still wearing my father’s ill-fitting clothes. The other two scarecrow men were Skeet and Jo Jo, their tattered, soiled and ragged clothes draped upon their undernourished frames.

Astonished, the crowd murmured. “Where’d they come from? Did you see that? What the hell...? They came out of nowhere.”

The three men moved like inebriated phantoms, staggering apparitions, saying nothing. Jiggs positioned himself in front of Sylvester Huggins. Skeet and Jo Jo, each placed themselves next to two other shirtless, young men from Huggins’ group.

“What you doing, filthy thing? Get away from me,” Huggins shouted.

The big football player balled his hands into sledge-hammer-sized fists and issued a walloping, right-handed, haymaker at Jiggs, delivering enough power to break a good man’s jaw. When Jiggs didn’t fall, Huggins took another violent, circular swipe at the gaunt man. He hit nothing. Jiggs was standing right in front of him, but Huggins’ powerful blows never connected. It looked as if Huggins’ fists passed right through Jiggs’ head, like the emaciated tramp was made of smoke and light, not flesh and bone.

The next eerie thing happened when Jiggs took his trembling hand and placed it upon Huggin’s broad, bare shoulder. Huggins tried in vain to lift the hobo’s bony hand and push it away from him. He could not.

“Look at his back,” Old Doc Simone said, pointing toward Huggins.

“He’s got scratches on his back. The Shepard girl scratched her killer. She fought so hard she broke her nails.”

“I should have known it,” my father said to Huggins. “That was your switchblade we found stuck in Sheila Shepard.”

Huggins was still struggling, trying to loosen Jiggs’ grip on his shoulder.

“Who are the other punks that helped you rape and kill that poor child?” my father asked.

I heard a click and saw a slender, silver blade winking in the sun. Skeet stood next to a shirtless teenager who pulled a switchblade and brandished it. The teenager Jo Jo stood next to sprang into action by pulling a homemade zip-gun from his waistband and randomly pointed it at the people nearest to him.

“I knew we shouldn’t have messed with that girl. I knew it.” The teenager waved his homemade weapon wildly; his bugged-eyed expression conveyed his panic.

“Shut-up, fool,” Huggins shouted. “These goddamned hicks don’t know shit. Shut-up.”

Huggins thrashed about trying to get Jiggs’ hand from his shoulder. He couldn’t dislodge the wino’s grip.

“I ain’t going down for this, damn it,” the switchblade-wielding teenager vowed.

“Huggins killed her. We was just trying to have some fun. She went crazy. Huggins said she’d tell everybody what we done to her. He killed her. He killed her, damn it!”

The teenager’s unexpected confession caused the crowd’s mood to change. Shock replaced anger. Everyone seemed stunned and surprised.

I don’t know when Old Saul Shepard, the dead girl’s father, joined the melee. I don’t remember seeing him before he made his way through the throng, stepped forward and shot Sylvester Huggins at close range with a .38 Saturday night special. Jiggs removed his hand from Huggins’ shoulder and the burly teenager crumpled to the ground, clutching his abdomen.

“That was my daughter; my baby you killed.” Old Saul was sweating, crying and shaking with rage and grief. Before anyone could stop him, Old Saul Shepard put the smoking gun-barrel to his own temple and fired.

The moment was pushed into slow motion. Chips and pieces of Old Saul’s skull separated and floated in the air like feathers. His face contorted into an agonizing grimace; his eyes rolled upward until

the pupils disappeared, leaving two white ovals that looked like hard-boiled eggs. He collapsed gradually, sinking into a heap upon the ground. The slow-motion spell snapped and more chaos quickly unfolded.

The teenager with the zip-gun attempted to fire the flimsy weapon, which was made from an automobile antenna, a piece of wood, a rubber band and masking tape. Instead of issuing a .22 caliber round of ammunition as intended the crude, homemade gun simply exploded, severing all five fingers from the boy's hand.

The teenager waving the switchblade tried to escape through the crowd. He took a couple of rapid steps, tripped and fell on his own knife. Old Doc Simone said later that the sharp blade pierced the boy's heart, killing him almost instantly.

Old Saul and the boy with the knife lay dead on the dusty road. The boy with the severed fingers writhed in pain, his injured hand bled freely. Sylvester Huggins coiled and twisted in the dirt. Apparently he'd gone into shock. He shuddered violently and held his bloodied hands over the seeping gunshot wound.

Old Doc Simone rushed toward Huggins to help him. Jiggs waved a thin, trembling hand, motioning for him to stop.

"There's no need. He will never know peace," Jiggs said, his voice lingering like an echo.

Most of the villagers who were present that day acknowledged later that they would never forget the look on Jiggs' face at that moment. At that instant, he seemed completely consumed by inner conflict and torment.

"There was a pleading, aching look in his eyes," Old Doc Simone said. "It was like he suffered, but not just for himself. It was like he suffered for the whole world."

“He was burdened with a heavy sadness,” Old Lady Bailey said. “I saw it in ‘im the moment I found ‘im hiding under my front porch.”

“He looked like a man with a troubled soul,” my father said.

But to me, Edna described it best.

“He looked like he carried everyone’s worst hurt deep down inside of him. The way Jesus must have looked on the cross, dying for our sins,” she said.

* * *

The state troopers finally came. Edna and I ventured from the house and stood on the front porch.

With wailing sirens and flashing red lights, two patrol cars screeched to a stop. Their arrival created a diversion. The white farmers lowered their weapons and moved to the road’s edge like innocent passersby. The villagers gathered in a group by the picket fence surrounding our front yard, acting as if they had every right to be there and to be armed. The unruly teenagers dispersed, concealing their weapons behind their backs and trying to appear as if they were just casually heading for their vehicles.

The familiar, officious lead trooper jumped from his car with his weapon drawn. He saw the water truck parked in front of the charred, wooden cross.

He saw Old Saul and the teenager dead on the ground. He saw the badly wounded Sylvester Huggins and the squirming boy with the missing fingers.

Looking over his shoulder, he yelled to his fellow troopers.

“Get on the radio. Get an ambulance and get backup out here, now.”

He turned to my father with an I-told-you-so look on his face. “Well, it finally happened!”

My father wasn't listening. He stood in the middle of the road with his Brooklyn Dodger's baseball cap in his hand, scratching his head.

"Did anybody see what happened to Jiggs and those other two hobos?" he asked. I automatically looked to the places on the road where the men were standing just seconds before. They were gone.

"They're gone, Cockeyed Bill," Old Durante, the Mayor said.

"What's that there?" Old Doc Simone asked.

My father looked down. On the ground at his feet was a clear, unlabeled pint bottle filled to the neck with yellow Muscatel wine.

"There they are," someone yelled.

I turned to see Jiggs, Skeet and Jo Jo, walking--not staggering--strong and upright. The road extended north and south. All the parked vehicles, the water truck, the cars the teenagers drove, my father's red pickup, Old Doc Simone's black hearse and the troopers' patrol cars blocked the road a few feet to the north of our house.

The three hobos headed toward us, eerily advancing from about one hundred yards to the south. I wondered how they could have gotten so far away so quickly. Only seconds ago they stood in the middle of the seething crowd.

Jiggs, who still wore my father's old clothes, didn't look so odd anymore;, and Skeet's and Jo Jo's garments didn't seem so dirty and ragged. As they came closer, I could see that their bare feet no longer touched the ground, yet they continued walking toward us.

Everyone saw them: The farmers, the villagers, the teenagers, the Troopers, my father, and Edna and I. It was a warm day but a cool, wandering wind whipped past us as the three hobos approached.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked repeatedly, not believing what I saw. The three men were walking on the air. With each step they ascended higher and higher as if they were climbing an invisible staircase.

A stronger, colder wind gusted, stirring dust and blurring my vision. When the dust settled, I saw that Jiggs, Skeet and Jo Jo were joined by four other spectral human figures. They all walked above the ground, ascending skyward with each step.

As the images came nearer, I could better identify the individuals who'd joined Jiggs and his two companions. It took a breathless moment for me to realize what I was witnessing, and when I did, a shivering, tingling sensation coursed through me.

Sheila Shepard, the girl we buried only a few days before, was on the left of Jiggs. She was slender and pretty, the way I remembered her. To Sheila's left, and holding her hand, was her father, Old Saul Shepard. Strangely, I knew his lifeless body was lying in a heap upon the dirt road. Yet, there he was walking into the sky. It was as if his spirit had risen and walked alongside his daughter's spirit. He wore his black train conductor's uniform with its shiny buttons gleaming in the dazzling sun.

On Jo Jo's right, walked a teenage boy, his brow untroubled, and his eyes clear and bright. My shocked senses struggled to grip reality. I was witnessing the resurrection of the slain teenager, Emmett Till. I recognized him from pictures in the newspaper that were taken before he was so viciously mutilated and murdered.

Next to Emmett Till, walked a beautiful, beautiful woman. Her hair was long and black; sunlight illuminated her bronze-colored skin. My heart recognized her before my mind could. It was the woman in my dreams. I was watching my mother, marching upward, into the heavens, with the others.

Rapture compelled the crowd. It seemed like we all were given a chance to glance beyond the stars to see into our own wounded hearts.

My father stood in the middle of the road. Like everyone else who was there, he appeared dazed and bewildered by seeing the magic and majesty of seven souls ascending into the blue. I ran from the porch to stand by his side. Edna followed me and we watched the images lift and rise higher and higher, until they looked like small birds soaring above us. Fluffy clouds parted as if separated by the hands of some powerful, unseen Almighty. Suddenly they were gone from sight, disappearing into the floating, silky-white cloud.

No one knew what to say. In the dirt at our feet there was death, blood and pain. And we did not know what to say. So we said nothing. The circling Earth turned with such force that I feared I would be flung into outer-space.

Anxiously, I scanned the faces of the people who witnessed the phenomenon of Jiggs, my mother and the others walking into heaven.

I looked at the white farmers lined up at the edge of the road; their anger seemingly melted into compassion. They'd dropped their weapons. Their hard eyes softened.

I looked at the villagers gathered by the fence; they seemed more humble, reverent. They shook their heads in disbelief and murmured: "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord."

I looked at the state troopers; they seemed powerless. Their arrogance was muted. They seemed to know they were in the presence of a higher authority.

I looked at the young black men who had come to our house that day to fight and kill. They cried like the children they really were.

I looked at my father and my sister and understood how fragile and gentle were their beating hearts.

Everyone there had been touched. They watched the sky. I knew they would watch for the rest of their lives.

* * *

Sylvester Huggins died on the way to the hospital.

A month later, the boy who blew his hand apart with the homemade gun died from a massive gangrene infection.

Summer had died, too. One cool, early autumn morning our telephone rang.

“Sheriff’s Office,” my father answered.

“Yes, I am the one,” he said. “What’s that again? You’re calling from what Army base? Oh, Fort Bragg. Yeah, sure. I called about a month ago. I was asking for information about three men. What’cha got for me?”

A hollow silence filled the room.

“OK,” he eventually said. “Thank you for calling.”

My father replaced the telephone receiver like it was made of egg shells. He went to the front door and looked toward the inexplicable sky.

“What happened, Pa?” Edna asked. My father had his back to us so we couldn’t see his face. He shrugged, shook his head as if to say “nothing,” and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“No, Pa. What Happened?” Edna pleaded.

“Oh, that was the United States Army finally calling me back about Jiggs and them other fellas.” He deliberately refused to turn in our direction as he spoke. We knew he was upset because his voice trembled and he gulped like his mouth was thick with saliva.

“Well, what did they say, Pa?” Edna approached him and put an arm around his waist.

He turned slightly and we could finally see his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks like silver ribbons rippling against the dark earth.

“That was an Army general. He called to tell me that the men I wanted to know about were killed in action overseas.

“Skeet and Jo Jo died in France in May 1944, more than 10 years ago. Jiggs was killed a few months later.”

My father, Edna and I went out on the front porch and silently watched the sky.

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The White Lie

The leather whip's long, sharp tongue pops like a firecracker. A heart-breaking scream shatters the star-dusted Southern night sky. Blow-by-rhythmic-blow, scream-by-chilling-scream, these are the sounds of cruelty's maddening meter as tragedy pulses through the slave quarters of Hiram Hampton's South Carolina plantation.

It is the seventh day of the seventh month in the year of our Lord, 1859. Heaven and Hell know Hanna will die tonight. The over-worked slaves—the under-fed men, women and children who shiver with fear inside their makeshift hovels—they know Hanna will die this night. They pray for her as well as for themselves.

The well-dressed guests from the main house have left Hiram's pre-nuptial celebration to suck what joy they can from the blossoming carnage—they know the slave wench will die this night. They wonder how long it will take.

The worms and the slugs and the bugs and the leaves on the trees and the musky magnolias down by the hedges, they know Hanna will die on this sickly sweet summer's eve. They wonder marvelous nothing. They do what they must. They wait, they listen and like all things of the earth, they understand that atrophied blood and murdered human flesh nourishes the American soil. The soil sows the American crops and the reaping of those crops makes cannibals of us all.

The slap of the whip, the bite of its tip, the spurting blood, the tender flesh, the ripping flesh. The scream is so far away now the sound no longer comes from inside her. Hanna knows she will die this hollow, unholy night.

The wicked crack of the surly whip breaks its brutal beat:

“We found ‘em, Master! We found de pearls. She had ‘em cooking in a pot, ‘bout a mile down road, off into de bushes, under de moonlight.” It is a young slave boy, no more than fifteen years old, who delivers the message.

The first thing Hiram did when he received word that the pearls were missing was to dispatch his white overseers and a few trusted slaves to launch a search of the plantation’s grounds. The next thing he did was to snatch Hanna out of her shack, and chain her to the spank-worn whipping post, where he assaulted her, abused her and beat her like she was a beast he feared.

Hiram knew Hanna had stolen the missing pearls. She had access to the main house and she had cause for grievance. He’d bought her when she was estimated to be twelve years old. She’d borne two sons by him, and she hated him for selling her teenage mulatto boys in exchange for the precious gems he intended for his bride’s dowry.

Now he stands sweat-soaked before this mound of open wounds and sprouting sores that, not more than an hour ago, had been a young, attractive African woman that someone had named Hanna.

“Did ‘ya bring the pearls?” Hiram demands of the boy. He is malevolent, menacing. His frowning brow shades darkly gleaming eyes.

“No suh, no suh, Master. Dem pearls, dey was boiling in somthin’ like a stew. Yes suh, dey was cooking with rat heads, and snakeheads and all dey guts and all dey chopped up body parts. Nunn’a us wanna touch dem pearls, Master suh.”

Hiram viciously backhanded the boy, sending him sprawling onto the blood soaked ground. On this night Hiram is fiftyish, tall, broad shouldered, and a bit portly. He looks like a man who enjoys the excesses of Southern aristocracy and its mystique of exclusivity, where white skin is an emblem of privilege, where black skin is a victim’s flag.

“What kind of pickaninny, voodoo juju you trying to pull?” Hiram growls.

His remarks are meant for Hanna but she can't hear him. His whip has torn one of her ears from the side of her head. The other ear is split and hanging by scraps of flesh, flapping like an old shutter threatening to fall away from the window. One eye is missing, the other swollen shut; her shredded lips are covered with a bloody froth. From head to toe, she is a massive welt of slashes, bruises and opened wounds. Already, flies are buzzing in a circle, anticipating a sticky feast.

“Black magic cannot save your black soul this sinful night, you wicked wench. Leave her chained to the post,” Hiram commands. “Leave her be as an example to all the thieving minded nigras on this plantation. Remember dumb darkies, if you steal—this is what you get -- misery, pain and death.”

He spits on the blood-red ground then drops the whip like it's a hot iron. He wheels on the boy and commands, “Get your lazy black ass up and show me where them pearls are.”

Mortally ravaged, limp and nearly lifeless, Hanna hangs from the whipping post, shackled and connected to the whirling world by the thinnest thread. Her essence exists within the confines of the smallest spot, a special, precious, impregnable space that offers some solace, some safety. She is a fetus in the womb of time, reborn in the quiet center of her storming soul, perilously lost, yet profoundly protected. She is nowhere in the middle of everywhere. She is in a calm place where she can reflect upon the curse she set in motion with the rat heads and the snakeheads.

It is a fleeting, beautiful breath of cognition, a serene knowledge that her hex will survive with immense power. She welcomes the death that swaths her with the knowledge that her revenge will be delivered.

Hiram recovers the precious pearls, plucking them from Hanna's slimy brew with his bare hand. He sends for the jeweler from Charleston, who stays on the plantation overnight, cleaning, polishing and

restringing the impeccably formed, marble-sized gems.

Hiram is married the afternoon following Hanna's death by his hand, chained to his phallic whipping post. Before the ceremony, Hiram's guests and his white overseers beg him to remove Hanna's body from public view.

They plead: "Throw her into the big pit with the rest of the dead darkies. Throw lime over her corpse. Let her bones bleach with the other trash. You have your justice."

Hiram refuses: "She left her place. She left her place. She chose to rebel against me, a transgression no white man can countenance. Death is not insult enough. Let her stay. Let everyone see her corrode."

The rich, the beautiful, and the *crème de la crème* of Southern society attend the wedding. The nuptials take place on the mansion's lavish west lawn, far removed from the stench of death wafting from the horrific fruit rotting in the Southern sun; a lonely lingering lump of flesh that now serves as Hiram's monument to fear and intimidation.

Hiram's blushing bride, Lila Lee Bethel, plays her part to perfection. She is the poised cultivation of beauty, the archetype young woman of the Old South's upper class. She is privileged and pampered, flirtatious yet chaste in her demeanor. She is a prize and a trophy for Hiram Hampton, who is twice her age, a man she will never grow to love, but a man who can solidify her position in a culture where money is everything.

The wedding vows are exchanged against a rich backdrop of gently flapping linen that covers elaborately appointed tables laden with fancy cuisine that includes roast duck, stuffed game hens, wild rice, succotash and cornpone. A crowd of genteel men and women gather around the bride and groom to witness the presentation of the pearls. They have all heard so many stories about these mystical, magic beads.

It is rumored that the iridescent jewels were retrieved by two generations of native Fiji divers, diving deep on foray after foray into lava-lined lagoons, holding their breaths for untold numbers of minutes, flouting schools of man-eating sharks, ignoring the flesh-numbing stings of armies of jelly fish to procure over half a century, thirty of nature's most excellent artistic creations.

Another story claimed the pearls had once belonged to Edward Teach, better known as Black Beard the pirate. It was said Black Beard exchanged them for a single night of sexual favors from the Duchess of Devonshire.

Now the legendary pearls are in the hands of Hiram Hampton, slave trader, slave owner, master of all he surveys. Hiram paid five thousand dollars and traded two of his high-priced Negroes for this string of pearls.

The Charleston jeweler does Hiram proud. The pearls glow in the crushed velvet box, luxuriously cushioned on a bedding of soft satin. This is Hiram's proudest moment. At long last he has picked a bride from the South's finest cotillion; his presentation of the pearls is the final touch to his self-certified pedigree.

The pearls are brought out on a shining silver tray. Hiram begins his speech, declaring the pearls to be the official Hampton family heirloom.

Overhead, a swift swarm of thick, dark clouds blacken the sky. A sweltering summer wind billows the white linen on the tables. A jolting flash of lightning, a frightening clash of thunder -- a sudden onslaught of heavy, pelting rain sends Hiram's guests scurrying for shelter on the mansion's wide veranda.

The velvet box spills from the silver tray, blown by the wind, and the pearls fall to the ground. The fierce rain and wind swirls across the veranda, driving the guests inside, where they gather like wilting weeds. The women's waterlogged and broad brimmed straw hats droop; the men's drenched white

cotton suits wrinkle.

The luster of the event is tarnished. Hiram presents a string of muddy pearls to his bride while the wind shrieks and the rain pounds angrily against the elite mansion.

The cleansing downpour baptismally washes over the mutilated remains of a wretched slave girl who dared to appeal to both heaven and hell for justice.

In the year and a half that follows Hiram's wedding, he continues to prosper, buying, selling and owning human souls. His dutiful wife gives him a son to ensure the perpetuation of his line. He has long forgotten Hanna, erased his memory of her hatred for him and the brazen act that she knew would mean her death.

All is well with Hiram Hampton. He is safe and his vision of the world is secure.

He is unaware of the serpents uncoiling and slithering across the South's wide swaths of sprawling, ebullient plantations, the scrappy miles of poorly watered cotton fields and mosquito infested rice fields, the disjointed crazy quilt of sharecropper farms and the dank, patchy forests of pine and oak.

There is talk of civil war and secession. The hollow winds of war blow off shore and ripple the murky waters of the Charleston Harbor, where Hiram's moored slave ships gently bob, waiting to be dispatched, their empty holds hungry for human cargo.

The South gathers to preserve its way of life, the underpinnings and the underbelly of which is slavery. In 1860, when war is a certainty, Hiram has a choice to make. He can rally with his Southern compatriots, risk losing his wealth and resources, and live up to the pledge of his segregationist convictions.

Instead he chooses, as Hanna could have predicted, to sell the plantation, the ships, and the

slaves. He sells everything while he can still get a pretty penny for his holdings. When his Confederate colleagues hear of this, they confront Hiram.

“Gentlemen, I assure you all that by liquidating my holdings I can better help our Glorious Cause. I can help finance the war for the rights of white men. As a Southern gentleman, this I will surely do. I pledge my property, my wealth and my life.”

So Hiram assures his fellow plantation owners. But on April 21, 1861, when Confederate ships fire on Fort Sumter, Hiram Hampton and his vast fortune are nowhere to be found. No one hears about the Hamptons until after the April 9, 1865 surrender at the Appomattox Court House in Richmond, Virginia.

The South is devastated and licking its wounds. Rumors trickle in, that Hiram has settled in upstate New York where he continues his penchant for purchasing flesh. This time his market is not human flesh, but horse flesh. But in the South there is no heart to pursue a deserter, a coward and a reprobate.

Hiram emerges as a post Civil War Yankee with lucrative holdings in the budding sport of thoroughbred horse racing. His enemies charge that he fixes races, sabotages the stables of his fellow competitors, and buys off politicians to protect his turf. Aside from his location, nothing much has changed about Hiram Hampton. He is odious, perfidious, and contemptible. Even into his eighties he is driven by an amoral greed that abates only when age and illness bring him to death’s door.

On the night of his death—after his family has deserted him, when the doctor and the nurse leave him for the moment and he is all alone in his big bed—a ghastly, ghostly figure steps from the shadows of his darkened bedroom.

“Your time has come, now you will drown in lakes of fire!”

Hiram barely lives, but the phantom’s presence stirs the embers of his declining verve. He manages to utter, sotto voce: “Who’s there?”

“I am your nightmare and I have come to issue your final, unending punishment. You can never harm or hurt anyone ever again. You will be chained underground to crawl with rodents. You will never rise. I bind you to the sulfur. I sic snakes upon you so that you may scream in pain as I once did. I put everlasting torment on you, forever.”

“Closer... come closer,” Hiram croaks. “I do know you...”

“You never knew me. You only knew your pleasure and your anger. You came to my bed, even when I was a child. You left your spunk and took my goodness. I bore two sons, the only good to ever come out of you. You ripped them apart like paper, trash you traded for pearls. I cursed those pearls. I prayed to the Devil below and the Lord above and both deities granted my wish: You will burn in hell forever and so, with the exception of my two innocent boys, shall all who possess one drop of your poisoned blood. This curse will extend for seven generation. It will end when the last Hampton slithers into hell.”

“Hanna!” Hiram rasps.

“You said you would never sell my sons. You lied. *You lied!* And it will be a lie that ends your corrupt bloodline. When each generation of your descendants meets their self-devouring end, I will be there to usher them to join you in hell.”

“You’re Hanna... You’re Hanna...” Hiram trembles. “B... b... Hanna was a dumb niggra slave... You don’t talk like a niggra... You can’t be...”

“I am all things. I am the wisdom of the ages. I am the knowledge. I am the universe. I am the one you whipped to death! What you did not understand is this -- when you whipped me, you whipped yourself. You whipped your race and mine. You condemned our human family to generations of injury. You inflicted sores that will not heal.

“*I am* Hanna. I never was a niggra. I never was a slave. I never was dumb. The woman you

whipped to death was a creation of your evil desire, your wanton self-righteousness and your gratuitous racial hubris.”

The apparition moves closer to Hiram’s bed, and is transformed, cloaked in a sudden radiant light. His last vision on this Earth is of a beautiful young African woman.

The woman who would have been had she not been stolen from her mother as a child. The woman who would have been had she been left free to live and love and hope.

On the seventh day of the seventh month of the year of our Lord 2007, Janet Hampton busies herself tidying the second-floor nursery of her well-appointed and newly constructed two million dollar home, located in the heart of the Royal Oaks Country Club community, a short forty miles from downtown Houston, Texas.

She doesn’t mind doing a few light household chores two days each week. After all, she considers herself a housewife, albeit a privileged one.

Most days, Hattie cleans the house and sees to the children while Janet writes letters or make phone calls in the downstairs den, her time devoted to organizing charity fund-raisers. But Hattie called in sick today. The third time this month.

Janet decides she must talk with Greg; they need a new domestic service provider, preferably one that does not employ African American help. Janet does not consider herself a racist, but she thinks Negroes are an imperfect people. Slavery was a long time ago; shouldn’t they be able to adjust to the modern world by now? But they are undependable, lazy and untrustworthy.

One day she caught Hattie looking at her pearls. The black housekeeper actually picked them up and held them against her breast while looking into a mirror.

Hattie is a dark skinned, heavy set, middle-aged woman with huge dark rings circling her eyes, and Janet isn't that impressed with Hattie's work. She cleans house well enough, she keeps the children clean and fed, but Janet can't use her to serve at her posh fundraising parties. The older black woman is just not attractive. She's lived a hard life and it shows on her face and in her demeanor.

Beyond all those considerations, Janet doesn't feel comfortable around Hattie. At times, the black woman seems surly toward her, like she resents her. No, Hattie has to go. Janet makes up her mind. She will fire the black woman and change the home services agency to one that can supply suitable domestic help.

It's just as well that Hattie isn't here. Today Janet needs to keep busy. Her husband, Greg, once the darling of the Houston financial scene, is being vilified in the press as the "Junk Bond King of the Southwest." True to the Hampton family tradition for swindling and profiteering, he faces felony charges for violating securities laws.

Today Greg is attending a preliminary court hearing. He is accused of selling millions of dollars of junk bonds through his New York-based investment firm. Greg could spend years in prison if found guilty. He could lose his fortune.

Janet is concerned but not worried. After all, she'd been warned about the Hampton men. They were marvelous money-makers, but doubts about their methods always hovered over them. Greg had faced legal challenges before and always prevailed. He had the money, the lawyers and the insider's influence to ward off charges of impropriety and under the table dealings. Even though she is apprehensive about today's court decision, Janet is confident that her husband will prevail. He always has.

At thirty-two years old, Janet Hampton is attractive, tall, shapely and physically fit. Her long, straight blond hair is pulled back from her forehead and held at the nape of her neck by a filigreed 14-carat gold clip. She is smartly dressed, even at home, doing chores, and as she always does, she wears a necklace of rare pearls, a gift from her mother-in-law.

The collar of a silky white blouse peeks from beneath a soft, lavender mohair sweater. Her slim waist and curvaceous hips show to sultry perfection in her designer jeans. A preferred customer at Neiman Marcus, everything Janet buys looks designed just for her. She wears a new pair of stylish running shoes, her thick white socks folded to just below the ankle the way she likes to wear them. She hopes to get a little free time later to go jogging on the deluxe treadmill in the fully equipped exercise room, where Greg lifts weights most mornings before he leaves for work.

On her left hand are two elegant rings: a gold wedding band studded with a half-dozen modest-sized diamonds and a more plain, yet still elegant, silver engagement ring that Greg gave her when he proposed marriage.

Janet's father was a successful Texas politician. Her mother served as a dean of academics at an exclusive all-girls private college in Dallas, where Janet grew up. Her whole life has been one of promise and advantage. Her parents are retired now and spend their time traveling where their whims and the travel consultants lead them.

Janet met Greg Hampton six years before at a retirement dinner held in her father's honor at an exclusive downtown Dallas hotel. The daughter of a popular local politician, Janet had attended many such functions. She wore midnight blue Valentino and moved around the lobby chatting up the guests as they waited to be seated for dinner.

When one of her father's associates introduced her to Greg, their eyes met and locked. Clichéd as it seemed, she knew he was perfect for her. He was tall and very good-looking with emerald green eyes, wavy sandy hair, a classically straight nose, thin lips and a strong, square chin. She learned later that he'd graduated Magna Cum Laude from Princeton with an advanced degree in business economics. He was in his early thirties and already eminently successful. He'd asked her for a date at their first meeting and she'd accepted.

Because Greg lived in New York, their romance began slowly. Over the next three months she

saw him only four times, during his business trips to Dallas.

One day Greg called and asked if she would visit him at his parents' estate in upstate New York. She agreed and flew to New York City. Greg picked her up at the airport. He drove a sparkling new, gray and silver Mercedes. The two-hour drive to the Hampton's posh manor was dreamy.

New York State was quite gorgeous. Green, tree-lush hills rolled alongside the smooth highway. Apple orchards for as far as the eyes could see gave the late summer air a scent of fruit and freshness. Sunlight poured like honey from a powder blue sky.

The Hampton's 1500-acre estate was located just north of Saratoga Springs, the charming city known for its Revolutionary War history and its chic, big stakes horse racing. The main house was a sprawling, impeccably cared-for antebellum mansion.

Huge white pillars vaulted upward to form a wide, expansive veranda. Doublewide oak doors with polished brass doorknobs and beautifully refined brass knockers opened into a grand hallway of shining floors and walls lined with museum-quality paintings. A dozen finely sculptured busts sat on rigid pedestals like stony sentinels guarding unspoken sins.

Colored servants quietly carried her bags up the carpeted staircase while Greg guided her into a huge library lined with floor-to-ceiling mahogany shelves stacked with expensive leather-bound law books and other rare tomes that would be the envy of any scholar. With its dark leather furniture and its thick velvet drapes, the large room exuded wealth.

"Mom? Dad?" Greg said softly.

A matronly woman and a distinguished-looking older man rose from two high-backed leather chairs that were positioned so they faced away from the room's entrance.

"This is Janet, the girl I've told you so much about."

“We are delighted, my dear. Welcome to our home,” Greg’s mother said, walking toward her and extending a delicate hand.

She is a darling woman, Janet thought. A small dumpling of a lady, Greg’s mother wore a tailored, finely knitted blue dress and matching jacket. A string of opulent pearls hung loosely around her neck. Her pearl earrings were embroidered with gold. Her coiffed hair was white and flawlessly arranged. She was grandmotherly and sweet looking.

Greg’s father was a big man, tall and portly in his mid-seventies. The slightly distended paunch, the head of snow-white hair and the white handlebar mustache gave him an air of distinguished confidence. He reminded Janet a little of Santa Claus. He stepped forward and offered a huge, meaty hand.

“Well, well,” he said, his clear green eyes sparkling with affection. “Now I do see what all the fuss is about. Thank you for coming, dear. I was beginning to think my egghead son only cared about business. I am proud to see he does have an eye for beauty. I am Irvin Hampton. This is my wife, Grace.

Janet’s planned three-day visit turned into a ten-day stay. She and Greg went horseback riding on his family’s beautiful estate. The Hampton’s stables were among the finest in the country. Each year several of their foals brought high prices at the famous Fitz-Tipton auctions held at the racetrack.

The couple attended the Saratoga races. Greg didn’t like gambling on horses, even though some of his family’s money came from the racing industry.

“I don’t mind taking chances but only when I can control the events,” he told her.

He encouraged her to bet on several races, which she did. When she won a couple of times, Janet found the sport exciting. During her stay, Greg had to attend several business sessions in New York City. On these occasions, he took a helicopter from Albany to the city, returning eight to ten hours later.

One day, one of the colored servants came into the study to tell her that Mrs. Hampton would appreciate her company. The servant, a dignified older black man, accompanied Janet to a third floor sitting room.

“Come in Janet, please. Have a seat. Greg won’t be home for a while. I was hoping we could take time to talk more. Get to know one another a little better.”

“Why, certainly, Mrs....” Janet stopped, and then said, “Grace. I would love to.”

Janet took a seat in a comfortable cushioned chair opposite the older woman. She noticed the older woman loved to wear her pearl necklace. She’d worn it every day Janet had been here.

“Jason,” Grace said to the old servant. “Please bring us some tea and maybe something to snack on.”

“Yes, em,” the servant said obediently. He quietly left the room.

“I’m sure you know a lot about us by now,” Grace Hampton said. “Irvin is a retired New York State Supreme Court Judge. He sat on the bench for many, many years. I was nearly thirty years old when Greg was born. Irvin was almost ten years older. The Hampton family’s great wealth was amassed generations ago, and not without controversy and scandal. Irvin’s great, great, great grandfather made huge profits from the antebellum slave trade.”

As she spoke, the older woman absent-mindedly fumbled with the string of pearls adorning her neck. Janet took the opportunity to comment about the pearls.

“That necklace is extraordinary, Grace. I notice you wear it daily, even though the pearls appear to be quite rare and extremely precious.”

“Yes, my dear, they are exceptional and very valuable. They are an heirloom and inextricably connected to the so-called wicked Hampton family history. There is a reason why I wear them on most

days. Perhaps I am revealing too much, my dear, but I sense that Greg is very serious about you.”

“Oh, please,” Janet implored. “I am honored you feel you can confide in me.”

“Well, I suppose you should know,” the older woman said with what seemed to Janet a sense of relief. “I’ve been keeper of the family hush-hush for so long. I’m not even sure how much Greg knows about his ancestors or even about his father’s affairs.

“The pearls came into the Hampton family with my husband’s great, great, great grandfather, Hiram. He was a slave trader of ruthless ambition. Just before the Civil War, Hiram decided to take a bride. He wanted to give his young and beautiful new wife the most exquisite wedding present he could find.

“The pearls supposedly belonged to a plantation owner of vicious repute. Hiram bought the pearls for five thousand dollars and two young slave boys. The boys he traded were the sons of an African woman known for casting spells and practicing voodoo. “The plantation owner treated his slaves brutally. It was just the way things were in those days,” Grace Hampton said matter-of-factly. “No one thought of Negroes as being people. The voodoo woman’s sons tried to run away. They were caught and tortured and killed. A vicious lie circulated at the time that Hiram had sired the boys, but I don’t believe such nonsense. Some whites did mingle with the Africans they owned, but I do not believe that Hiram, or any Hampton man, would ever commit such a vile act as to spread his seed among God’s lost souls.

“In any event, the African slave woman placed a curse on the Hampton pearls. She foretold that one day calamity would befall the family, a tragedy so vile and fitting that it would completely destroy the bloodline.”

“Oh, my,” Janet said, inhaling deeply. She didn’t realize it but she’d been holding her breath during Grace’s narrative.

“Such a thing has obviously not come to pass,” Grace Hampton continued. “I’ve always treated it

as just a story. Most families have skeletons in the closet, especially wealthy families such as ours. These pearls were passed down from generation to generation and finally given to me. We laughingly call them ‘pearls of fears,’ simply because nothing has ever come of the old black woman’s curse. I wear the pearls nearly every day in defiance of the superstition that surrounds them.”

“So, the Hampton family started out in the South,” Janet said, summarizing what she thought she knew about the family, “yet you have a wide reputation as well-respected Northerners.”

“There is more to tell. There always is,” Grace Hampton said dryly. “The slave trade, of course, ended with the Civil War. Carpetbaggers took over the South. Hiram couldn’t do business in that environment, so he took his fortune and his family and settled here, in New York State, where we’ve gained Old Money status.

“Greg’s great grandfather was an arms merchant. Rumor claims he tripled the family’s sizeable fortune by selling guns and ammunition to both the United States and the German governments during the First World War. Irvin’s father, Greg’s grandfather, doubled that fortune when he partnered with Joseph Kennedy. Jonas Hampton and Kennedy supposedly engineered the stock market crash of 1929. The Kennedy’s have not fared so well despite their position and power, but no right-thinking person would attribute their travails to notions of curses or payback for supposed past evils.

“Most recently my dear Irvin was accused by the *New York Times*, that filthy, muck-raking Jew rag, of being rewarded handsomely for using his position as a state supreme court judge to pass rulings favoring big money corporate interests over the common man. The article accused us of living the ‘white lie,’ implying that the Hamptons are part of a culture of Caucasian hypocrisy, feigning respectability while exploiting the misfortunes of others. The article called us ‘old-school, die-hard John Birchers,’ members of the American aristocracy of bigots.”

“My, my. How colorful,” Janet exclaimed. “It sounds like a case of serious jealousy. The have-nots bemoaning their fates.”

“I am glad you feel that way, my dear,” the elder woman continued. “We’re an old Eastern family with sentiments that tie us to the segregated South. We are not ashamed of our past. We don’t believe in race mixing, although we want the blacks and Mexicans and such to rise to their own levels of prominence. Being from the Southwest, I am sure you understand these ideas.”

Janet had heard similar sentiments at home, and so she nodded.

“Already there are ugly rumors about Greg trading something called junk bonds. I don’t care what they’re called, Greg will be as successful as his forefathers. The Hampton women have never concerned themselves with the business interests of their husbands. I feel that is the way things should be, and I see that it is important for Greg to have a wife who has breeding. Someone who knows her position in the world; someone who can give him a proper family life. Someone who can help him succeed.”

There came a light tap at the door, followed by the entrance of the old, black servant. At the end of the day, the two women had become great friends. Janet felt like an insider. Her sense of self and her feelings of entitlement began to grow.

After supper that evening, Greg returned from New York City. He said he’d eaten at a restaurant before leaving the city and now he felt like taking a walk. He took Janet by the hand and led her into the cool evening air.

They stopped and stood under one of the huge elm trees that lined the long driveway. Bright stars studded the night sky. The full moon lit the landscape like a huge theater spotlight.

Greg turned to Janet. He fished a small, velvet box from his pocket. The silver ring glinted in the yellow moonlight.

“Janet. Will you marry me?”

Janet threw her arms around him. They kissed passionately.

“Oh, Greg. Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Six months later they were married. At the wedding reception, Grace presented Janet with the string of rare, prized pearls she'd worn over the years. Janet was flabbergasted. Grace whispered: “You are keeper of the family hush-hush, now.”

Greg used the occasion to announce to his parents, his new-in laws, and his guests that he and his new bride had decided to build a home in the suburbs of Houston, Texas. Greg had spent the past two years building strong business ties in Texas. Now he was ready to open a new office in Houston. He would head the Houston office and his trusted business partner would run the more-established New York office.

A year after the wedding, Irvin and Grace Hampton were killed in a horrible automobile accident. Irvin lived long enough to tell authorities that the car crashed when he swerved to avoid hitting an old black woman who suddenly appeared in the middle of the road.

The house the newlyweds built, and where they now live, is a large modern Palm Beach style home with five bathrooms and five bedrooms. In addition to the exercise room and spacious den, there's an indoor pool, a family room, a den, and a well-stocked gunroom. A Texas native, Janet grew up with guns in the house. She knows how to load them and shoot them. Her father took her on hunting trips.

Greg is a gun advocate who likes to hunt wild game. It was good for business to take clients out to shoot duck and wild geese. Greg has a fine collection of rifles, shotguns, and handguns. He insists that he and Janet visit the shooting range at least twice a year. Greg wants his wife to be always able to protect herself if there is danger when he's away from home.

The entrance to their newly built home sports a finely laid Mexican tiled walkway leading to a classically constructed Spanish arch door. Once inside the front door, a foyer leads visitors to the left or right. To the left is a fabulously laid out living room. It is roomy and sparsely endowed with furniture of

the modern style. A black baby grand piano is the room's stunning centerpiece. To the right is a fine dining room where a crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling and gold-framed mirrors hang from the walls. The four-car garage houses the Ford Explorer SUV Janet uses for trips to the store as well as Greg's sporty new Jaguar, which he uses to commute to the office.

This is the world Janet Hampton lives in with her husband Greg and their two children, five-year-old Lisa and three-month-old Jeffery. It is a world far removed from strife and commonality. It's the good life, the best life. A life that is as stainless as her stainless steel kitchen, pure, sterile and spotless.

As Janet busies herself in the nursery, she looks toward the crib where her three-month-old son, Jeffery, gazes happily toward the ceiling. He stretches his pudgy fingers upward, trying to touch the colorful cutouts of fish swimming in the air and strung from a mobile just out of his reach.

"Who likes fish? Who likes the pretty fish?" Janet asks in her cutest baby language voice. The baby responds by grinning toothlessly and drooling spit bubbles.

"Come see, Mommy," Lisa says. "I am cutting out flowers from my book for Daddy. Come see, Mommy."

Janet turns to see her five-year-old daughter standing in the doorway of the nursery. It has taken Janet the better part of an hour that day to bathe Lisa, comb and brush her blond hair and dress her. The little girl wears plaid shorts with suspenders and a white linen blouse, embroidered with little blue flowers on the collar.

Lisa turned five a week ago. One of her birthday presents was a gorgeous coloring book. The present included a full set of Crayolas. The pictures in the book are big and outlined in black so a child can cut them out and paste them on places like the refrigerator door.

"Be careful with those scissors, honey. They look a little too sharp for you."

“I got them off the table, Mommy. These are big girl scissors. I don’t want to use baby scissors, Mommy. Come see, Mommy. Come see.”

Janet smiles patiently and lovingly. “In a moment, honey. Mommy is busy. Judging by the odor in here I think someone needs his diapers changed.”

“I wanna help, Mommy. What can I do?”

“You can watch, honey,” Janet says patiently. She strides over to the counter, picks up a fresh cloth diaper, a container of powder and several moistened baby wipes.

Moving deftly, Janet picks the baby up and places him on the changing table at the foot of the crib. She lays the baby on his back and removes the soiled diaper, careful not to let the contents spill.

Jeffery responds by giggling and burbling more spit bubbles. Janet wipes him clean.

“What is that, Mommy?” Lisa points to her brother’s small red penis, protruding from between his fat cherub-like legs. “I don’t have one.”

Janet isn’t quite ready to introduce the idea of gender and sexual differences to her five-year old daughter; she thinks it might be best to keep Lisa innocent to those concepts right now. Her job is to keep the family pure and unspoiled. She thinks it best to tell a little white lie.

“Oh, that’s just something the doctor forgot to cut off,” she explains with a smile.

Just then, she feels the small cell phone vibrate in the breast pocket of her blouse. She retrieves the instrument, punches a small button and holds the phone to her ear.

“Hi, honey,” she says, her face lighting with one of her bright smiles. “I’m changing the baby. You need a telephone number from your address book? The last time I saw it, it was in the nightstand drawer by the bed. I know you don’t like talking to me about business but how’s the

hearing going?’

Placing the baby, diaper-less, back in the crib so he won’t fall on the floor, she runs along the carpeted hallway to the master bedroom.

She’s gone only a couple of minutes. She finds the address book, recites the number to Greg, and repeats her concern about the court hearings for the fraud charges he faces. She tells him she loves him and snaps off the phone.

That’s when she hears the baby cry. At first it seems to be a tiny gasping. Then it grows to an abnormal howl. Janet drops the phone and runs toward the nursery. When she arrives at the doorway, she cannot believe what she sees.

Jeffery is holding his breath, gathering enough strength to create another wail. Blood spurts from between his legs. The baby’s face is bright red. Finally, he howls a piercing scream. Lisa stands by the crib, holding the scissors in one hand and a small piece of flesh in the other.

The sound begins deep down in Janet’s stomach and grows louder as it is forced up to her throat, escaping from her expanding mouth. “*Nooooooooo!*”

Blood gushes from the baby in red surges. It completely covers the crib’s mattress and drips to the floor. Janet’s panic is lunatic.

Lisa knows she’s done something wrong. Beginning to cry, she drops the scissors and the piece of flesh on the floor and runs from the room.

Janet does not know what to do. She thinks about calling 911. She can’t find her telephone. She’s forgotten she dropped it on the bedroom floor. She looks around for something she can use to stop the bleeding. She sees a couple of baby blankets. Quickly she wraps the baby in the blankets and rushes to the side of the crib. She picks up the baby’s severed penis.

“Oh, no,” she sobs. “Oh, no.”

She doesn't know what to do. The nearest neighbor is about ten minutes away by foot. She must get the baby to the hospital. She picks the infant up. Blood spills from the blankets on to her trembling hands. She places the small penis in the blanket, between the baby's legs.

“Jeffery,” she coos. “Jeffery. Shhh. Mommy's going to take care of everything. Don't cry. Please don't cry!”

One of her blood-splattered hands flies to her forehead; in desperation she clutches her hair. Blood streaks her blonde locks.

Janet is so frightened that her skull feels like it is encased by a tight bathing cap she can't remove. She thinks about the SUV sitting in the garage. If she can get the baby to the hospital before he loses too much more blood, maybe someone can fix this. Maybe there is a chance, she thinks.

She holds the swaddled infant close to her breast and wildly runs to the flight of steps, sprints downstairs, darts through the living room and dashes toward the garage. The keys to the vehicle are where they always are, on a hook by the door. Snatching them, Janet scrambles to the vehicle. Flinging the driver's side door open, she leans in to place the baby in the passenger's seat. He is wailing, bleeding profusely.

Oh, my God. My God. Help me, she prays.

She jumps into the driver's seat, shaking uncontrollably. The keys slip from her bloodied hands. She fumbles, gains control of the keys and finally slips the correct key into the ignition.

The engine roars to life with a huge growl. Janet snatches the gear into reverse. The big SUV jumps into action, shoots backward out of the garage, lurching down the cement driveway.

Janet glances over at the baby. His face is blue. Just then, the backwards-moving vehicle hits

something in the driveway. There is a horrible sounding thud and a thump, followed by a bump, bump.

The vehicle continues its backward thrust until it stops suddenly when Janet slams the brakes. Inertia throws the swaddled baby from the seat to the floor of the vehicle.

From the front windshield she can now see what it is she's backed over. She's run over her child, Lisa, who, confused, had run after her mother and was standing behind the SUV as her mother hurriedly backed the automobile out of the garage.

"Oh, my God! What have I done!" she screams.

She places the vehicle into park, jumps from the cab and kneels over the lifeless body of her child. The little girl is bruised from her legs to her forehead. She looks as if she's sleeping, but she is dead. The monster car has crushed her limbs and internal organs. Janet attempts to pick up her daughter's lifeless body. The girl's limp head tilts to one side. Blood trickles from her slightly parted lips.

Janet is out of her mind with hysteria. Thinking of Jeffery makes Janet run to the passenger side of the SUV. Snatching the door open, she sees her three-month-old infant, lying face down, his tiny hands balled into fists, which are pumping up and down, beating the carpet of the vehicle like little pistons.

When she turns the baby over, Janet knows it is too late to save him. His lips are blue, his eyes are glazed and he's choking, trying to breathe, while swinging his arms and legs wildly. The baby's severed penis is missing. Janet doesn't know if it was lost in the blankets or if it had fallen beneath the seat of the vehicle. Janet gingerly places the blanketed baby on its back on the front seat and steps back from the car, drenched in horror, frozen in terror.

Her bloodied, shaking hands flutter to her own scorching throat. Immediately she feels the string of pearls, the rare jewels her mother-in-law had passed down to her. "*You are the keeper of the family*

hush-hush, now, my dear.” Those words echo in her head, over and over. Finally, she tears the jewels from her neck. The pearls bounce and roll down the driveway, scattering like marbles.

In Janet’s twisted, pain-racked mind, there is only one thing she can do. Her perfect family, her perfect life is ruined in an instant. No one could have foreseen these events. She had been in control. She had expected to be always in control. Now there is nothing. She has killed her two children. She can never face her beautiful husband again.

Janet finds herself in the gunroom, standing over the glass case that holds Greg’s silver .45-caliber handgun. She doesn’t open the drawer with the key, she pounds the glass case with her bare fist until it breaks. Ignoring the cuts and shards of glass stuck in her hand. She picks up the pistol, finds the ammunition, loads the weapon and goes back outside.

Standing over Lisa’s lifeless body lying in the driveway, Janet’s entire soul aches at the vision of her child, dead on the pavement before her. She kneels and kisses the child’s bruised, lifeless forehead. She feels like she’s moving under water. Everything is slow motion. There is a weighty resistance to every movement.

When she looks at the infant lying on the car seat, Janet knows he is dead. He is motionless; his little face is scrunched and frozen in pain. Blood is everywhere. There is no gurgling sound, no struggling to breathe. He is dead and she was powerless to stop it.

The whole world spins around Janet as she stands there. It starts slowly, and then spins faster and faster until she feels she is at the center of a Ferris wheel where an irresistible centrifugal force threatens to cast her from the fixed center and throw her upward and outward into the chaos of outer space.

Suddenly, she is aware of another presence in the garage.

“Help me! Help me!” she shouts.

She looks around searching to see who is there. Her vision is fuzzy. She is an axis and the world spins around her. Her heart stops along with the spinning world when she sees a blur moving quickly toward her. The blur takes shape... Is it...? Is it...? It's Hattie, the housekeeper she plans to fire.

“Hattie. Oh Hattie. Help me!”

“I am Hanna,” the dark woman says. “No one can help you now. I lost two children myself... myself... myself.”

“Hattie! Hattie! I won't fire you. I just need to...”

Janet crazily realizes that no one is there. The image of the old black woman evaporates and Janet is left alone, insanity her only companion.

Janet Hampton releases the safety from the gun, places the nozzle beneath her chin and pulls the trigger. She falls in a heap beside the open door of the vehicle, where her infant son lies dead on the seat and not far from where her young daughter lies broken and lifeless in the driveway.

Greg Hampton is depressed. Driving home from a brutal day before a court that refused to see things his way, he is forlorn and murderously angry. He paid good money for witness testimony that has been discredited. His attempts to negotiate a private deal with the judge have failed. He knows he is only days away from arrest and being charged with defrauding thousands of people and profiting from his deceit. He could lose everything. All of his money, his inheritance, his property -- everything!

As he turns his Jaguar on to the dusty rural road where he lives, he is thankful that he at least still has his beautiful family. His sweet children and his sweet wife are waiting for him. As long as he has them, he feels he will make it. His mother had told him that Hampton men continually face adversity, but

they always prevailed with the strength and support of their families.

Out of nowhere a woman appears in the middle of the road. Greg slams on the brakes. He hadn't seen her a second before but suddenly there she is, standing in the midst of a whirling dust devil. Greg is not in the mood to confront this creepy old woman who, by all appearances, has wandered away from some mental health institution or old folk's home. She wears a tattered blanket that's thrown over her head and shoulders.

Following an impulse driven by his anger over his legal problems, Greg rolls down the window and yells: "Get the fuck out of my way, you old bat!"

The old woman laughs -- no, she cackles.

Greg spins the rear wheels of his Jag and cuts forward and around the old woman. He looks in his rearview mirror, but doesn't see the old woman. The dust devil is gone. No one is standing on the lonely road.

No one's crazy imagination could conjure the ghastly scene Greg sees when he turns into his driveway. His first instinct is to back out and drive away. Surely he must be at the wrong house. Dried blood streaks the pavement, the SUV sits at an absurd angle, a small hand lies lifeless at the edge of the vehicle's front wheel.

Time circles on itself, stands still, rushes forward. The only sound he hears is the thundering in his chest. He steps from the car not feeling the ground. He sees two human feet lying askew in the cryptically cool shade of the garage. They are clad in familiar footwear with white socks folded down at the ankles. The SUV's door is slung wide open on the passenger side. His thumping heart stops. Fear stirs in the pit of his stomach; yellow-green bile involuntarily spews from his mouth, erupting with gut wrenching violence. Greg Hampton instantly inhabits another world, another reality.

He steps cautiously forward. His eyes see what his mind cannot process. Janet lies on the cool

garage floor, a dark pool of maroon spreading in a circle around her head. The opened passenger door of the SUV lures like an ominous cavern into which one is compelled to look, even though every instinct says *don't look!*

Greg does look. What he sees is beyond all human capacity to untangle. Sanity is suddenly an egg crushed underfoot. The baby on the car seat is a dark thing, a shriveled fleshy thing, lifeless, caked with dried blood.

Time is a sucking instrument drawing him into a vacuum of fear and agony, leaving him limp and shapeless. He moves to the front of the SUV, he spies his daughter. She lies dead, bloated from internal bleeding.

“Honey are you okay?” Greg rushes to kneel beside his child’s supine body. The idiotic ludicrousness of his beseeching slices through him like a hot knife. His daughter is dead. His baby boy is dead. His wife is dead.

Greg’s initial sob is a guttural, primordial scream, a chainsaw ripping into the fabric of the universe. His mind turns to mush with the need to understand the world. He mumbles and mutters: “Who? Why?”

Those two questions churn in his mind. He sees a marble-sized ball stuck at the end of a trail of blood where it spun to a stop. He picks up the orb like it’s a fallen cherry, rolls it between his thumb and his forefinger. It is one of the pearls from the family’s heirloom necklace. One of the gems his mother kept close to her breast all his life. He stands and turns in circles, like a man trapped and looking for an exit.

The old woman steps forward, seeming to come from nowhere.

Greg’s surprise sobers him. He recognizes the woman from the road. She’s old. A worn, filthy blanket shrouds her face.

“Who are you? What do you want? Is that you, Hattie? What are doing here? What have you got to do with this?” The questions slip from him like sand flowing through his fingers.

The old woman lets the blanket fall from her shoulders. With the unveiling, a young, strong, barefoot African woman stands before Greg. “I am Hanna,” she says. Her voice sounds like it is filtered through an echo chamber. “I am here to deliver you to your ancestors who live in hell. Your abominable, ancient grandfather Hiram Hampton waits to receive you.”

Greg is so filled with horror the crazy woman somehow makes sense to him. Overcome by shock and dismay, he mutters gibberish and Hanna takes her supremacy.

“It’s your turn to pay. Your turn to sacrifice your children, your love, and your life. Now you are on the other end of the white lie, the great falsehood that white skin gives you the right to kidnap and kill, take land and steal money. The lie that you believe grants you amnesty for your sins against man and the universe.

“The white lie is the notion that nothing stands between you and God but the blue sky. The white lie is one lie too many. The carnage you see is your reaping for the lies you’ve told and for the lies you live.”

The round sun is an orange ball balanced in a bruised sky of purple and yellow. Hanna, the ghost—the undying spiritual energy that has twisted the fate of the Hamptons like a slave turning in the lynch man’s noose—has come for his soul. Before he knows it, Greg picks up the blood-encrusted gun his wife used to end her life and in a swift, thoughtless moment, he blasts a hole in the side of his head.

The world goes black and silent. The deed is done. Hanna’s time to rest has come.

###

The Town Of Insanity

My rented Ford Focus sped along the narrow rural road. It was nearly midnight and I was sleepy as hell. I shouldn't have been driving.

The waitress at the diner where I'd stopped for coffee told me there was a motel about fifty miles up the road. That was 67.4 miles ago according to the odometer, and I hadn't seen anything but sinister darkness and the towering black forest defending both sides of the desolate road. I hadn't seen any other cars. There were no streetlights -- no neon signs, no yellowed windows glowing from random houses. The only illumination came from a star-pocked night sky and from a lean slice of a pale, waning moon.

I dozed off, felt the vehicle swerve and snapped awake, heart thudding, I was so tired, so tempted to stop and take a nap, but the dark forest was foreboding. An escaped convict could climb in the car and kill me. It was an irrational notion, but that's how I felt.

I nodded off again and the car swerved. I opened my eyes in time to see a blurry shape in the headlights -- very large, very broad -- standing directly in the path of my car. I yanked the steering wheel to the left, wildly over-correcting in my panic. The rented Ford shot toward the shoulder. I slammed the brake, but too late. The car plummeted down a steep embankment, crashing through limbs and branches, and smacked into a thick stand of trees.

The airbag exploded in my face, stunning me. I was conscious, but barely, heard a loud crackling sound and wondered numbly if the car was on fire.

My door flew open. A very large, very hairy hand unfastened my seat belt. I was grasped roughly by the shoulders and pulled out of the car. The crackle was now a roar, and I could see through my blurred vision that the Ford was nearly engulfed in flames. Then I passed out.

When I came to, I was slumped against a rock. Everything was blurred. A wet cloth covered my forehead. Through the thin material I saw the flicker of a campfire. Some *thing* was in front of me.

“What happened...? Where am I...?” I tried to stand but fell back.

“Hold on, partner. It’s gonna take a minute for you to get it together.”

My vision focused, and I gasped! Was I talking to a bear or a man? I decided it was a man: a big, hairy man wearing nothing but a skimpy loincloth.

“You... you saved my life,” I sputtered.

“I’m gonna heat up some tree bark tea,” he said. “You need something nice and hot inside of you.”

I blinked and saw big tin can simmering on a makeshift grill. In the background there was a soft gurgling sound, like a bubbling stream. I assumed that’s where he got the water to dampen the cloth on my forehead and for the “tea” he was brewing.

My entire body ached, especially my head. I stared at the large hulk crouching beside the fire. He was the hairiest person I’d ever seen. He had a low brow and his bottom jaw jutted outward. He looked more like a Neanderthal than a modern man.

“What brings you out here on a lonely night like this?” he asked.

Given the caveman looks, his cultured, urbane speech surprised me.

“I’m trying to get to Utica, Utah,” I replied. “I’m supposed to meet someone there first thing in the morning. I’m a reporter. My newspaper is publishing a special edition on the town.”

“Uh,” the hairy man grunted. “The town is in ruins. Anyone who might be living there is a renegade, and probably dangerous.”

“The person I’m supposed to meet is a doctor, a scientist. I don’t think he lives there but he did extensive

research on the town and what happened there about thirty years ago.” I paused, then said, “I saw something out there on the road. It stepped in front of my car. I --”

“You’re groggy from the crash,” the shaggy man interrupted. “Be careful about telling stories about things you see up this way. What’s the name of this doctor or scientist you’re supposed to meet?”

“That’s just it,” I said. “He called the newspaper and asked for the interview. The city desk editor spoke with him, I didn’t. I was just told to ask for a Dr. Elliot... or Ellwood... something like that.”

“Have you been a reporter a long time?” he asked.

“No. I’m just twenty-four. I graduated a couple of years ago. This is my first staff writing job. My editors still consider me a cub reporter.”

The hirsute man picked up a small tin can from the ground and poured some steaming hot liquid into it. He passed the can to me. It was so hot I almost dropped it. I looked into the container and saw a dark, frothy liquid. Whoa, I thought, I’m not drinking that.

“Don’t worry, it’s what you need,” he said. “Take a sip.”

I did, and gagged. “Aagh. What *is* this?”

“I told you, tree bark tea.” He poked a stick at the fire. “I was born in Utica. I lived there until I was about ten. My mother had relatives living on the east coast. We ran away -- er, uh --

I mean we left town and I lived with her in Boston until she died last winter. I know all about Utica, Utah. I can tell you anything you need to know.”

I was still nursing the foul drink he gave me. It did make me feel better.

“I came out here for a story,” I said. “Go ahead, tell me what you know.”

There was a long silence while he drank from his tin can. Then in a soft, guarded voice, he began his tale.

It was a long narrative and I can't quote him verbatim, but this is a summary of what he told me:

It so happened that on or around October 30, 1975, a cosmic cloud visited our galaxy.

It was a haze as thick and as expansive as the Milky Way. It covered millions and millions of miles of deep space. Scientists were puzzled and scrambled to discover its origins and determine its particulate composition. They used geostationary satellites to calibrate the behemoth fog's polar orbits, attempting to predict its traveling pattern.

The theoretical physicists were so absorbed with their instruments and their mathematical factoring they didn't notice when an obscure puff of the cloud separated from the foggy nebula and began a rapid descent toward Earth. The separated portion was about as big as a good-sized cumulus vapor formation.

It was crimson, flat on the bottom and puffy on top and at the edges. It sparked with electrical impulses that seemed to come from the heart of it. When the cloud reached Earth's atmosphere, it coagulated like a dark bruise in the sky and settled like a roof over the valley town of Utica, Utah. A gloom settled over the quiet houses and burgundy shadows rippled the tree-lush landscape.

Forty-year-old Charles Crocket lived with his 69-year-old mother. He awoke that morning and went through his usual ritual, running his fingers through his thick red hair and consulting the bathroom mirror to check his sleep-shot eyes. He poked his tongue out looking for discolorations or abnormalities that might foretell an on-coming illness. Satisfied all was normal, he reached for his bathrobe and headed for the front door.

As usual, the paper boy missed the front porch. The folded *Morning News* lay in the middle of the lawn. Barefoot, Crocket descended from the porch and stepped into the moist grass. He felt a drizzle. Looking skyward, he saw the scarlet cloud. Huge ruby-colored rain drops fell onto his upturned face and pelted his shoulders and chest. Pollution, he thought, contaminated smog. The government is going to kill us all.

He picked up the newspaper and ran for the cover of the porch. Even in that short space of time, he got pretty wet.

He went into the house, made coffee and started to read the newspaper. He couldn't concentrate. He wanted to laugh. He couldn't explain it but a chuckle began somewhere deep within his solar plexus, forced its way up into his chest and burst from his throat and mouth.

"Mm, mm, eh, eh, eh, ha, ha, haaa," he laughed. Oops there it was again -- "Mm, mm, eh, eh, eh, ha, ha, haaa!" he bellowed. Then he did it again, and again. He laughed until he woke his mother.

"Charles!" She yelled from her bedroom. "Stop that! It's too early in the morning for nonsense."

"Yes, mother," he said, giggling.

Charles Crocket tried dressing for work. He put his pants on and took them off. He put his shirt on and took it off. Clothes seemed heavy and unnecessary. He stripped down to his bare skin, naked as the moment he was born. He snatched his car keys from the hook where he kept them. He headed for the back door when he noticed his mother's hair dryer on the kitchen counter. The funniest notion hit him. He wasn't going to work. He laughed again, thinking about how he could have some fun. In the spur-of-the-moment, he grabbed his sunglasses, picked up the hair dryer and left the house, naked as a puppy.

A few minutes later he backed his car into the entrance to the town cemetery. The vehicle faced the road where he was sure passing motorists could see him. He put on his sunglasses, rolled down the driver's side window and held the hair dryer like it was a police traffic radar gun.

Approaching cars slowed down so fast they skidded; all the drivers thought they'd just been caught in a radar trap. Boy, did Charles Crocket laugh!

Judy Jordan Frogly, the town's first grade teacher, was late for school and driving ten miles over the speed limit. She saw the hair dryer waving at her, assumed it was a radar gun and slammed the brakes. The car skidded into an out of control slide and spun around in a complete 360 degree circle.

Crocket threw his head back against his seat and howled with laughter.

Judy Jordan Frogly was not amused. She saw Crocket in his car, laughing his head off and snatched her umbrella out of the backseat; the black bumbershoot had kept the weird red rain off her when she'd left home. When Judy turned around she saw a naked man running toward her car. It was Charles Crocket, whooping and hollering, and jumping up and down, his penis flopping from side-to-side.

Judy Jordan Frogly was 39 years old, a virgin, and fast on her way to being an old maid. She wore her brown hair in a bun and wire rim eyeglasses pinched her nose. She'd never seen a naked man before and she screamed, terrified, and pressed on the accelerator.

Her car shot forward into the intersection and broad-sided a flat-bed garbage truck driven by Chip Axelrod. The crash sent garbage tumbling onto the hood of her car and flung heaps of rotted lettuce leaves, fish skeletons, coffee grounds, old milk cartons, rancid chicken bones and the like all over the street.

Chip Axelrod had started collecting garbage at 5 AM that morning. By six he was sopping wet with crimson rain. He sat in his truck cackling with glee like he was watching a Charlie Chaplin movie. Buck naked, he climbed out of the truck's cab.

The garbage man had a barrel chest. He was balding on the top of his head; the rest of his body was covered with coarse, thick hair from his broad neck to his short, muscular legs and his flat feet. Judy Jordan Frogly almost fainted. Two naked men were coming toward her.

The schoolteacher dropped the umbrella and leapt from her car. She ran only a dozen steps before she stopped and held her palms up, smiling at the big, wet, cherry-red drops soaking her hair. Judy smiled, stood in the middle of the street and kicked off her old maid's pumps, peeled off her stockings, stripped off her skirt and blouse and threw away her wire rimmed eyeglasses. Wearing only her bra and panties, she pulled the bobby pins from her hair so that it fell, wet and curling around her white shoulders. She was giggling like a schoolgirl.

Chip Axelrod thought Judy Jordan Frogly was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. When Judy turned and saw Chip, she thought he was attractive, too, even though he was very hairy. He reminded her of a

teddy bear she had as a child.

Disappointed that Chip had beat him to the schoolmarm, but only for a moment, Charles Crocket chuckled his way back to his car outside the cemetery gate. What a beautiful morning! Crocket grinned, looked through the chain links of the fence and stared, suddenly transfixed by what he saw inside the graveyard.

Pug, the Australian kangaroo that Willy Goode kept in a cage in his backyard, was loose and hopping over the marble and granite gravestones. Willy's cousin had shipped the marsupial from Australia when she was just a joey. It was against all civic ordinances to keep a wild animal on private property, but Willey Goode didn't care about the rules and neither did the town's people. Pug became an unofficial town mascot. Everyone thought she was cool.

With her soft gray fur drenched and tinted pink from the rain, Pug was leap-frogging over the perpendicular slabs of gravestones, headed toward the 20-foot high fence where Charles Crocket stood. When Pug spotted Crocket standing by the gate in his birthday suit, she hopped up to the fence and sat on her strong hind legs. Her nostrils expanded and contracted in a pattern that suggested she was sniffing, trying to smell the naked man. Obviously excited, Pug jumped at the fence, trying to clear it to get on the same side as Charles Crocket.

Crocket guessed that Pug had gained entrance to the cemetery from a hole in the back fence because the kangaroo couldn't jump high enough to make it over the 20-foot-high fence. Normally kangaroos can jump as high as forty feet, but Pug was still quite young, and since she was domesticated her jumping ability was under developed.

Laughing like a child, Crocket reached inside the gate and unhooked the latch. He flung the gate wide open and ran into the cemetery. When Pug saw Crocket, she hopped eagerly toward him. Crocket ran toward Pug. They closed on each other in slow motion, like lovers on a beach, thirsty for each other's arms.

When Crocket reached the kangaroo he extended his arms, and Pug reached forward with her short, frail forearms. His hands gently clasped her paws and the two began to dance. Well, sort of. Charles Crocket jumped

into the air as high as he could. When he landed on the ground, Pug, still holding the man's hands, jumped in the air. And that's the way it went. Each one jumped in turn so that one of them was in the air all the time.

While Crocket and Pug hopped -- er, danced -- Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod were skipping along the sidewalk, arm-in-arm. They giggled and laughed insanely. When they reached the entrance to the cemetery, they broke into a run and soon disappeared behind a huge grave marker bearing a big sculpture of a winged angel. What they were doing behind that gravestone, one could only guess.

“So this mysterious cloud with its seductive rain,” I said, breaking into the story, “caused people to become amorous? Is that it?”

“Listen, if you want to hear this story, at least have the good manners not to interrupt,” the hairy man admonished. He poured more tea into my tin can and saved some for himself.

“Now, let me pick up where I left off.”

Things were happening all over the town of Utica, Utah. Kids walking to school were rained upon. Once the drops soaked through their clothes, they dropped their books, shed their jeans and shorts and t-shirts and ran across the school grounds naked and laughing uncontrollably.

Any living thing that was exposed to the mysterious downpour reacted in similarly silly way. In the town square, a dozen dogs chased their tails, running around in circles until they fell over with dizziness. They lay on their backs, panting till they caught their breath, then they leaped up and started chasing their tails again. Cats lost their fear of dogs and wove between the the canines' churning legs, like they were participating in Saturday night do-si-do.

Hundreds of chattering squirrels ran up and down, up and down the tree trunks until they fell over on the ground, wheezing and out of breath. Once rested, the squirrels' frantic scrambling resumed. Chirping birds zoomed like dive bombers, darting in and out of tree branches, bushes and scrub until they, too, dropped to the ground, exhausted, their feathers ruffled. Once rested, they returned to the sky. Even mice and insects crawled

all over each other in bizarre emulations of copulation.

The dogs in the square chased their tails at the feet of a bronze statue of Brigham Young, the polygamist leader of the Latter Day Saints religious movement who died in 1877. Electric sparks popped and crackled mischievously in the cloud hovering above the statue, then spit out a single bolt of bright red lightning that struck the old patriarch straight on his bronze head. The bolt hit with such ferocity it flipped the statue off its pedestal. The acrid smell of singed metal wafted in the damp air.

The hairy paused and took a deep gulp of tree bark tea. I reached inside my jacket and pulled a notebook and pen from my pocket.

“Oh. So now you’re gonna write this stuff down,” my host said, nodding. “Well, that’s all right as long as you don’t interrupt again. If you think what I’ve told you so far is odd, wait until you hear what happens next. All I will say about the next part is that it deals with facts, facts so strange and astonishing that no lie could match them.”

Once the cloud gathered knocked the replica of Brigham Young on its ass -- the bronze figure of the Mormon began to move. The damn thing sat up, rubbed its bronze head, and then stood like a giant. Of course it was heavy, weighed almost 500 pounds. It was eight-feet tall. *Que horror!*

It moved stiffly at first, but within moments its agility increased until it was fairly lithe and clanking around the square, turning its great head this way and that -- until its bronze gaze fell on Mildred Maude, the old homeless woman who lived in the bushes around the town square. Like everyone else who had been drenched by the red rain, she’d stripped off her clothes. She sat on the ground, naked and giggling.

Old Maudy Maude, as she was called, wasn’t the most tidy of persons. Her wide, square feet were black and grimy. Her varicose-veined legs were cellulite-riddled stumps. One had to count the numbers of stomachs that fell in fat pleats across her lap and, thankfully, hung low enough to hide her furry vagina. Her breasts hung like huge bloated goats’ bladders. She was toothless and her tangled hair lay matted against her scalp.

The Brigham Young statue clanked its way toward her. In one powerful move it scooped her up in one of its massive bronze arms. Maudy Maude giggled and tittered like a maid.

Back at the cemetery, Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod were still hidden behind the enormous grave marker with the marble carving of a protective angel. They were moaning and groaning, deliriously enjoying one another.

Charles Crocket and Pug had been joined by a couple dozen naked people who had taken hold of each others' waist and formed a kind of nude, hopping conga line, each person jumping up and down in sequence. When the person in front landed, the one behind jumped into the air and so on.

All the citizens of Utica, Utah were affected by the red rain cloud -- except for old Aunt Bidy, the 88-year-old great- great-grandmother, who rarely left her house. She had sense enough not to go out in the rain, red or otherwise. She didn't know what was going on and if you asked her she'd have told you she didn't give a damn.

The giggling, laughing and naked reverie went on in the town of Utica for more than 24 hours before any one on the outside had a notion that something had gone wrong. The kids stayed out all night, running around naked because no one told them to stop. The adults had lost all common sense and all lost all restraint of their libidos. The town had gone loony tunes.

It was the Chief of Police in the City of Logan who first became aware of peculiarities. Logan provided community policing for Utica. The two officers assigned to patrol that area had not reported in since the day before. His cops couldn't contact them on the radio; all they received was static.

When the chief personally tried the radio, he heard the static, and over that he was also able to hear high-pitched giggling. He dispatched two more officers to investigate. When those officers didn't report back after a couple hours, the cops tried radioing them, too, with the same result -- static and giggling.

Being a top-notch law enforcement officer, the police chief deduced that "something was wrong." He

notified the state police who had just been notified by an area meteorologist that a mysterious cloud formation had settled over the town of Utica, Utah. The state police notified the governor, who notified the federal government. The government notified the National Guard who set up a post at the edge of the town. A team of specialists carrying instruments and wearing protective bio-suits entered the city limits of Utica.

By the time the bio-suited team reached the town square, the cats and dogs were completely exhausted. They were dog-tired, cat-tired. They lay limp like rags on the ground. The mice and insects were lying on their backs, wearily waving their legs skyward. The team saw where the statue had been uprooted from its pedestal but there was no sign of the statue itself. They saw Maudy Maude's pile of dirty clothing.

The team moved on to the schoolyard, where they found naked, exhausted children lying listlessly upon the bars of the jungle gym, slumped in swings, drooping in the grass. The team summoned an emergency medical squad. The EMT's set up bio tents where the children were treated and given nutrition.

When the bio team reached the cemetery, they stared in astonishment behind their clear masks at dozens of exhausted, naked people propped against gravestones. They were bushed, whacked, done in, and danced out.

The most remarkable discovery was Charlie Crocket and Pug.

People don't realize it but kangaroos are very cuddly creatures. They like to hold on to their partners and nuzzle and kiss, so when the team saw the naked man, Charles Crocket, and the kangaroo, Pug, locked in what looked like a lovers' embrace, they didn't know what to think. The man and the kangaroo. The kangaroo and the man. Wow! They didn't know what to think.

Suddenly, the hairy man stopped talking. The abrupt silence made me feel like I'd been pushed off a cliff.

"What happened?" I cried. "What happened?"

The hairy man didn't answer, simply turned his face up and sat staring at the dark sky. He gazed toward the heavens so intently, that I looked skyward, too. I didn't know what I was looking for but it seemed important.

We both sat silently for such a long time that when he did speak, he startled me.

“I don’t know how I know this,” he said. “It’s more like a premonition or intuition than it is really factual. I’ve thought about it for years.”

“What?!” I shouted. “What?!”

“Scientists called the cloud an, ‘*undulates asperatus*,’ which is Latin meaning they didn’t know what the hell it was. My theory is that the red cloud from deep space was made up of zillions of intelligent molecules. Some of the molecules were older than others or more atomic than others. The old molecules were like the leaders, the elders. They governed the massive body. They gave orders. They ruled. A giant mind made up of separate infinitesimal particles.

“The small portion that visited Earth -- the part that broke off from the tail and went unnoticed -- was made up of younger molecules. Those young molecules were like juveniles, like kids. They saw our little blue planet and came here to have fun, to play jokes. That’s what they did. They came here and pulled a prank on Utica, Utah.”

“You can’t believe that,” I scoffed.

“I do believe it,” he growled. “All right, I’m gonna finish telling this story. Maybe by the time I’m done, you’ll see what I mean. Now, where was I...? Oh, yeah...”

The kangaroo and the man. The man and the kangaroo. The team was contemplating what to do about the unusual pairing of Charlie Crocket and Pug when they heard muffled moaning sounds coming from behind one of the big grave markers. They peeked over the angel on the top of the stone and discovered Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod.

The couple appeared to be glued together, stuck in the missionary position. They had been at it a long, long time. Judy Jordan Frogly’s eyes were glazed. Chip Axelrod was dribbling drool. They didn’t know whether

to pull the man and the woman apart or what? They didn't know what to do about the kangaroo and the man. They were scientists but this was new territory for them.

They radioed back to the National Guard post outside town and asked for a team of medical doctors and psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors and sex therapists. They all had to be outfitted in bio-suits and they had to get there *fast*.

Overhead, the mysterious *undulates asperatus* -- the cloud -- began a rapid dissolve. It diffused, lost its cumulus thickness, became cirrus, and then stratus. It looked like a powerful vacuum cleaner was sucking the red vapor upward and drawing it out into the nether.

The scientists who'd been observing the deep space cloud phenomenon, later reported seeing a small, reddish cloud that adhered itself to the tail of larger, moving cloud. For all the world, they reported, the mass of particulates that visited Earth looked like impish molecular youngsters called home by their parents.

Within minutes the sky above Utica, Utah was as blue as ever. On terra ferma the bio-suited squads were busy, busy, busy trying to explain what had happened to the small town. They tested the red puddles and the red dew on the grass and determined that it was a compound composed of a powerful hallucinogen -- an extraterrestrial psilocybin mixed with a stringent, unidentified aphrodisiac.

The townspeople who'd been exposed to the red rain would never be quite normal, ever again; even weeks after their initial exposure to the red rain, they continued to refuse to wear clothes. They were prone to breaking out into fits of spontaneous giggling and uncontrolled laughter.

The scientists and doctors didn't know what to do. They suggested that the government quarantine the entire town for an unspecified period of time. The government got the idea to put a fence around Utica to keep people in as much as to keep people out. It took a couple of weeks, but they erected a 14-foot, chain link fence around the whole town.

The government denied that anything at all happened in the town of Utica, Utah, which worked for about

five minutes. First, there was all that fence they had to explain. Then there were the relatives of Utica residents who couldn't get in to see their loved ones. Then there was the media who refused to let it go. Every rumor, every scrap of gossip, heresay and so-called eyewitness reports were splash across every network and cable news program.

The government would never admit that aliens had visited Earth, so they called a press conference to announce that the townspeople had volunteered and agreed to become a part of a special, secret experiment that would benefit all mankind. That didn't work, really, but you know the government -- the more questions they were asked, the more they lied.

And as time went on, there was much more to hide:

Judy Jordon Frogly, the schoolteacher, became pregnant with a baby fathered by Chip Axelrod, the garbage man. No one could have possibly guessed that Pug, the kangaroo, would get pregnant with Charles Crocket's baby. Kangaroos have a gestation period of about 28 to 33 days. Pug's thumb-sized joey attached itself to a nipple in her pouch and went unnoticed by medical personnel for four months, until it stuck its head out of her pouch.

Pug's baby was boy. He had red hair like his father, big kangaroo ears and a human face and torso. He had kangaroo-like forearms, and his lower body and reproductive organs resembled that of a kangaroo. He had a big red tail and traditional kangaroo haunches, legs and feet.

The government called in veterinarians, animal psychologists and kangaroo experts to examine the hybrid. They named the baby "Manbit," the gynecological term for half man, half kangaroo. Everyone wanted to study the bizarre creature. Charles Crocket didn't care for the scientific name. He named his son "Joey."

With the exception of Charles Crocket, Pug wouldn't let any humans near her baby. If anyone came close, she'd kick them square in their belly, knocking them fifty feet away. Then she'd hop away so fast and jump so high no one could catch her.

By the time the hairy man stopped talking a red dawn had crept into the sky. I was breathing fast and furious like I just finished running a twenty-six-mile marathon.

“Shhh. Hush.” He scooped a huge handful of dirt over the fire. “People are near. I think that’s state troopers. They must have seen your wrecked care and they’ve come looking for you.”

Then he jumped to his feet and hurriedly ushered me deeper into the thick forest. I didn’t want to go that way. I wanted the troopers to find me, to save me. The hairy man was definitely weird; not normal. But he pushed me forward with such force that he sent me into a stumbling run. We ran for a quite a distance until we reached a tall, chain-link fence.

I was panting and huffing, trying to catch my breath. The hairy man wasn’t the least bit out of breath. He put a forefinger to his lips, warning to me to be quiet. He knelt and put his ear to the ground. Then he stood up and whispered: “Joey. Joey. It’s okay. Come on out.”

I heard bushes rustling and twigs crackling on our side of the fence. Fear swished around in my stomach. Tiny hairs on my neck bristled.

Then I saw him. It was him -- the manbit, the half man, half kangaroo, the incredible offspring of Pug and Charles Crocket emerging from the underbrush.

“That’s the thing I saw in front of my car!” I croaked.

“Save the commentary for the peanut gallery,” the hairy man snarled. “Don’t slight him. He understands what people say. Let’s get going.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes off of Joey. A tuft of red human hair sprouted between large, swiveling ears. His oversized blue eyes were round. He had a red beard and curly red hair sheltered his human chest. His slender forearms pranced in front of him. He hopped on both hind legs, and his long, thick tail menacingly slapped the ground.

“It’s okay now, Joey,” the hairy man said soothingly. “The coast is clear.”

Suddenly, Joey sank into his haunches, sprang upward, and jumped the high fence, disappearing into the brush on the other side.

“Let’s go!” the hairy man insisted.

We moved along the fence until we came to a place where the wire was loosened at the bottom. The hairy man pulled up the slack until it was raised high enough for me to scoot under. He followed by simply moving quickly beneath the breach before the fence fell back into place.

“You are now inside the compound that was once the town of Utica,” he announced. “There are a few people still living here. Some of the kids that scampered around in the park that day couldn’t be rehabilitated. They ran and hid when the government came to collect them. They’re adults now, and they’ve been clever enough to evade capture all these years. The local people call them crazy. I call them renegades because they live outside the laws of convention. Because of what happened here, they can never be just ordinary.”

“Are they dangerous?” I asked nervously.

“Not as long as you are with me,” he answered flatly.

I walked beside the hairy man through the remnants of Utica, looking at abandoned houses, rusted cars, and dilapidated street signs. When we reached the town square, I noticed the crumbling cement pedestal where the bronze statue of Brigham Young once stood.

“What happened to the statue?” I asked.

“That’s one of the most curious of all the puzzles. The government didn’t believe the account of the statue grabbing old Maudy Maude and making off with her. They thought it was an idiotic yarn concocted by the infected witnesses.

“You know the Latter Day Saints pretty much controlled Utah back then, just as they still do today. The

Mormons pooh-poohed the reports of the statue having its way with Old Maudy, but secretly they were intrigued. They sent missionaries into the area by the dozens to investigate every sighting of a full-of-life metal man.

“Supposedly, five missionaries came across the itinerante statue one morning while it was leaning against a tree. They had a solid wire cable in their truck and they used it to tie the statue to the tree until help arrived. Under the cloak of darkness they shipped the bronze thing to an undisclosed location in Salt Lake City. I think they’ve stored the statue down in the catacombs under the city and church leaders sacrifice virgins to it each month.

“I’m kidding about that last part,” he added quickly. “I don’t think there are that many virgins anywhere.”

The mid-morning sun floated high in the sky. The day was hot and humid. We walked toward the barricaded gate to the entrance to Utica. Two National Guard soldiers stood at their post outside the locked entry.

“I was supposed to meet that doctor or the scientist early this morning,” I said. “I thought I would meet him outside the compound.”

“You’ve already met him, my friend, and you’ve heard his story.”

“You?” I gaped at him. “You’re the doctor?”

“My name is Elliot Axelrod. I’m Judy Jordan Frogly’s son. Chip Axelrod was my father. Mother and I fled Utica about ten years after the red cloud. With the help of my pal, Joey, we were able to get over the fence. We went to live in Boston with my uncle. I was kept at home because I was so different. Mother feared people would ask questions and we’d be discovered. My uncle was a Harvard professor and my mother was a teacher. You can say I was home-schooled. With my uncle’s help I tested out scholastically and received my degrees without ever having to go to formal classes. I never liked wearing clothes. After mother died, I came back here. I came home.”

“Hey, Elliot!” One of the guardsmen shouted. “Who’s your friend?”

“He’s a stranger who got lost,” Elliot Axelrod shouted back.

“Aren’t we all?” shouted the guardsman.

“Call the state troopers,” Elliot yelled. “He’s gonna need a ride.”

“They know you?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course. They’re good guys but they don’t know that I can get in and out of here. I serve a purpose, keeping the renegades in line.”

“What happened to the remaining population of Utica?” I asked.

“They let the townspeople live in their own homes for a while, but there were socializing problems,” he explained. “People needed to be fed and cared for medically and that brought the outside in. Except for the people they couldn’t round up, the rest either died or they were shipped out to mental health institutions. A good reporter,” he advised me with a raised eyebrow, “would start by checking with the Dorothea Dix Institute in Washington D.C., or the William Jefferson Clinton Mental Health Foundation in Arkansas. Check the names of the patients against the names of town residents.”

The state troopers’ car speeded toward the gate. Elliot Axelrod extended a hand. I shook it, and felt the tremble in my fingers.

“You go back and write that story. It’s time for people to know the truth of what happened here.”

From the rear seat of the state trooper’s car, I watched the forest slip past. What a wild night. I needed to make sense of it, and the questions that plagued me.

How do you juxtapose absurdity with significance? How do you explain the vast, profound universe? How do you reconcile the simple graces of the human heart with compelling cosmic power? I didn’t know the answers to those questions. I was just a reporter, not a dream-weaver.

I glanced out the window and thought I saw Joey, jumping along in the forest; flashes of red hair and white skin. I thought I saw him, but when I looked again --I didn't.

###

The Clay-born

Most of the people in the African village sat on straw mats eating their morning meals of maize-flour porridge in front of grass-thatched huts turned brown and parched by the sun. A child suddenly howled: “Simba! Simba!” *Lion. Lion.*

Children jumped to their feet, scrambling for cover behind the adults. Frenzied parents reached for their sticks. Something *was* out there, moving in the tall grass, making it sway and crackle. Perhaps it was a lion. The villagers knew they must beat it to death or the beast would surely grab one of them, drag the unfortunate one into the meadow and eat its own breakfast.

The thing that ruptured into the clearing was not a lion. It was, of all things, a mud man! The people had heard about the mud creatures that once lived in the mountains nearby. In every village in the vicinity, Africans told stories about the mud monsters. They often spoke of them in whispers around the big fire at night. But even the oldest among them had never actually seen one.

The clumsy, fearsome-looking creature possessed two arms, two legs and, a man’s torso and a human-shaped head, completely covered with bulky clay. Every orifice, its mouth, its nostrils, even its anal cavity, everything, except its blinking, gray eyes, was made of dried orange clay. Walking like a zombie, it staggered forward with one rigid arm raised, groping as if pleading for help, it fell into the dust and died.

* * *

Three months later

I stood on a flat, rough outcropping of metamorphic rock jutting over the jagged edges of Mount Margherita, the highest point of the snow-capped, cloud-enveloped Ruwenzori Mountain Range in Central Africa.

I am actually here, I thought. The fabled Mountains of the Moon. Looking down the steep mountainside, through a swarming veil of mist, I could barely see the precipitous, slanting terrain. I heard excited African voices rising from the slopes, echoes of Swahili chants crooned in unison. The voices belonged to the half-dozen Kenyan porters who were happily and rapidly descending the mysterious mountain.

“Mama Yuko? Ndio Yuko. Njoo kutuamkia,” they sang.

I don't speak Swahili but one of my companions translated the mantra when the porters had hurriedly begun their descent: *“Is the woman home? Yes, she is home. I hope to see her soon.”*

Mount Margherita rises to a height of more than 6,000 feet. My two colleagues and I had not yet reached the summit--but we were close. Previous explorers had found evidence that billions of years ago this mountain was the site of massive volcanic eruptions. Our mission was two-fold: To forecast the possibility of future explosive flare-ups; and to prove the existence of the Terracotta Troglodyte, the legendary mud man of indigenous lore.

On their backs, the porters had toted the fragile ultrasound and infrared seismic detection equipment needed to determine the potential for volcanic activity. Throughout the climb, they'd chattered nervously. They had lingered only long enough to help us position the high-tech tools. When told they could go home, they departed quickly, clearly relieved.

From my perch, I peered through the mist at the dimpled landscape of the Great Rift Valley below. The Ruwenzori Range consists of six massifs separated by deep gorges, covered with an assortment of vegetation, ranging from alpine meadows, to tropical rainforests, to mangrove wetlands.

The lofty view and the thin air were breathtaking, but it was the thought of the unknown, the possible encounters with hidden horrors that had me on edge. I understood why the natives dreaded this mountain. One could become lost or stranded and the oxygen-deprived air seemed haunted, troubled. As

I stood looking down upon the valley, I allowed my mind to drift back to how I came to be here, in Africa, at this moment.

* * *

Just a few weeks ago I was sitting behind my paper-strewn desk in a safe, comfortable, book-cluttered office on the campus of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

“I simply don’t understand why you don’t want to go on this expedition,” said Professor Vincent DeLoria, poking his head through the half opened door. DeLoria, the dean of Yale’s Department of Geology, looks like the proverbial absent-minded professor. He is not very tall; his droopy intelligent eyes are set in a wide and long face framed by a great shock of frizzled and very gray hair rising high from a lofty brow. His nose is fleshy and prominent, his mouth small, his lips full, his cheeks plump, his chin rounded. A bushy mustache covers his upper lip. His favorite attire is a rumpled salt and pepper suit, white shirt and black bow tie.

“My Lord, man! This is an invitation to greatness,” the dean shouted, abruptly entering my office waving a letter he’d received from Sir Robert Hest, the legendary paleoanthropologist, one of Oxford University’s most distinguished and accomplished academicians.

“You are the noted Dr. Thor Tillman, one of the very few African American geologists of considerable merit. You are summoned to explore an isolated region of Africa on an all-expenses-paid junket by one of the great scientific minds of our time. You respond by saying you are not sure if you can get away from your teaching duties.”

“That’s not fair,” I responded. “Sir Robert wants me to travel to England to meet with him to plan an expedition of unknown duration to a region of Africa notorious for claiming the lives of the bravest, most foolhardy scholars. And for what? He *thinks* we can unearth the remnants of some storybook creature that may or may not have ever existed.”

“Well, Dr. Tillman, you may not give a damn about your career, but I want this university to forge ahead in its reputation for exploration,” the dean snapped. “As of next week, you are on sabbatical. Professor Goldsmith will take over your classes until you return. I’ve taken the liberty to write Sir Robert telling him you are on your way.

“Go at it, son,” Dean DeLoria’s tone softened. “You’re young, only thirty six. You have quite a name on campus as being a tough touch football player. You jog at least five miles every day. You’re in great shape and you’re a splendid scholar. You can handle it. Travel arrangements are being made, Dr. Tillman. Be safe.”

* * *

London wallowed in a thick, hazy fog when I arrived at the home of Sir Robert Hest, Oxford professor emeritus, esteemed doctor of letters, el capo de capi of paleoarcheology.

A very stiffly dressed manservant led me into the huge private library where Sir Robert sat behind a highly polished mahogany desk. He looked quite old and frail hunched in a big leather chair. His many years of living and his many travels had taken their toll on him. With thin wisps of gray hair sprouting from and otherwise balding scalp and sunken, liver-spotted cheeks, he looked as if he kept life in his wasted frame only by grim concentration.

This man is in no condition to go exploring.

Seated in a cushioned chair at one end of the desk was a young woman. I could not help but notice her beauty. Her dark hair fell in soft curls just above her shoulders. Her intelligent, amber eyes were exquisitely framed by naturally long black eye lashes. The glowing red lipstick she wore made her full lips even more voluptuous. Her features and her opulent brown skin suggested that she was of African heritage.

“This is my granddaughter, Minkah. Loosely translated, ‘minkah’ is an African tribal word

meaning ‘justice,’” Sir Robert said with pride. His British accent gave him an air of lofty sophistication. I found myself gazing at Minkah. She stared straight ahead, her beautiful eyes seemingly fixed on the wall. I felt rebuffed.

“You seem surprised, Dr. Tillman?” Sir Robert observed. “Her grandmother was of the Ashanti tribe of central Ghana in Western Africa. I garnered much fame for my work with Louis and Mary Leakey, examining human remains found at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, but, for years, I explored other parts of Africa.

“I’ve managed to keep my private life private,” he continued. “I don’t need to tell you this, but most Europeans dislike the idea of interracial marriage. Not many of the upper crust know of my marriage to Mesi, Minkah’s grandmother. She refused to come to England. She was a smart woman. She died a few years ago at our home in Kumasa.”

“You don’t have to explain, Sir Robert,” I replied.

“Yes I do. You need to understand why I want you and Minkah to go to Africa together. Obviously, I cannot go. I am too old and too ill.

“Minkah is the child of my daughter and my son-in-law, British paleontologist, Dr. James Jones.

“James was exploring in Africa. He died a few weeks ago, killed by some creature that captured him and immersed him in some type of soil.” I looked toward Minkah but she sat still, not returning my gaze.

“James escaped from the creature. He managed to descend a very steep mountain before he stumbled into the African village where he died. He was covered with a thick coating of terracotta. It was an extremely adhesive substance he could not remove. He died, literally, of skin suffocation, an incredibly painful process that was exacerbated by the region’s excessively hot temperatures.”

“My father left a trail for us to follow.” Minkah spoke for the first time. She did not address me, but rather, she spoke to her grandfather.

“Several weeks before he died, my father wrote to us. He said he was on to a spectacular find. Something that would overturn everything humans think about how life began on this planet.”

“Minkah is an accomplished anthropologist in her own right,” Sir Robert offered. “She has studied at universities in Sweden and France. She’s fluent in nearly a dozen languages, including Swahili. She collaborated in the dating of fossil remains found in east Africa, the site now accepted as the cradle of human life.”

“Actually, I have heard of Dr. Jones and her work,” I said and Minkah shot a glance in my direction. “I had no idea she was your granddaughter.”

“But why me? Why choose me?” I asked. “I’ve never been to Africa. My work has been confined to explaining the geology of North America. In the most remote paleontological sense, I’ve studied fossiliferous rock formations found in the sedimentary layers of America’s numerous canyons. Only a small portion of my work lies in estimating dates of fossil records to get a purview of how life evolved across geologic time.”

“My grandfather is quite familiar with your work, Dr. Tillman.” Minkah’s tone of voice seemed dismissive. “Personally, I would have chosen someone else. Someone familiar with the African continent.”

I felt thoroughly rebuffed. What had I done to offend her?

“Now, now Minkah.” Sir Robert chided her, and focused his gaze on me. “Dr. Tillman, the papers you’ve published in geology reviews are quite intelligent. This expedition needs a geologist. My son-in-law wrote that he believed life on our planet harkens to a specific geological explanation. Some of your work has touched upon that theory.”

* * *

“Are you with us, Dr. Tillman?” Minkah shouted. Her loudly scolding voice shocked me out her grandfather’s London library and brought me back to Africa so quickly that I teetered and almost toppled over the edge of the rocky ledge I stood upon. A strong hand grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me backward.

“Whoa, don’t fall off the mountain,” said Dr. Damu Kimbili, the Kenyan-born, Oxford-educated paleontologist Sir Robert hired to assist with the expedition. “We can’t lose you now.”

Minkah was already scrambling up the narrow mountain trail. *She thinks I am so incompetent.*

“What’s a guy gotta do to get on her good side?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Tillman,” Damu said. “This is my third expedition with Minkah. She’s a serious scientist. She’s complicated.”

“Yeah, aren’t we all?” I mused. “You’re quite an interesting fellow yourself. How did you get to know Sir Robert? Through your studies at Oxford?”

“Actually, No. I am from the Ashanti village of Kokofu. When I was a boy, Sir Robert sponsored the mission there. Sir Robert took special interest in me. He taught me how to speak, write and read English and he paved the way for me to study in England.”

Dr. Damu Kimbilli was one of the most exceptional persons I’d ever met. His polished British accent was a dramatic contrast to his African heritage. His exquisite ebony skin was inscribed with the distinct facial scarring of his Aduana tribe. He was fluent in seven languages and he had the manner and bearing of African nobility, the temperament of a perceptive philosopher and the quick and curious mind of a dedicated researcher.

“You must remember,” he said, “Minkah has had to be extraordinarily strong. She is part British,

part African. She lives in two worlds. For her, any display of sentiment is a sign of vulnerability. Besides, she's a woman. We men are not supposed to know what she's thinking.

"Let's get going before she leaves us behind."

I picked up my gear and scurried after my colleagues.

We trudged upwards. The air became so bitterly cold that I could hardly believe I was in Africa.

"We can camp here. Is that all right with you, Damu?" Minkah asked. She did all she could not to address me or pay me any courtesy. I tried not to take it personally.

"This is fine," Dr. Kimbili said. "How about you, Thor? Is this spot okay?"

I looked around. A small alcove was carved out of the craggy mountainside. The recess extended to about eight feet inward. The interior was completely barren of snow. It was wide enough for three people and the rocky shelf above made a convenient roof.

"Sure," I shrugged.

We burrowed in and placed a tarp over the opening for a makeshift door. I noticed the rocks were warm to the touch. *That's curious, I thought. It was so cold just a few feet away. Could the warm rocks be a signal that the mountain is volcanically active?* I put a few rocks in my knapsack. *When I have a chance to examine them more thoroughly, I hoped they might provide some answers.*

We ate cold minced ham and scrambled eggs from cans. Minkah and Damu drank water from canteens. I took a few sips of brandy from my flask.

Morning came quickly. Mountain climbing left me sore and aching but I knew better than to complain. Minkah already thought I was out of my element. As if she was reading my thoughts, Minkah gave me a look of utter disdain and swiftly turned away from me.

Again, we traveled upwards. There was no longer any semblance of a path, just rock piles and boulder stacks. It took almost four hours to climb about eight hundred more feet. I calculated we were less than one thousand feet from the mountain's summit.

Minkah stopped climbing for a few moments. I leaned against a huge rock, exhausted.

"We are very close to where my father said we will find the fissure," Minkah announced.

"How do you know?" I asked, predicting her scorn.

"It's in the air, Dr. Tillman," she countered impatiently. "Use your sense of smell. My father said there would be an overwhelming odor of sulfur."

I inhaled deeply. The smell of rotten eggs filled my olfactory senses. Elemental sulfur is odorless. Hydrogen sulfide, sulfur mixed with water, is what stinks. I decided to keep the chemistry lesson to myself.

Clambering upward a few more feet, we found the fissure. The sulfide stench was so strong it cleared our noses causing mucus to drip to our lips. The opening in the mountain was very small. One-by-one, we crawled into the hole on our stomachs, pulling our knapsacks in after us.

Once inside the crevice, we stood to find ourselves in an enormous, cathedral-like chamber, decorated with sulfur-drenched, crystallized stalagmite and stalactite formations. Some of them were twenty feet or longer, brilliant colors and fantastic shapes. There was no need for artificial light. In warm temperatures, sulfur issues a soft yellow-orange and blue glow that provides an eerie illumination.

"Impressive," I said. "What now?"

"We explore," Minkah said.

We followed a down-sloping corridor studded with sickles, descending toward what sounded like gurgling water. The temperature rose to sweltering as we made our way deeper into the subterranean

grotto. My eyes stung from the caustic sulfuric fumes. The rocks around us were steaming.

I was having trouble breathing. I think the others were, too, but I said nothing as Minkah led the way. Damu followed her. I was behind him.

Suddenly, Minkah screamed, “Thor, help me!” Through the mist of sulfur fumes, I saw her collapse against the wall—then disappear. I was surprised that in that moment of fear, she called *my* name.

“Damu! Where’s Minkah?”

“Something just pulled her through the wall.”

“That’s impossible,” I shouted. “You can’t just walk through a wall of rock and sulfur crystals.”

“She was *pulled* through, Thor. I saw something that looked like huge arms reach from the other side and—*aagh!*” Damu gave a hoarse cry, and then he too, disappeared into the wall.

I blinked, stunned. This couldn’t be happening. Had the fumes gotten to me? Was I hallucinating? This could not be real.

I scrambled as far away from the wall as possible and opened my knapsack, retrieved my flashlight and switched it on. The light was not much help. It illuminated the vaporous, roiling gases but not much else. I inched toward the wall and gingerly raised my right hand. I expected to touch rock. Instead my fingertips made contact with a moist, gooey substance. I snatched my hand back and wiped my fingers on my khaki trousers.

The wall was composed of some kind of muddy membrane, like Silly Putty or bubble gum. Two huge arms had pulled Minkah and then Damu through the membrane. I hoped my arms were strong enough to push my way through it. What choice did I have?

My thoughts racing, I reached into my knapsack, fumbling for my large, silver-tone hunting

knife. Rummaging, I felt the rock specimens I'd collected from the alcove where we'd spent the night. I had surmised that they were pieces of iron ore. Thinking they might come in handy, I put them in my trousers pocket.

The membrane undulated before me, rippling, swelling and surging as if it were alive. I drew a deep breath and leapt into it, slashing and cutting with my knife.

The barrier offered no resistance. After my body pierced through it, the muddy gel simply folded back into place, leaving no trace of my entrance. The mucky divider was like a giant sheath of chewed bubble gum that left a layer of sticky sludge all over me. Peeling the membrane away from my eyes, I saw the source of the gurgling sounds.

I stood on the edge of a steaming, frothing, underground lagoon. In size it was about as big as an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

“Minkah! Damu!”

My shouts were swallowed by the raucous slosh and babble of the agitated lagoon. I sensed movement behind me but before I could turn, I was struck on the head.

Regaining consciousness was an insane exercise. My clothes were ripped from my body. Naked, I was forcefully rolled upon the ground, over and over. Soon, I was completely covered with wet dirt... Mud! No, clay! I was encased in a cocoon of clay.

My jaws were forced apart and something awful tasting, something like fish goo was crammed into my mouth. I could not spit it out because my lips were sealed quickly with some substance. My eyes blinked open. I saw a huge creature with indistinct facial features. The fishy substance made me feel sick. I wretched involuntarily, but I could not vomit. Suddenly, I was hoisted into the air, like I was being thrown over someone's shoulder and carried off.

Then, I was propped against a rocky wall; unable to move because the earthen shell restricted my movements. On the other side of the turbulent lagoon, I saw a creature, an abominable thing, standing over Minkah's prostrate, nude body. Minkah seemed to be in a merciful state of slumber. I could not make sense of what was happening.

The beast was man-like but was not a man. It was about eight or nine feet tall, with two legs and two arms. Its torso was spherical with no definitions of chest or abdomen. Its head was as big and round as a beach ball. Finally, I comprehended what I was witnessing.

The Terracotta Troglodyte!

This was the creature! This was the thing Professor Jones wrote about in his letter home. This was the thing we came to Africa to find. We found it!

"Minkah wake up!" I tried to shout but the sound I made was muted. My mouth was filled with thick, fishy slime. My lips were held closed by earthen clod.

I could not see Dr. Damu Kimbili but I thought I heard him next to me. He, too, was trying to yell. I could barely hear his muffled shouts. I assumed he was bound in clay, too. Both of us were forced to watch the crazy scene unfolding across the tepid lagoon.

The monster rapidly rolled Minkah in a chrysalis of clay. It seemed to handle her gently, though. Its hands looked more like paws. Once Minkah's body was completely covered, it scooped clay from the edges of the lagoon and pasted it over her face, leaving only her mouth and eyes uncovered. Once her mask of mud was in place, the creature stood, looking down at Minkah, admiring its work.

Turning to face the lagoon, the creature held its arms out over the bubbling brine. To my shock, a shimmering, snake-like eel shot straight up, like an arrow, flying from the fizzling pool—almost as if it had been summoned, as if the creature had called it. The creature caught it deftly and, skillfully ripping the squirming eel apart, it stuffed the fishy remains into Minkah's mouth.

What was this ritual? What was it for?

After filling her mouth with eel entrails, it sealed Minkah's lips with a clump of clay, picked up her shell-encased body and lumbered around the edges of the lagoon, headed toward Damu and me.

As it drew closer, I saw the creature better. It was dark red, the color of dried brick. It stood on two, tree trunk-like legs and flat elephant-shaped feet. Its facial features were vague. There was no nose, no mouth. Its eyes were two small, glassy disks.

It placed Minkah's clay shell next to mine, leaning it upright against the cavern wall. Minkah regained consciousness. I heard her muffled screams. I felt so helpless.

OK, Gumby. What now?

What happened next was a marvel of sensation and psychological phenomenon.

The thing sat down in front of us, Buddha-like. It placed its paw-shaped hands on its round belly, and emitted a low, steady, guttural, chanting moan. I fell into a drowsy, hypnotic daze. Perhaps I was dreaming.

I had a sensation of spinning rapidly, counter-clockwise. I felt disorientated, mentally scattered, diffracted and I could feel electrically charged particles bombarding me; they made my skin prickle. The spinning thrust was maddening.

Time reversed. I was in high school, walking backward along a corridor. I was a boy scout, reciting my pledges, backward. I was a child, playing little league baseball, backward. I was an infant, crawling backward. I was an embryo, floating backward. I was a speck, flying backward. I still existed but only as part of a collective consciousness, a synaptic atom in a universal mind.

The spinning sensation ceased. I was comatose but strangely perceptive, alert and discerning.

I was no longer in a cave. The mountain no longer existed. The landscape around me was a

boiling geosphere, a teeming ball of exotic gases and sizzling rocks. The red sky bled fire.

I realize I was experiencing an altered state of consciousness. I felt the presence of Minkah and Damu. Their voices came through as vibrations.

“Thor! Damu! Are you there?” *It was Minkah! Her thoughts emanating psychically.*

“I am with you,” reverberated Damu.

“I am here,” I responded.

In this distorted state of awareness, Minkah, Damu and myself were psychically receiving and relaying information. We were telepathically connected, in synch with each other and to the creature.

Like an echo resonating within my disembodied psyche, the creature spoke non-verbally, yet I could translate its command.

“Come with me.”

The creature began to move. Minkah, Damu and I had no bodily structure. Our physical selves had been reduced to flickering points of light floating in space drifting behind the perambulating creature, which moved rapidly across the arid ground.

“Thor, what do you make of this?” Minkah spoke her thoughts to me.

“Do you mean this crazy, psyched up, out-of-body state,” I asked, “or our surroundings?”

“Both,” Minkah replied.

I was gratefully aware that Minkah’s attitude toward me changed. She was friendly, responsive. I could hardly contain the thought that she might actually like me. What a foolish time to consider it, I knew I’d fallen in love with her the moment I saw her.

“Geologically speaking, I think we’ve been transported back to the Precambrian period, when Earth was transforming from a dead planet to a living one.” My answer surprised me. I still had access to my academic knowledge.

“I think you are right,” Damu responded telepathically. “See the grass meadows? Grass was the first vegetation to emerge from the age of hidden life.”

“Yes, Damu, I see. And look there, to the left,” I said, amazed that we could “see” anything in our disembodied state. “The bands of rock in that outcropping are sedimentary strata, further evidence that this is the Proterozoic era, the age of “first” life.

“Then we are seeing Earth as it existed four and a half billion years ago,” Minkah marveled. “The moon hasn’t even formed yet.”

“Science has always asserted that life during this period was only microscopic or bacteriological,” Damu said. “How is our clay-born host even possible?”

I considered Damu’s question. The answer hit me like a lightning bolt.

“Sulfur!” I exclaimed. “It must be the sulfur in the fissure and the lagoon. The amino acids cysteine and methionine contain sulfur, as do all polypeptides, proteins, and enzymes. Our clay-constructed friend must be one of our earliest biological cousins. Somehow this clay thing, or clay person, has survived for billions of years because it was entombed in a sulfuric environment. We must accept that complex life has existed on Earth almost from the beginning of global formation.

“Yes! That must be so,” Minkah said excitedly, “My father’s body was found encased in clay. The only way this thing, this clay man, could bond with humans was to bind us in the sulfuric substance that serves as its flesh. My father managed to escape from the cave, but he could not shed the terracotta cocoon he was placed in.” Minkah’s contribution to the enigmatic puzzle we were trying to piece together helped explain our predicament.

“What about the eels? Where did they come from? And why stuff eel guts into our mouths?”

“We can only theorize, Damu,” I suggested. “But, did you notice in the lagoon, the eels subsist in hot, steaming, sulfuric liquid? “

“Yes, you’re right,” Minkah said. “What are eels but fish?”

I think I follow,” Damu replied. Earth’s very first organic life, even microscopic life, was culled in a protoplasmic ooze comprised mostly of water. Anaerobic bacteria, mingling with sulfate minerals, and incubating in a kind of hydrothermal placenta created the embryonic atmosphere that produced fish, or, in this case, eels.

“The clay people..., the clay-borns as you called them, Damu,” Minkah continued, “harvested eels for food.”

“That’s right, Minkah,” I agreed. “Eels possess strong electric charges. Electricity is generally agreed to be the allusive ingredient that animates life. By consuming the eels, particularly their intestines, the clay-borns generated locomotion, movement. It also means, they were fortified with a cerebral and emotional stimulus, derived from the organic electricity spawned by the eels.”

“So, you’re saying that these ‘clay-borns,’ were intelligent, expressively lucid beings?” Damu asked.

“I am,” I replied. “How else can you explain what’s happened to us?”

“Touché,” Damu murmured thoughtfully.

“Energy is radiated light,” I went on. “Universally, matter is held together by atoms and molecules. All things, and all animals, including humans, contain elements of electricity. That explains why we’ve been transformed into sparking, electrical fragments.

“Do you mean that the creature, the clay-born,” Damu asked, “fed us the eels guts to amplify our

innate electrical charges?”

“I believe so, yes. It converted our psyches to transmittable subatomic particles—neutrons and protons—to establish a reciprocal electromagnetic field between itself and us.”

“That’s how it channels thoughts to us and why we are able to channel our thoughts to each other,” Minkah said following along. “Astonishing! This primeval creature is applying fundamental physics and telekinetic communication,” Minkah deduced.

“Yes,” I concurred. “I suspect our flesh and blood bodies are still intact in the cave, still inside the clay cocoons. It is our mental energies that the creature is manipulating.”

“That means we are experiencing what the clay-born is experiencing through its thoughts, Damu concluded. Or better yet, through its memories.”

“Fantastic,” Minkah exclaimed. “We are experiencing mental time travel.”

Our clay captor was still moving swiftly, but it abruptly stopped and swung its great, round head from side to side. Floating above and slightly behind the creature, Damu and Minkah and watched the clay-born climb atop a mammoth meteorite and sit.

What happened next was the stuff of dreams.

* * *

Ensnared upon the rock, the clay-born assumed its Buddha pose; the clay-born plunged into another meditative spell, which produced a mental motion picture composed of its memories. The three of us not only watched the clay-born’s mnemonic scenes unfold, but we absorbed the creature’s emotional fluctuations, as well. We felt what it felt.

A kind of village...a cluster of dwellings appeared, each one a sculpted mound of reddened earth, hollowed on the inside and accessible by entrances shaped like enormous ovals. The clay-born focused its

attention on one dwelling in particular and soon, we saw what looked like a family of three clay-borns emerge from the abode.

One clay-born was clearly larger than the others. The second was only slightly smaller than the first and the third was noticeably smaller than the second.

It was not easy to discern their genders since the clay-borns did not possess visible anatomical distinctions and there were no apparent sex organs. Yet, judging from the way the biggest family member led the other two, I concluded the largest was the dominant one.

They trudged along a well-worn path leading to an enormous lake of boiling, steaming liquid; reminiscent of the geothermal fluid we'd seen in the cavern lagoon. Standing at the edge of the lathering lake, each family member stretched its arms over the brewing surface. Immediately, numerous electrically charged eels jumped from the swirling, bubbling brine. The soaring eels stretched their long, slimy bodies into the air like acrobatic snakes struck by crackling bolts of lightning. The eels had enormous, viciously sharp teeth protruding like daggers from their mouths. They looked dangerous.

But the clay-borns adroitly caught the slippery fish between their paw-like hands and pitched them over their heads. The wet, slick eels landed behind the clay creatures, plopping upon the dry, rocky ground, helpless. They flopped, slithered, and collected into a writhing, slinking heap that snapped and spit like a gaggle of downed live wires from telephone poles during a storm.

Once they had caught enough, the family sat upon the ground, facing the pile of writhing electric eels. Each clay-born picked up a sharp rock and carved a yawning hole in their clay chins. Then, we watched them snatch eels from the thrashing pile, pull off their heads and stuff the slick bodies into the maws they used for feeding. When they were finished, the clay-born resealed their crudely carved out oral cavities with clumps of clay.

Minkah, Damu and I had stopped communicating with one another. I had no words for what I

was witnessing. My companions didn't, either.

As the family lumbered to their feet, another large, hulking clay-born approached along the lakeshore. The biggest family member turned to face the stranger and assumed a menacing, defensive pose. It stood with its two elephantine feet wide apart and firmly rooted, and waved its thick arms, seeming to signal to the forth coming creature to stay away.

Undaunted, the advancing clay-born drew nearer to the group. When it was within a few feet of the stationary clay-born, it lunged into the other's outstretched arms. A brutal struggle ensued.

Neither would yield nor give way to the other. Suddenly, the stranger, who was slightly larger than the clay-born with the family, produced a massive amount of power, lifted the adversary high into the air and heaved it into the steaming lake.

The immersed clay-born splashed madly, struggling to reach ground, but it could not. Damu, Minkah and I watched, horrified, as the sinking clay-born was besieged by a swarm of electric eels. They gnashed it with their sharp fangs, biting and devouring bits and pieces of the submerging victim. Soon, the defeated clay-born vanished beneath the lake's frantic surface.

When the victor was sure the opponent was vanquished, it turned to face the two remaining family members who continued to stand in front of their diminished catch of the day. The next largest family member bowed slightly and deferentially stepped back. The smallest one sat down, dumbfounded, a partially devoured eel flipped its tail as it hanged from the gouged out feeding gap.

Because we were telekinetically channeling information through our clay-born host, we were also emotionally connected to it. We experienced robust sensations emanating from all the clay-borns. We sensed the agony of the drowned, eel-consumed clay-born. We were aware of the humility and fear of the submissive clay-born. But the most heightened surge of emotion came from the smallest, remaining family member. It was a gut reaction that was returned by the triumphant creature. I could identify with

this particular, delightful sensation because I had been reacting to a similar emotion ever since I met Minkah: It was the feeling of passionate love.

The mid-sized clay-born, who I now assumed was the mother of the smaller clay-born, stood a good distance away from the swooning couple, giving them wide berth.

In an instant I understood that we were participating in the romantic recollections of our captor. We had just observed a primordial mating ritual that took place billions of years ago, but this creature, who had survived the eons, was reliving the event as if it were happening now.

In order to win a mate, a clay-born apparently had to kill a rival. Afterward, the victor took on the responsibility of caring for its companion. This was a tale about the survival of the fittest.

Next our captor's thought turned to an instance of great joy and happiness: The delivery of an offspring. Clay-borns didn't reproduce as mammals do, but they did perform a kind of birth-giving ceremony. It took place on the lakeshore.

After a huge meal of electric eels, the two clay-borns, the victor and the smallest family member gathered mud from the lake's edge. They rolled the damp earth until they'd made three perfectly round, infant-sized clay balls. They stacked the spheres on top of one another, the way one would make a head and a body for a snowman. To make arms and legs, they rolled more clay into elongated cylinders, and then stuck the cylinders onto the orb-like body. When they finished this task, they had what looked like an anthropomorphic baby made of clay.

Vigilantly, they sifted through the discarded eel heads left over from their recent meal. They carefully removed the eel's lidless eyeballs from an eel head that they found suitable and pushed them gently into the clay surface of their creation's faceless head. Next they carved a feeding aperture in its small chin. Taking turns, its parents regurgitated eel flesh into the oral cavity. When the new creature's feeding hole was filled, the opening was sealed with a clump of

wet clay, allowing the regurgitated gunk to ferment. Soon, the nascent clay-born began to squirm, showing the first signs of life.

The clay-borns joy at their offspring was short lived. Earth was a new planet, constantly bombarded by huge meteors, asteroids, and comets flying through space at tremendous speeds. Frequent collisions with the planet wreaked fiery havoc that produced overwhelming atmospheric storms.

Our clay-born host remembered when it lost its family. Through its memory, it took us to the lakeshore, where it fished for eels to take home. Dark, rolling clouds covered the red sky. Booming, clapping thunder shook the bruised Earth. The clay-born had stopped taking the family to the lake because of the onslaught of perilous weather, including episodes of profound, torrential rainfall. Too much rain was hazardous to clay-borns.

Our host had already moved the family out of the clay house into the mouth of a distant cave. The house was water soluble, and could be washed away during the relentless rainstorms and so could the clay-borns, dissolving in mere, soggy clumps of waterlogged mud.

Remembering this day frightened the clay-born, and us, too. Thousands of blazing meteors and other wayward celestial bodies streaked through the thick cloud cover, landing in the lake and on the ground like steaming, smoky missiles that split open upon contact, leaving vast craters and spewing smoldering ashes everywhere.

Because it was alone, fishing for eels, the clay-born was separated from its family when the big meteor storm came. It took cover in a lakeside cave, hoping to rejoin its loved-ones when the tempest subsided but the meteor blizzard continued to rage.

Earth rumbled, growled and wobbled. Red-hot, molten rock seeped across the searing landscape. Finally, there was a great, shocking uplifting of terrain, a grand and magnificent upheaval of rock and soil, and the Ruwenzori Mountain Range was formed.

Because it had sought shelter in the lakeside cave, the clay-born was sealed into an underground grotto. All that remained of the once enormous lake is the subterranean lagoon where we first encountered the mysterious clay creature.

“So,” Minkah said softly, “that is the story of how the clay-born came to live in a cave in Africa.” Minkah was the first to speak thoughts since the clay-born began its meditative journey after it sat upon the huge meteorite. Minkah, Damu and I were still telepathically linked and channeling our thoughts to each other.

“Yes, yes, yes...” I said excitedly trying to express all that was making itself clear to me. “The clay-born continued to exist, alone, for billions of years. The lagoon produced enough eels to keep it alive. At some point it found a way to leave the cave. It may have even constructed the elastic, mud-covered threshold we entered through.”

“And when it found its way out,” Minka continued, “it went looking for its family, hoping by some miracle that they survived, too. The villagers had chance encounters with It. Just like the sightings of the Yeti in Asia or Big Foot in North America. They told others about the creature, especially their children. Over time and through the generations the legend of the clay man came into existence.”

“Something is happening,” Damu said. His telepathic voice was faint. “I think we’re headed back, now.”

Damu was correct. I experienced another spinning sensation, only this time, the motion was clockwise and I was being thrust forward. In an instant, I flickered through ancient space. I visualized Earth’s development from rock to forest to jungle. I witnessed the age of dinosaurs and their terrible demise, fathomed the nativity of human civilization with its wars and its progress. I floated in my mother’s womb, experienced my birth, re-lived my childhood and grew into a man. I saw myself studying, teaching and finally, when the spinning stopped, I was once more trapped in the clay cocoon, aching to be free. More than four billion years have flashed before me and now I’ve returned to real time.

I could not speak because eel tissue filled my mouth. The clay-born rose from its Buddha pose, its movements sluggish, its energy drained I guessed by its meditative state. I was aware of the lagoon and the cave surroundings. I reached for Minkah and Damu, but they were no longer in my head—the telepathic, psychic connection was broken.

What now?

The clay-born approached the clay pods containing Minkah, Damu and me. Our eyes were the only portions of our bodies not covered in clay. The clay-born came very close to me. It peered directly into my eyes. The creature's flat, eel-like gaze sparked with intelligence. The creature turned from me and moved toward Damu. Then last, it turned to Minkah.

Since I could not turn my head, I could not clearly see what the clay-born was doing, but I caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of my eye, then nothing for quite some time. I guessed that the clay-born had moved the clay sarcophagus that held Minkah.

Once again, suddenly, the clay-born confronted me. I could do nothing—neither speak nor react. Abruptly turning from me, the clay-born moved again toward Damu. I heard a muffled scream. A moment later the clay-born appeared in front of me with a clay cocoon lifted above its bulbous head. Its arms heaved and the cocoon splashed into the briny lagoon. The surface of the water fizzed from the rapidly dissolving clay. I could see Damu, now free of his clay imprisonment, his head bobbing barely above the surface, his arms swinging crazily as he struggled to stay afloat.

Next the creature lifted my cocoon and pitched it into the lagoon. The clay encasing my body began to dissolve on contact with the hot sulfuric waters. I flailed, flinging melting clay from my limbs. Soon, I was almost free. I tried to keep my wits about me, but I admit panic set in.

I floundered in a half-circle toward Damu in time to see a group of vicious electric eels close in around him. The lagoon became a spasm of voltage. I felt electric shocks, but Damu was the focus of the

seething, biting eel attack. They feverishly bit into his flesh, severely wounding him. The yellow green surface of the lagoon splashed with bright red stains.

Finally free of the clay, I swam toward Damu, grabbed his groping hand and pulled him with me toward the dry embankment. I shuddered as several eels brushed against my legs and stunned me with electric charges. Damu was the one who was clearly in trouble at that maddening moment. The eels were all over him, biting him and shocking him numerous times. I pulled myself from the gurgling lagoon. Struggling with my waning strength to pull him free and lay him down on the edge of the pool.

Most of the flesh on his legs was gone. The eels had tried to eat him alive. Miraculously, he was still conscious, but only barely. I looked into his pleading eyes. He could not speak but I knew he wanted me to let him go. He was ready to face his death, but I could not let him go. He was bleeding profusely. His eyelids fluttered, and he lost consciousness.

From the other side of the lagoon I heard Minkah's muffled screams. I quickly turned and saw the clay-born hoisting her over its rounded shoulder. The clay-born, busying itself with Minkah, paid scant attention to what happened in the lagoon. The creature had not noticed that I'd escaped the eels and pulled Damu's partially eaten body out of harm's way.

It is amazing what shock and adrenaline will do to the human mind. I was able to think with extraordinary clarity. I knew the clay-born's purpose—it wanted to take Minkah as its new companion, to keep her sheathed in clay so that it might start a new family.

Driven by eons and eons of loneliness, it was reacting to her feminine essence. Its romantic urges were stirred. I could not let the clay-born have Minkah. I truly loved her. It was now a case of the survival of the fittest. I knew what the clay-born would do. It would act upon its primordial instincts. And—I would act upon mine.

I knew I could not win a physical fight against the bigger, more powerful creature. But I had to

do something.

Now free of my clay coating, I realized I was naked. I vaguely remembered my clothes being ripped off. So were Damu's and Minkah's. The clay-born had removed our clothes so we would be better conduits for our telepathic journey.

Guessing I had only a few moments while the clay-born was distracted, I looked around the cavern. I saw my clothes lying in a shredded heap, along with Damu's. Moving carefully, so as not to draw attention to myself, I searched through the pile of rags and found my trousers. The pockets were intact. I withdrew the two iron ore pebbles I'd collected from the mountain alcove where we'd spent the night.

My Boy Scout training had taught me how to use stones as flints to spark a fire. I found some dry paper tissue in one of Damu's shirt pockets and made a fuse. Rubbing the two rocks together, I produced a succession of sparks. The sparks set the tissue on fire. I added scraps of our torn clothing to build up the fire.

Still on the other side of the lagoon, the clay-born placed Minkah's clay-covered body upright against the cavern wall and turned toward me. A moment later it started toward me. A shiver of dread went through me at its ambling, unwieldy march toward me.

Quickly, I broke one of the long sulfur sickles free of the cavern ceiling and wrapped one end with strips of cloth. I set my makeshift torch on fire and brandished in front of me. Still a good distance away, the clay-born drew back.

I'd remembered that during the fiery meteor storm, the clay-born had sought shelter—the creature was as afraid of fire just as it feared being immersed in water. It took another step back, hesitating at the sight of the burning torch.

I had to get to Minkah but the clay-born blocked the way. I did not falter. Giving my most fierce

warrior yell, I ran toward the creature, waving my crude torch.

The clay-born turned and lumbered away as fast as it could, well past the spot where it had left Minkah's clay cocoon. I chased the creature until I'd backed it against the far cavern wall. I had the advantage because it feared the fire, which burned and glowed with unruly ferocity. I realized then that the torch had burned through the cloth wrapping and the substance in the sulfur sickle fueled its blaze.

It was my luck—and the clay-born's doom—that the cave walls were mostly composed of sulfur, the primary component of matches. I recognized that, with the tons and tons of sulfur in the cavern walls and floor, combined with the sulfuric liquid in the lagoon, if I didn't douse the torch, the entire mountain top could soon explode like a colossal firecracker soaked in kerosene.

I laid the burning sulfur torch on the cavern floor and a wall of fire arose, instantly. The clay-born was stuck on the opposite side of the flaming partition. It would not dare breach the blazing barrier.

I raced back to Minkah, lifted her clay cocoon, and dragged her around the lagoon to where I'd left poor Damu. I had to free her from clay, but the only thing that would rapidly remove it was complete submersion into the sulfuric brine of the lagoon. Considering what the eels had done to Damu that would be tricky at best.

But how could I dip Minkah into the lagoon without subjecting her to the onslaught of vicious eels?

Almost as if on cue, Damu regained consciousness. He pushed up on one arm and saw me wrestling Minkah's cocoon. He gave a blood-curdling scream and, with all of his remaining strength, flipped his nearly half-eaten body into the chaotic pond. Instantly, the eels overwhelmed him.

A thought hit me like a spike in the heart. Damu was offering himself as a sacrifice. He was giving his life to distract the eels so I could free Minkah.

I lifted and lowered Minkah's cocoon into the hot liquid sulfur water. She struggled and began to moan but I refused to let her go. The clay coating was beginning to dissolve.

"Only a few more moments, Minkah," I whispered. "Please hold on."

She responded by arching in my grasp and shaking free of her remaining clay confinement—and not a moment too soon.

The voracious eels had finished with Damu and were moving in a piranha-like pack toward Minkah's kicking legs. I pulled her out just in time. The eels darted and swirled; not yet realizing their prey had escaped.

"We have no time, Minkah. I pulled her up and steadied her on her feet. "We've got to get out of here."

I clasped her hand and we ran like hell toward the soft, muddy membrane in the cavern wall. As we rounded the lagoon, I could see the clay-born. It was furious, heaving itself from side to side, forward and back, looking for a way through the flames. Just as I pushed Minkah ahead of me through the membrane, the clay-born hurled itself at the wall of flames.

I pushed Minkah through the membrane of mud and eagerly followed her to the other side. My last image of the cavern was seeing the clay-born stumbling crazily toward us, its sulfur and clay flesh engulfed in flames.

Minkah and I escaped the fissure and fled down the slope of the mountain. Naked, but driven by the urge to survive, we ran for our lives, happy to be alive, impervious to the frigid air, unaffected by the rocky terrain.

When the mountain blew, as I knew it would, the concussion knocked us to our knees. The pulverized top of Mount Margherita lit up the sky like a giant Roman candle, but we'd descended far

enough to be safe.

There was no lava flow and only a slight plume of ash rose from the volcano's cone. The sulfur fire sparked a minor volcanic eruption that was not volatile enough to endanger the natives living in the villages clustered throughout the foothills, but the blast vaporized the clay-born's ancient lair, a conflagration that the creature could not survive.

Several hours later Minkah and I stumbled into the same village where Minkah's father had once startled the natives who thought he was the ancient mud man. We were naked, unashamed and grateful to be alive. We had just returned from the moment of creation and we'd found safety in Africa's garden of human origin.

I felt like we were Adam and Eve.

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JIGGS AND OTHER STORIES

By

Vondell Jones

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Abstract

Jiggs and Other Stories represent a diverse sampling of my work as a University of New Mexico graduate student and a writer of fiction. The works presented here are a pastiche of genres that include magical realism, tragedy, absurdist fiction, and fantasy and adventure. Beyond those significant categories, however, these stories are the product of my imagination. The power of fiction itself—I'd like to believe—depends upon the capacities of the mind. When knowledge, experience, restless imagination and bold creativity are combined—good fiction supersedes the boundaries of literary categorization.

My intention, in part, is to have these stories serve as an homage to many of my preferred authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Carson McCullers, John O'Hara and other American writers as well as a panoply of African, British, Irish, French, German and Russian novelists, short story writers and playwrights.

The collection is prefaced by an introduction intended to give a full sense of what kind of enrichment these stories hope to achieve. Each story is summarized and examined to present an overview of the theory and the craft that defines it.

* * *

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My sincere thanks go to University of New Mexico's (UNM) entire English Department faculty, with special thanks to professors Jerome Shea, Julie Shigekuni, Dan Mueller, Marissa Greenberg, and Sharon O. Warner. These educators have had a noticeable and lasting impact on my writing as well as my desire to write. The guidance I've received at UNM has elevated my writing. I've benefited from courses such as professor Shea's *Writing with Tropes* and *Stylistics Analysis* classes in which I was introduced to rhetorical techniques designed to improve style and clarity of thought. Creative writing workshops and one-on-one sessions with professors Shigekuni and Mueller have given me a wider perspective of my own work as well as for the work of other writers. Professor Warner's instructive novella class taught me how to apply effective principles regarding character development and plot structure. Under this guidance, I now better understand the craft and forensics of writing. My UNM experience has given me confidence and increased my desire to write and enhanced my ability. Part of my motivation to write will be to justify the gifts given to me by so many UNM professionals.

● * *

Preface

Jiggs

The title story, *Jiggs*, is a novella that was composed prior to my enrollment at UNM in 2010. However, *Jiggs* has benefited from a very special graduate creative writing workshop taught by Professor Julie Shigekuni, where ideas such as ethos, pathos and dénouement were thoroughly discussed.

Jiggs' storyline speaks to American racism from the historical perspective of the modern civil rights movement. The novella blends some of the methods used by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), two celebrated writers known for using magical realism as a dominant literary mode in their novels. My novella replicates the form and content of magical realism. Magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. Such are the elements found in my novella.

"Jiggs" is set in 1955. A seventeen-year-old African American girl is murdered in the normally sleepy, rural Village of Stone's Throw, NY, a community settled by African Americans fleeing Southern oppression, hatred and bigotry. The novella's protagonist, "Cockeyed Bill" is the village sheriff who is both gentle and strong; he is down-to-earth yet worldly, easy-going but nonetheless complex. Cockeyed Bill must solve the crime amid powerful resistance from institutionalized and colloquial racial intolerance. When the black sheriff puts several white derelicts into custody, events heighten to a harrowing pitch, threatening his family and testing his legal authority.

Stone's Throw villagers and surrounding communities of white farmers are riled over the murder and the arrests; state troopers and young African American ruffians exacerbate the conflict. All the while, our narrator, the sheriff's son, 11-year-old Billy Brewer is struggling to comprehend and cope with hard realities such as death (including his mother's death some years before) and racism. The story ends transcendently when the white men thought to have committed the murder actually are the ones who solve the crime by exhibiting unearthly power that connotes an otherworldly intervention, thereby invoking my

use of magical realism as a storytelling mechanism.

Jiggs is more than just a *Twilight Zone*-type murder mystery. Its ethos is meant to capture a moment in time by pointing a finger toward one of the most heinous crimes in American history: The murder of Emmett Till, an African American teenager who was slain horrifically in Mississippi in 1955. The story is not about that specific crime but draws from the tumultuous national pre-civil rights zeitgeist that arose from it. *Jiggs* presents a morality tale that pierces the heart of verisimilitude and its pathos is applied using the techniques found in magical realism.

In his article on “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction,” writer and literary critic Angel Flores chronicles 1935 as marking the literary birth of magical realism, a term originally conceived to describe visual art. Flores credits the works of Argentine, Cuban, and Mexican writers as having advanced magical realism as an efficacious literary approach that is being more commonly used by American writers.

A significant symbol of magic realism is apparent when a character in the story continues to be alive beyond the normal length of life. On the surface, however, the story has no clear magical attributes. To convey an aura of realism, the author may give precise details of the real world such as the date of birth of a reference character or the army recruitment age, but such facts belie the notions of abnormal occurrences like someone living for two hundred years.

Throughout my story, the men who are suspected of committing the murder in Stone’s Throw are actually ghosts who appear as wandering transients addicted to rot-gut wine. They appear in real time as seemingly lost souls, downtrodden, throwaway human beings. In actuality, they represent powerful forces from the cosmos. In literary terms, they are character conventions of *prosopographia*, a rhetorical trope introduced to me in Professor Shea’s English 520 classes. In his textbook, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, Richard Lanham defines the trope as “...a type of Enargia, which vividly describes the appearance of a person, imaginary or real, quick or dead. Real but dead...” (Lanham 122).

It seems to me that the term “magical realism” is broadly descriptive rather than critically rigorous. In other words, magical realism is a genre where magic elements are a natural part in an otherwise realistic environment. Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* is one of the models I’ve consciously drawn from to shape my novella. She uses magic, folktales, and the supernatural in her novel as a way to suggest that life is often cryptic, inexplicable, spooky and spiritual.

In *Jiggs* the magical realism effect is enhanced by the mysterious emergence of numerous bottles of cheap wine that seemingly come from nowhere. This puzzling aspect bedevils the sheriff whose efforts to confiscate the alcohol from his wino detainees are constantly frustrated because when he thinks he’s seized it all, more bottles of wine show up. The highlighting of continually replenished wine is a literary device endemic to the tenets of magical realism. It’s a bizarre effect devoid of clear magical attributes because everything is conveyed in real time. The character, Cockeyed Bill, along with the readers, expects that a rational explanation for the unending bottles of wine will be provided. Eventually, however, we realize the rules of our real world rules have been broken and our sensibilities have been invaded by something enigmatic and queer.

Also germane to this discussion of magical realism and its use in my novella is the significant role of community, a feature that theoreticians believe is inherent in the genre. “Magic is communal,” writes Wendy B. Faris in her book, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (183).

“Magic realist texts may encode the strengths of communities even more than the struggle of individuals. Societies, rather than personalities, tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction” (10). Throughout their experience, she says, black people responded to the cruelty of the modern world not only as individuals but also collectively. Despite the slaveholders’ efforts to separate people of similar lineage in order to prevent communication that could lead to rebellion, a spirit of resistance rose, fostering a sense of black community. Faris’ explanation connecting the symbolism of magical realism to the camaraderie of community is endemic to my portrayal of the fictional Village of Stone’s Throw, where its

African American residents share common faiths and taboos.

In an interview from *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, by Danille Taylor-Guthrie, Morrison states:

“...no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it, because they are afraid of it – which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four The collective sharing of that information heals the individual – and the collective (248).

In *Jiggs*, the residents of Stone’s Throw strengthen their bonds because one of their own was killed and it was thought that white outsiders committed the crime. My novella, however, includes a slice of postcolonial irony when it is eventually learned that it was African American teenagers who killed the girl, not the white suspects. This paradox converges on theories of racism-induced self-hatred, rebellion turned inward, the loss of identity and the posttraumatic stress created by horrific hegemony. While the memories and sharing of traumatic experiences also bond human spirits (slavery for instance), they also can foster anomalous, difficult to explain behavior and aberrant psychological manifestations. In *Jiggs*, the fact that the killers are African Americans becomes moot because the magical reality of the ghosts and the ascending apparitions bring the question of murder and conflict into a higher level of scrutiny.

My narrative crafting in *Jiggs* is influenced by “African American oral culture and mythology adapted from the piquant, black language-based storytelling of techniques of Zora Neale Hurston. Using the lessons I’ve learned from reading Hurston, my novella uses African American syntax to enhance the telling of a regrettably common American saga. The African American residents of Stone’s Throw, who had migrated to the North, brought their black Southern brogue with them. For example when one of my characters hears that the African

American sheriff has taken a white man into custody, someone in the crowd says that "...sho' do make a difference." "It sho' do," Old Man Henry replies. "It sho' do."

On occasions when it seems appropriate, I try to re-create African American dialect the way Hurston does in her 1937 publication, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her classic novel that celebrates the rural, southern African-American experience of the twentieth century, Hurston skillfully uses "black-speak" expressions such as "dees (these), dems (them), and dos (those)" to construct lyrical, poetic dialogue that adds beauty, innuendo, and impact to her groundbreaking story.

It is my intent and desire that with the use of magical realism and the tone of authentic colloquial dialogue, and the alluding to inner turmoil caused by postcolonial racism, Jiggs will help lift the veil on a the debilitating issue of historical racial animus that keeps America churning in a vicious cycle of mistrust and animosity.

* * *

The White Lie

"The White Lie" is a short story that applies the storytelling techniques found in the tragic tradition, a literary invention born in the roots of Oedipusan and Dionysian tragedies. The story employs many of the classical tropes and idiomatic strategies found in the doctrines of revenge tragedy, a rhetorical format that justifies all manner of theatrical horror in which the rich and powerful are compelled to act out agonized, gruesome fates. The formula for the "The White Lie" was devised with help from concepts found in John Kerrigan's book, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. The story was written to fulfill the requirements of a UNM English 587 course. Professor Marissa Greenberg instructed the course which explored the craft of writing tragedy.

My short story tells the saga of a modern day family that is ultimately destroyed by a 150-year-old curse. The story of how the Hampton family falls from the pedestal of pomp and privilege is ingrained in the aesthetic theories of Greek and Elizabethan drama, where anger-induced curses often forecast future doom.

Greg and Janet Hampton are heirs to the fortunes amassed by an ancestry that accumulated enormous wealth from the wages of sin, dishonesty, exploitation, corruption and fraud. The money that buys them exclusivity and societal favor is tainted with a simmering curse that has smoldered for seven generations. The Hamptons' story is a fatal kismet that spells the brutal termination of a family's lineage.

To better understand how the Hamptons are damned for all time, one must travel back to the year 1859 and consider a string of precious pearls that will become a family heirloom. The pearls serve as the talisman for a revenge curse placed upon the unborn family members of slave trader, Hiram Hampton, who sired two sons by one of his African concubines. When Hiram wants to purchase the rare pearls as a wedding gift for the vain and pampered Southern belle he's chosen to become his legitimate bride, he trades the two boys he's fathered with his African mistress, Hannah, in return for the coveted gems. The man to whom Hiram sells his own miscegenational flesh and blood is a notoriously wicked slaveholder with a reputation for sadistic cruelty. When the boys try to escape from him, he ruthlessly tortures them until they die. Grieving and crazed with hatred for Hiram, Hanna steals the pearls and hexes them with an evil curse that will take more than one hundred years to ratify. Hiram recovers the pearls and mercilessly kills Hanna in a fit of fuming retribution. The family pearls are passed down from generation to generation. In the year of our Lord, 2007, the ancient curse unravels when Janet Hampton tells her five-year-old daughter what she considers to be a harmless "white lie" about a part of her baby brother's anatomy. That "innocent" lie causes a chain reaction of events that lead to fratricide, accidental filicide, and double suicide, thereby eliminating all chances of sanguineous continuity for the Hamptons. Hanna's ancient curse has come to fruition. It is then and only then that the ferocious Dionysian prophecy of vengeance comes full circle, bringing a gory end to the Hampton family bloodline.

The genre of tragedy is rooted in the Greek dramas of Aeschylus (525-456 B.C., e.g. the *Oresteia* and *Prometheus Bound*), Euripides (ca. 480?-405 B.C., e.g. *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*) and Sophocles (496-406 B.C., e.g. *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*). I contend that there is a strong association between my short story and the antiquated tenets of Greek tragedy. “The White Lie” skillfully uses the pathos of argumentum ad odium (appeal to hatred and revenge) to render a gripping short story, told in the manner of the classic tragedy with its inevitable payoff of ruin, remorse and bloody death. But the most obvious influence that traces *The White Lie* to the tragic tradition can be seen in the techniques found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Aristotle’s influence on the lore of plot within short fiction theory has affected creative writing in general. I’ve chosen to discuss only how Aristotle’s *Poetics* (2011) has impacted the way that plot is defined within *The White Lie*.

Sometimes Aristotle talks about plot and tragedy as if they are different, but mostly, he addresses them as if they are the same. For example, Aristotle states, ‘tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality’ (12). A few pages later, Aristotle writes, ‘the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that as a whole, the structured union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed’ (15).

I take these somewhat differing definitions to mean Aristotle did not see tragedy as belonging to a monolithic dogma that spells doom only because of the evils of one individual character. The great thinker understood that the drama of tragedy’s cause and effect might come about simply out the action or events of a plot construction over which the characters have no control. In my story the omen of tragedy is introduced by the evil of one man, Hiram Hampton. But the bloody deus ex machina of the plot feeds the ensuing ugly revenge on Hiram’s descendants.

According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, classical tragedy involves a protagonist of high estate (“better

than we") who falls from prosperity to misery through a series of reversals and discoveries as a result of a "tragic flaw," generally an error caused by human frailty. In *The White Lie* greed is the tragic flaw

The White Lie depicts dog-eat-dog characters caught in a culture of greed that extends through multiple generations. For Aristotle, the downfall of an evil protagonist is not tragic (Shakespeare's Macbeth would not qualify nor would Hiram Hampton, the morally corrupt slave trader I write about in *The White Lie*). But what my story has most in common with Aristotelian tragedy is that it evokes pity and fear in the audience, leading finally to catharsis (the purgation of these passions).

In my story, Hanna is the underdog acting out her hatred for her oppressor by casting a curse on his family that takes more than one hundred fifty years to fully execute. Hanna—Hiram's enslaved concubine—calls on both God and Satan to help her obtain justice from the unspeakable treachery and ghastly abuse of a cruel slave owner who sold their two sons for the price of a string of pearls and tortured her with a horrible, awful, painful death at his brutal whipping post.

The key to crafting this story lies in the meaning and purpose of "revenge!" Dark, raw, violent and profound torture sets the stage for "The White Lie." It is a brutal and callous tale of torment transferred, of anguish and retribution, of myth and black magic, of ominous omens, cursed oaths and spiritual resurrection. Hanna will have her revenge against Hiram Hampton and as her story unfolds we see that its premise is built upon the foundations of a dramatic tradition of tragedy that was invented in ancient Greece.

I am aware that the main characters I create in *The White Lie* are archetypes, clichés. Both master and slave, twisted into inhuman objects of hatred and revenge by a destructive system of domination and submission that continues to drive our nation crazy. I admit that the archetypes of Hanna and Hiram are obvious, convenient inventions fashioned to carry out my intention to use tragedy as a social critique.

Tragedy is commonly thought of as a tool for making political statements. One of the under appreciated aesthetic aspects of the ancient genre is its ability to craft powerful social messages. Circa

414 – 412 BC, Greek tragedian Euripides wrote a tragedy titled, *Ion*, in which he railed against Greek society's ambivalence toward illegitimate births and its treatment of orphans. With *The White Lie*, it is my intent to establish an opportunity to torch truths about the metaphysical and moral battle between good and evil, a contemptible clash in which black folks lose their dignity and white folks lose their souls.

The White Lie is a harsh indictment of America's racialized fabric. It is a horror story that howls like wild dogs crying out in the night, a suitable metaphor for a tale that mimics a literary genre designed to illustrate the voracious human thirst for bloody revenge.

* * *

The Town of Insanity

“The Town of Insanity” is a fictional account that uses absurdist literary theory to tell the tale about a small Mormon community in Utah that is visited by a massive rain cloud from outer space. The cosmic cloud travelled billions of miles from the farthest regions of the galaxy; its misty extraterrestrial vapor acts like a super potent aerosol aphrodisiac. All Earthly matter—cats, dogs, birds, insects and even an inanimate object—that comes in contact with the infectious substance are thrown into bizarre, salacious behaviors where they must perform uninhibited, out-of-control, non-stop public sexual intercourse.

After being exposed to the cloud's red rain, a dowdy schoolmarm and an uncouth garbage collector—who meet after being involved in a minor traffic accident—fornicate compulsively because they've been drenched with the outer space love juice. A middle aged bachelor and an escaped kangaroo are attracted to each other and are then compelled to commit deviant sexual acts that ultimately result in the birth of an offspring that is half human, half kangaroo. The coupling of the man and the animal and their bestial, sexual activity inspires onlookers to join in a public orgy in the town's cemetery. In an

excess of total and absolute absurdity, the story creates a scenario in which a 500-pound bronze statue of Mormon leader Brigham Young miraculously comes to life and snatches a homeless woman from the park and runs off into the woods with her. All who are touched by the cloud's red rain are forced to involuntarily participate in an outrageous concupiscent bacchanalia of sexual revelry.

It turns out that the cloud is made up of intelligent beings the size of microscopic particles that have visited our planet specifically to play a prank on Earthlings.

“The Town of Insanity” is written to serve as a humorous, absurdist metaphor for religious hypocrisy and pretentious social sanctimony. The story is greatly influenced by works by authors such as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. I consider the story to be part metafiction (Romantic Irony) and part philosophy of nonsense.

Thematically, this story focuses on creating an improbable but not necessarily impossible scenario depicting what Albert Camus termed as “individual metaphysical and historical rebellion” in the face of the absurdity of human existence. Camus was a twentieth century writer, philosopher and human rights activist. His important contribution to philosophy was his conception of the absurd, the paradigm of bizarre hypothetical logic, which he saw as the ultimate expression of human desire for clarity and meaning within a world that offers neither. *The Town of Insanity* presents my cockeyed point of view of man's obliviousness about the speck of universe he occupies.

I find the scope of the absurdist genre appealing because it permits wild conjectures that extend the definitions of the conventional world. My story allowed me to disrobe the rituals of human behavior. Absurdism sanctioned my urge to treat the most serious of social covenants with silliness and vulgarity. In my story, the discarding of clothing, the release of sexual restraint and uninhibited passion become the butts of the jokes that the universe plays on man's hubris and his need to feel private and emotionally sequestered. From the time I first read Camus' *The Stranger*, I've been drawn to absurdist writing. Camus' story is about a man whose apathy toward existence is so pronounced that he commits a senseless

crime for which he is given a death sentence. His ambivalence toward life is so profound that he never appeals for mercy and he looks upon death as a continuance of life's unsolvable, existential puzzle. In other words, Camus' character just flows along with the impersonal force of nature while absurdly flawed human evaluations impeach his sense of self-worth to the extent that he becomes emotionally mute.

In my story, the absurdity begins when an extraterrestrial cloud invades a small town, catapulting its residents into acts of wild sexual abandon. Or, perhaps, my story insinuates that the absurdity is already present before the alien invasion of the Utah town. Are we not already occupying a world that's gone totally, insanely absurd? Think of the wars, the murders, the greed, the child abuse, the hunger, the poverty, and the religious hypocrisy that define human existence on this planet. And yet, do we not live in "...the best of all possible worlds," as Voltaire's Dr. Panglos from *Candide* would have us believe?

There are many opinions on what constitutes absurdism, but I believe Camus writings are a field guide to the art of absurdity.

Aside from attempting to entertain, what is the purpose of telling a story about people being drugged by an alien cloud and fornicating until they lose their minds? For me the real question is: Why does every story have to have a purpose when real life doesn't always provide tidily summarized conclusions? Is it because we think that man's rasion d'etre is to always search for meaning?

The absurdist genre has pricked audiences with the productions of plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna*. For instance, in writing *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett did not intend to tell a story. He did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with not doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend. *The Town of Insanity* demands the same kind of blind observation.

"When the plays of Ionesco and Beckett first appeared on the stage they puzzled and outraged most critics as well as audiences," writes Martin Esslin in his book, *Absurd Drama*.

“And no wonder,” he continues. “These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play.”

I submit that my story, *The Town of Insanity* (while not a play) seeks a similar outcome as do the works of Beckett, Ionesco and other writers of absurdist art. My story allows readers to react and to think as they will. It is a story intended to provoke readers’ moral convictions yet offers little or no justification. Furthermore, I assert that my absurdist story follows the historical and aesthetic objectives of storytelling.

In his book, Esslin—who was an award winning playwright and Stanford University professor—discusses how absurdist art is a direct offspring of classic literature.

“Yet, however contemporary the Theatre of the Absurd may appear it is by no means the revolutionary novelty as which some of its champions, as well as some of its bitterest critics, tend to represent it.” Esslin writes that absurdist art can best be understood as a new combination of a number of ancient, even archaic, traditions of literature and drama.”

I see the absurdist genre as a composite fused with the tradition of miming and clowning that goes back to the *mimus* of Greece and Rome, the *commedia dell' arte* of Renaissance Italy, and such popular forms of theatre as the pantomime or the bawdy music-halls in Britain.

It is against this background that I ask readers to view my work on *The Town of Insanity*. The story presents an outrageous set of circumstances. It mocks sexual acts by presenting unlikely comedic couplings between a school marm and a garbage collector, a mamma’s boy bachelor and a kangaroo, and a statue and a homeless woman. Even dogs, cats, birds and insects revel in whacky sexual recitals as if mindless copulation is the legitimate answer to life’s riddle.

The Town of Insanity has clear links to the nonsense literature of Lewis Carroll (*Alice in Wonderland*) and Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*). The

use of neology bending portmanteaus like “undulates asperatus” and “manbit” contribute to the koo-koo atmosphere of the story. It is an outrageous story that asks the reader to be outrageous, too. A bronze statue comes alive and is driven by the need to copulate ridiculously. That is absurd and that is the point.

Nonsense literature is a subgenre to absurdity and elements of it are apparent in my story. Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot*. The action of *Godot* centers around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait but who never arrives.

Absurdist plots may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change, or shift in the laws of physics. For example, in Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, a couple must deal with a corpse that is steadily growing larger and larger; Ionesco never fully reveals the identity of the corpse, how this person died, or why it's continually growing, but the corpse ultimately – and, again, without explanation – floats away.

All types of characters can inhabit the world of absurdity. In my story, I've used a half-human and half-animal character that takes the story into the realm of ancient Greek mythology where centaurs and mermaids were common in folktales. Joey—half human, half kangaroo—is another absurdity that sprouts from the story.

Given the idiosyncratic definitions of absurdist plots, the events in *The Town of Insanity* make sense or non-sense as the case may be. As an author, I have no worry whether I've created a piece of weird fiction or an example of profound absurdist literature. It is not a story but a lemon squeezer for squashing noise out of the brain. It is a story engineered to make readers gag on a spoon, come unhinged and laugh and laugh and laugh.

* * *

The Clay-born

The Clay-born is my final selection. This short story straddles some of the dividing lines between fantasy, science fiction and adventure. It is a story about a team of scientists searching for a primordial life form that was thought to exist billions of years ago, in the predawn of Earth's tumultuous birth.

The Clay-born is a new kind of fiction story that employs a subtext of anthropological underpinnings to weave a tale that defies today's overdone, tired, paternalistic hero/heroine racial stereotypes so commonly found in Western literature.

The Clay-born tells the story of how Yale University geologist Thor Tillman is recruited to embark on an improbable expedition to East Africa to search for an incredible living specimen known as the Clay-born, rumored among African natives as the spooky mud-man who is the subject of periodic sightings that inspire lore and legend in much the same way Big Foot has captured the imagination of Western civilization. The Clay-born is a pre-historic life form that emerged from the swarming protoplasmic goop that gave birth to all life during Earth's tumultuous, eruptive formation more than 4.5 billion years ago.

Tillman joins with the granddaughter of Sir Robert Hest, a renowned anthropologist who is too old and too feeble to undergo the African expedition; so he sends Minkah, the daughter of his son-in-law, also a famed anthropologist, who was killed by the Clay-born. Despite a chilly beginning, Minkah and Thor eventually fall in love during an adventure that zooms them back to the natal time of our planet and forces them to endure a series of harrowing, life-threatening events.

This unique story presents a new, refreshing allegory about the origins of life on Earth. It is a provocative sci-fi/fantasy/adventure that stimulates curiosity about how life on Earth began.

I believe there is an audience thirsting for stories that portray characters that don't always conform to the typical "white protagonists" who generally rush in to save the naive, people-of-color from danger and extinction. Additionally, this story contains educational messages about geology and anthropology.

Inspired by Sci-Fi/fantasy writers, Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of the *Tarzan* and *John Carter* stories

and *Journey to the Center of The Earth* author Jules Vern, *The Clay-born* follows the rules of fantasy/adventure story writing. *The Clay-born*'s craft elements are:

- It is set within an imaginary world
- It uses real or imagined scientific language and/or technology
- It has characters that travel between realistic and make-believe settings
- It has an adventure-oriented plotline
- It involves a grand struggle against supernatural or evil forces
- It has scientists-as-hero protagonists

Of course, story elements are not enough. As with all worthwhile stories, a strong plot, fascinating characters and engrossing setting is needed.

Theoretically, *The Clay-born* holds to the guidelines that connote fantasy/adventure storytelling. It re-imagines the past, taking its characters and its readers back in time by bending pseudo scientific jargon into fantastic episodes of suspension of disbelief. Its stock cast of archetype characters includes a trio of brainy Renaissance scientists who are as brave as they are bright. The plot involves challenges from a unique creature and there is danger, death and romance.

The Clay-born's only objective is to entertain. I think it accomplishes that goal by adhering to the classic default settings required of fantasy and adventure stories.

Last Thoughts

I think it is absolutely essential that a writer understand that “stories” are the ambrosia of humankind. Stories, with their blends of sweet and sour, sweat and blood, drive the human psyche and find their place just above food, shelter, clothing and love on the hierarchy of needs. I believe in storytelling. I believe the stories in this collection aspire to the best of the tradition.

JIGGS

CHAPTER ONE

The day after Sheila Shepard was found floating face down in the Hudson River, Old Lady Bailey discovered Jiggs hiding under her front porch.

"I smelled 'im before I heard 'im. And I heard 'im before I saw 'im. And when I saw 'im, I said, 'Lordy, Lordy, what have You done to this poor man?'"

It was 1955 and Old Lady Bailey, a bony, sinewy spinster who'd already lived nearly 75 years, had a reputation in the Village of Stone's Throw, New York. It was widely known among the nearly eight hundred souls who lived there that she kept her double-barreled shotgun loaded and leaning against the wall next to the front door. And most folks knew that, even though she was a poor aim, she'd shoot at a trespasser just as quick as she could say, "Amen."

But miracles do happen. She didn't shoot at Jiggs that day and for the rest of her years, Old Lady Bailey was fond of recalling how she felt when she discovered him.

"I took pity on 'im. I don't know what it was about 'im. I just felt bad for the man," she'd say. "First thing that hit me was the stench. Cheap wine. Putrid Muscatel mingling with puke, old sweat, sickness and God knows what.

"Child! Child! Child!" she'd exclaim. "The odor was so rank and rotten, you could almost see it rising up around the edges of the planks in the porch. The poor man. Old Man Anderson's got pigs that smell better'n that."

Invariably, before she could tell the next part of the story, Old Lady Bailey would hesitate, swallow hard like she was trying to get her breath, fan her face with one hand, widen her eyes and

whisper in a conspiratorial tone.

"Then there was this low moan, like somebody wailing, only deep down and far away. But I played it cool. I went out to the yard and started fooling with my flowers. You know I love my flowers.

"I bent over and made like I was picking weeds and snails out of my garden. And just like never you mind, I looked up under the porch where it was dark and damp.

"And there he was... curled up in a ball like a baby not born, shivering and shaking, and holding his knees up against his chest. And I said, 'Lordy, Lordy, what have You done to this poor man?'

"Shoo! Normally, I don't play around with no old tramps, hiding under my porch. Hell, I could'a shot 'im with my gun an' been within my rights."

"But I ain't no fool, now. I knew they'd found that Shepard girl stabbed, choked and dead, floating in the river. So, I just moseyed back in the house, like nothing was wrong and I got right on the telephone and called Cockeyed Bill."

Cockeyed Bill was my father and the Sheriff of Stone's Throw. He was awarded his nickname because his eyes were crossed, a congenital condition that he passed on to my sister, Edna, and me. He earned his job as sheriff because he was the toughest man in the village. Everybody knew that you'd "rue the day you messed with Cockeyed Bill."

When I was a child, Stone's Throw was a sleepy village nestled inconspicuously in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, where the mighty Hudson River slithered through the verdant valley like a gigantic water snake, brown and green, twisting and flowing. The settlement got its name because, many, many years before, the diaspora of freed African slaves who migrated North would describe its location by saying it was just a "stone's throw" from the river.

When I lived in Stone's Throw, there wasn't much to the village, just four paved streets, a

network of dirt roads and clusters of shingled shacks clinging to a tree-lined slope on the river's west bank.

Most of the village men worked for Adirondack Railway, the sprawling railroad system that served a 1,200-mile region of upstate New York. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, black laborers had helped build the railroad. Once it was constructed, they stayed on to work for the company as porters, conductors, and train engineers. Several generations later, the railroad still provided the primary source of income for Stone's Throw residents. Some of the village's women worked as maids and cooks in the wealthy white households scattered on the edges of Albany. Each weekday, before sunrise, dozens of women, young, middle-aged and old, gathered at the end of the platform, boarded the caboose and traveled the twenty-five miles or so to, as they put it: "Clean white folks' houses, cook white folks' food, and raise white folks' children." They were strong, spirited women who worked until dark before riding the caboose back to Stone's Throw. Villagers who didn't work for the railroad or for the "white folks" lived off the land.

There was a General Store in Stone's Throw that mostly served as the village's only liquor store because, aside from a few sacks of flour, sugar, and corn meal, Old Man Wicks didn't sell much of anything else.

"I keeps a stock of high brand spirits cause you know people 'round here just ain't gonna spend much money on nothin' else. They makes they own bread, grows they own string beans, collards an' potatoes. If they need milk, a chicken, eggs, bacon, chops or sump'em like 'at, they can buy it fresh from Old Man Anderson," Old Man Wicks was fond of saying.

Old Man Anderson had the biggest farm in Stone's Throw. He lived in a shack but he had two barns and nearly thirty cows, a parcel of pigs, and a yard filled with chickens. He had 12 dogs that barked all night and howled at the moon; and all summer you could hear hundreds and hundreds of bullfrogs croaking in the pond behind his shack.

"Say what you want but them frogs is good eatin'," Old man Anderson would often say. And anyone within ear shot would chant, "You right. You sho' is right."

In summer, children picked wild strawberries by the bushel; women made jam, preserves and short cake. In autumn, acres and acres of wild apple orchards, tangled grape vines, and blackberry thickets provided a bounty of fruit. In winter, there was rabbit and quail to hunt in the woods and plenty of catfish in the county reservoir all year long.

Stone's Throw had one school and one church. The school was located in a three-story, wood frame structure that served as the educational facility for all the village children, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The Mount Olivet A.M.E. Zion Baptist Church was situated in a converted horse barn. Each Sunday, the kids who were forced to go, and those adults who thought of themselves as spiritually enlightened, congregated there; they sat on hard wooden benches and shouted "Praise the Lord," as Reverend Larkin told biblical stories in sweaty, sing-song sermons that lasted upwards of three hours.

Bucolic, pastoral, rustic Stone's Throw was populated by easy, uncomplicated people who shared their surroundings with butterflies and bees, woodpeckers and hummingbirds that darted in and out of purple lilac groves. It was a place where long, lazy days ended with crimson sunsets and where the crickets clicked all night.

But that summer, when Sheila Shepard was found floating in the river and Jiggs was discovered hiding under Old Lady Bailey's front porch, Stone's Throw was the site of more commotion than anybody in those parts could remember.

* * *

My father stood in the front yard, holding his Brooklyn Dodger's baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head, when the telephone rang inside the house.

"Well, gentlemen," he was saying to the three men who had come up from Albany to question

him about the murdered girl.

“Old Doc Simone’s got her down at the funeral home. All I can tell you for sure is that we found a knife poked into her chest and dark bruises around her neck, like she was choked.”

“Are the state police in on this? How’s this thing gonna be handled?” asked one of the men. He was a huge, beefy, red-faced man.

My father didn’t answer right away. He didn’t like people questioning his authority. Slowly, he put his cap on his head so that it sat almost sideways, with the bill pointed at an angle. Using his most icy, crossed-eyed stare, he studied the man who asked the question. My father only stood five feet, five inches tall but he was broad-shouldered and muscular. He didn’t wear a uniform like most other sheriffs. He always dressed like a farmer, with heavy work boots, dungarees, and a red, plaid shirt. His highly polished badge was pinned just above his heart. His stunning complexion was as black as the berries in the woods. He looked like he was going to pounce on the questioner, who fidgeted nervously.

“Now, who are you all, again, and what is it that you all do?” my father asked with a hint of suspicion in his voice. “Tell me, again, now.”

“Well, I’m, I’m Michael Muskal, a reporter with the *Knickerbocker News*, Albany’s largest morning newspaper,” the red-faced man said, sniffing like he’d said something very important.

“Yes and I’m Brad Brannigan, Channel Six Television News in Albany,” said the second man, who was tall and wiry and wearing a brown tweed suit that made his pale, white face look like a scoop of vanilla ice cream sitting atop a giant waffle cone.

“This here is my camera man, Alan,” he continued, referring to a short, stocky, yellow-haired man holding a big, black box with a huge, telescopic lens and long wires attached to something that looked like a car battery.

In the mid-1950s, there couldn't have been more than a half-dozen television sets in Stone's Throw. My father talked about buying one but decided to wait to see if the "contraption" would catch on with the public. Besides, people in Stone's Throw generally acquired local information through the village "grapevine." As my father put it: "The gossip mill is always up and running in Stone's Throw."

"Well, suh," my father began cautiously, "to answer your question about the state police. I see this as a local matter. The girl was from around here. She was found in my jurisdiction. And folks around here don't cotton to strangers snooping and looking for bad things to say."

The big man who'd asked the question was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like he didn't know if he should stay or go, when Edna opened the screen door and yelled: "Pa, Old Lady Bailey is on the phone for you."

That evening, I joined nearly a dozen other Stone's Throw residents who gathered to watch the news on the television set in Old Miss Saunders' barbershop.

"There he is! Well, I'll be shucked. They said he was gonna be on this thing, but I never thought I'd live to see the day when one of our own would be pictured on the television," Old Miss Saunders exclaimed.

"Shhh...now. Shhh," Old Man Wicks admonished. Everyone in the room inched closer to the oval screen and peered at the black and white images of my father pulling a long-legged man out from beneath Old Lady Bailey's front porch. The newscaster's voiceover reported on the events taking place.

"Stone's Throw Sheriff Bill Brewer today arrested a man in a possible connection with the murder of Sheila Shepard, the seventeen-year-old colored girl found yesterday floating face down along the river bank near the village.

"According to the Sheriff, the man, 24-year-old, Jeffery Jiggs, is a transient who may have come to the area by hopping Adirondack Railway freight trains..."

The television watchers issued a collective gasp and Old Man Wicks said: “See, I tol’ you it was sump’em like ‘at. I said it, sho’ nuff. ‘Probably one’a them tramps comin’ through here,’ I said. ‘They gone an killed that girl.’”

“I hear there’s a whole camp a them tramps settlin’ ’round Old Pokey Pond, just a couple a miles from here,” Old Miss Saunders said.

“Cockeyed Bill ought to take a couple a boys and go on out there and clean ’em out,” she said.

“You sho’ ought a be proud of your Pa, Billy,” Old Man Henry said, rubbing my head with a big, rough hand.

“Amen to that,” Old Man Wicks said.

Just then the little bell over the barbershop door jingled and my father walked in and was greeted by a chorus of “Howdy do, Cockeyed Bill, howdy do?”

My father acknowledged the crowd with a nod of his head and walked toward the big, swivel barber chair that Old Miss Saunders had ordered from a special catalogue and had shipped in from some place all the way in Pennsylvania.

He removed his cap, sat down and rotated to face Old Miss Saunders who stood staring at him like he was Jackie Robinson or somebody.

“How about a trim, Old Miss Saunders? I’m getting a li’l raggedy here.”

“Why, sho’ Cockeyed Bill. You know we gonna keep *you* looking good. We was just watchin’ the television here and they said you arrested the man what killed that girl.” Old Miss Saunders bent down to turn off the television, then reached for the white cloth she used to cover her customers while she gave haircuts. She threw it over my father’s head so that it snapped, billowed, floated and settled like a bib, covering his shoulders, chest and lap.

“Naw, we ain’t jumping that far ahead, now.”

“Well the man on the television said...” Old Man Wicks began.

“Oh, don’t go believing anything you hear on that old thing,” my father interrupted.

“Old Lady Bailey found the man under her front porch. I went over there and determined he was a vagrant. But he’s sick, mighty sick. I think he got the rum fits. He’s down at the can right now.”

The “can” my father referred to was the rusty old railroad boxcar that served as the village’s jailhouse. At my father’s insistence, the village had purchased an old, abandoned freight car from the railroad and he converted it into a makeshift jail, although there was seldom any occasion to use it, except, perhaps, when some of the men would get drunk and start fighting over one of the village’s widow women. A few holes were punched near the top of the metal box for ventilation. My father put in some old army cots, and he placed heavy iron locks on the wide, side doors to prevent detainees from escaping.

“No, he was in bad shape alright,” my father continued. “He stank so bad...Man you ain’t never smelled nothing like that. I had to damn near peel his clothes off him. I hosed him down, too. Just took the hose and sprayed the water right on him. He just lay there on the grass, naked, shaking up a fit.

“I had Edna bring some of my old clothes over for him to wear. Old Doc Simone came by and took one look at him and said: ‘That man there has got the horrors from drinking rot gut wine.’ I figure it ain’t no use trying to question him for at least a week. It’s going to take at least that long to bring him around.”

“You know, I couldn’t rightly tell from the television, an’ with him being so filthy dirty an all, but he a white man, ain’t he Cockeyed Bill?” Old Man Wicks asked.

My father hesitated like he was thinking about whether he should answer. Finally, he softly said,

“Yep, he is. He’s white.”

“Oohh, now that adds a new dimension to things,” exclaimed Old Lady Saunders.

“It sho’ do,” Old Man Henry said.

CHAPTER TWO

The dead girl’s father, Old Saul Shepard, sat on the stone steps of Simone’s Funeral Home with his face buried in the palms of his hands.

My father pulled his truck to a stop and sat for a moment before turning off the ignition. The truck, a 1947 Chevy pickup, was the village’s only official police vehicle. My father bought it used in 1952, the year he became Sheriff. He’d restored the partly rusted chassis and used three gallons of red house paint to cover up the blemishes. He polished the nickel-plated grill and bumpers to a sheen that reflected sunlight like a mirror. The big, round headlights sparkled like a child’s eyes caught in a state of perpetual surprise. It smelled like old leather and axle grease. I loved that truck and I loved riding in it when my father took me with him on his rounds through the village. But I wasn’t thinking about any of that on the morning I sat in the front seat beside my father and he pulled to a stop in front of the funeral home.

The funeral home was majestic compared to most of the other hardscrabble buildings in Stone's Throw. It sat at the dead-end of one of the village's four paved streets, a striking, three-story structure that sported an elegant red-brick facade and four, huge, white Doric columns supporting a mock veranda. A dozen long and wide granite steps elevated the double-door entrance. It had always reminded me of an ancient Greek temple, hushed and hallowed and haunted.

“Stay here, now,” my father said, lightly patting my knee. My father was a tough man but he

could be remarkably gentle, also. Two summers before, when I was nine years old, I saw him take on three men; they were thick and sturdy farmer types brawling over a crap game at the General Store. My father grabbed them one by one, slapped each one so hard they spun around, and then he pushed them down like they were unruly children; but when he saw Saul Shepard sobbing uncontrollably, his quiet strength emerged. The old truck's door gave a faint screech when he opened it and my father winced as if the feeble noise had caused him immense pain. He slipped from the seat and effortlessly lighted upon the ground without making a sound. Cautiously, he walked up to the steps like a cat that didn't want to wake its owners.

“Old Saul,” he said in a voice that sounded like he was praying, “I can't tell you just how sorry I am. I'm sorry too, that you wasn't here when she was found.”

Saul Shepard was the Chief Conductor for the Adirondack Railroad's Saratoga-to-Buffalo line. He was slightly better educated than most of the villagers. He'd actually finished high school, a distinction that earned him his conductor's position with the railroad, a job that took him away from home for several days at a time. He was still wearing his black conductor's uniform. He sat hunched over like a man caught in the pangs of terrible stomach pains. When he raised his head toward my father, I could see his eyes were as red as pimentos.

“I heard about it last night, but I couldn't get back to see her until now,” he sobbed.

“Yeah, I know, Old Saul. I called down to the Albany station after you. They told me it might be a spell before they could get in touch with you, what with the train schedule and all.”

My father looked up toward the blue sky like he expected some kind of answer to come floating down.

“Well... you know Old Doc Simone's taking good care of her, now. But we got some things to do,” he said lifting his baseball cap and scratching his head.

“Old Doc Simone’s taking good care of her alright. I just came out of there. He’s got her sliced up. I could hardly tell it was my little girl.

“I know you know how it is Sheriff, us both being widowers and all. She’s my only child. All I have left. I raised her all by myself. Just like you’re doing with your two young ‘uns.

“Who found her? When...?”

“The Larkin boys found her, two mornings ago, Old Saul. They went down to the bend, gone fishing. They came ripping through them pine trees, screaming like they seen Jesus. I was driving down the road when I saw them. I got out the truck and ran back down there with them.

“And there she was. Her dress caught on a river stump and kept her from floating away. Look like she been there some time. That’s why I came by here today, to see Old Doc Simone. See what he figured out.”

As if on cue, Old Doc Simone opened the double doors of the funeral home and stood at the top of the mighty stone steps looking down upon us like the Lord on Judgment Day.

Old Doc Simone cut quite a figure. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He was dressed as he usually was: wearing a black suit and an immaculate, stiffly starched, white shirt and a black bow tie. He was in his forties, brown as a coconut, and balding, with a horse-shoe-shaped fringe of coarse gray hair tapering into distinguished-looking mutton chops sprouting on either side of his face. He was the most educated man living in Stone’s Throw. He’d been to medical college. He served as the village’s doctor, coroner, and undertaker.

“When I’m not giving birth to them, or healing them, I’m burying them,” he was fond of saying.

Solemn and dignified, Old Doc Simone descended the steps. When he reached the bottom, he faced my father, put a hand on his shoulder, and gazed at the ground. After a long moment, he asked:

“How’s that prisoner doing?”

At the mention of the prisoner, Jeffery Jiggs, Old Saul quickly stood, heaved his chest forward, and clenched his fists like he was trying not to explode.

“Now tell me true, Cockeyed Bill, did that tramp kill my girl?”

“I don’t rightly know, Old Saul. I don’t rightly know. There are some things I don’t quite understand right now. That’s why I came by to see Old Doc Simone.” “We can talk later, Sheriff.” Old Doc Simone never called my father by his nickname; instead, he always referred to him by his title. In fact, he never referred to anyone the way other villagers did. In Stone’s Throw, everyone always addressed other adults and spoke about them as “Old so-and-so...” It was just a way of showing respect, a tradition deep-rooted in the evaporating black culture of the South. Anyone in the community who’d survived long enough to have the venerated appellation “Old” preceding their last name was honored because it meant they possessed a wisdom provided by long life; it punctuated superlative admiration for suffering and perseverance; it served as a noble title of meritocracy and high regard.

My father’s moniker, on the other hand— “Cockeyed Bill”—was an anomaly. No one would dare make fun of my father. He loved his nickname. He knew it was an affectionate reference to his ophthalmic impediment and he also knew that it was meant as a tribute to him as a unique and beloved individual who’d earned everyone’s trust and esteem. Old Doc Simone was the only villager who didn’t give in to the colloquial custom; he was worldly but not stuffy, sophisticated but not gauche; and although he always called my father “Sheriff” and he addressed adult villagers as “Mr., or Miss, or Mrs.,” he never lost the common touch and we all knew that he was blood-linked and devoted and caring and needed. Now, he had switched from being doctor / coroner to being an empathizing, grieving friend, a bonding spirit; he put an arm around Old Saul’s shoulders and the two men meandered along the street.

My father watched them, shook his head sadly, looked toward the blue sky and wondered aloud:

“Who killed Sheila Shepard?”

The sky did not answer.

* * *

“Mississippi Murder!” shouted the headline of the newspaper Edna had been reading.

That headline was blazoned across the top fold of the *Schenectady Gazette*, the weekly newspaper that served Stone’s Throw and other communities in the area. Beneath the horrible headline was a ghastly picture of a dead boy, who’d been pulled from a Southern swamp, so brutally beaten that his grotesque remains barely looked human.

When my father and I returned home, we found my sister, Edna, sluggishly swaying in the big wicker rocking chair on the front porch. Her eyes were moist and she stared off into the distance like she was in a trance. The newspaper lay unfolded across her lap.

She didn’t even flinch when my father put his hand on the back of the chair to stop its to-and-fro motion.

“Edna, girl, wha’cha got there?” he asked.

The headline and picture in the newspaper made him freeze.

“Oh, my, my,” he eventually breathed. “What they done, now.”

Quietly, I moved closer so I could better see the newspaper, too.

At the sight of the shocking photograph of the gruesomely slain boy, I shuddered involuntarily, like I was experiencing an earthquake inside my body.

My father picked up the newspaper, folded it in half and put it under his arm.

“His name was Emmett Till, Pa,” Edna said, coming out of her trance. “He was only 14. They killed him, Pa. Cause he smiled at a white lady.”

Just about everybody in Stone’s Throw said my sister was beautiful. She resembled our mother more than I do. True, she possessed the family trait of having permanently crossed eyes, but somehow that only made her more attractive, even mysterious, like she could look right at you but see past you with glittering eyes that searched your soul. She was soft-spoken, and emotionally sensitive, nut-brown and full-lipped. Also, she was born with one leg smaller than the other. It was her left leg that was deformed; it caused her to walk with a noticeable limp, but still she managed to move gracefully, poetically. I’d always thought that she moved like a beautiful ship safely moored in a harbor, rolling soothingly, from side to side, with the tide.

Stone’s Throw didn’t have a real sheriff’s station; our living room served as the headquarters for local law enforcement. When anyone wanted my father for official business, they came to our house or telephoned our home. Edna and I were instructed to answer the phone by saying: “Sheriff’s office.”

The telephone rang all afternoon. Dozens of residents called to find out if my father had heard about the dreadful murder of that “Till boy.” The murder in Mississippi was causing quite a stir around the country because festering wounds were coming to a head over whites’ mistreatment of blacks in the South. But the murder of Emmett Till, which stood at the cusp of the American civil rights revolution, was hitting home in the North, too, especially in Stone’s Throw, New York, where a white man was suspected of slaying a black girl. After a while my father stopped taking the telephone calls.

“I’m going down to the can to check on the prisoner,” he told us. The “can” or jailhouse sat on a foundation of cinder blocks in a clearing surrounded by towering evergreens, a couple of hundred feet behind our house. It could be reached via a slender footpath, strewn with rust-colored pine needles.

Early that evening, all hell broke loose in front of our house.

The first sign of trouble appeared when a bulky green Packard raced past our house, honking and kicking up clouds of dust off the dirt road. The car was crammed with young black men, who shouted obscenities and shook their fists out of the windows. After passing the house, the car spun to a stop, turned and sped past again, going the other way. The Packard repeated its dizzying, crazy cruising several more times before being joined by three other cars, each filled with angry, vocally caustic black men. Apparently, the shouting, the snarling automobile engines and the deafening, squawking horns, alerted my father, who was attending to Jiggs down at the can. Edna and I were in the living room, standing behind the locked screen door when my father startled us.

“What’s all this ruckus about?” he demanded.

“Those guys aren’t from around here, Pa,” Edna said shakily.

“Yeah, I know some of them characters. They’re from around Schenectady and Troy. I had to run a couple of them off a few weeks ago, drag racing on the river road.” Unlocking the screen door, my father went out and stood on the front porch with his hands knotted into fists.

“What you gonna do, Sheriff?”

The question came from the driver of the Packard, which had come to a sudden, exploding-cloud-of-dust, stop in front of the house. The questioner was a very dark-complexioned young man, wearing a black do-rag. As he spoke, he opened the car door and emerged from the vehicle. He was enormous. He stood over six-feet tall; brute muscles rippled beneath his tight-fitting t-shirt.

“Oh, I know him,” I whispered to Edna. “That’s Sylvester Huggins, Troy’s best high school football player.”

The other cars lined up and stopped behind the Packard. The drivers and their passengers formed a crowd of nearly a dozen, athletic, young men. They were angry and obviously spoiling for trouble.

My father stepped off the porch on to the hard ground; he remained silent, serious and stern.

“So, what you gonna do, Sheriff?” the Huggins boy asked once more. He was standing outside of the four-foot high picket fence that enclosed our small yard.

“About what?” My father’s voice was low and calm.

“About that whitey you got holed up in your stupid little jail. About that whitey who killed one of our sisters. That’s what! We’re tired of these whiteys just killin’ us whenever they want to. It’s about time we started killin’ them.” Sylvester Huggins was a notorious ruffian and he was clearly acting as the leader of the group.

My father said nothing. Instead, he held up one hand, and in a friendly, relaxed manner, he motioned for the stalwart questioner to come forward.

In one stride, Huggins jumped over the fence and swaggered up close to my father.

What happened next was so sudden and so amazing that it seemed like magic.

Without speaking or changing his facial expression, my father threw a detonating right-handed upper-cut and hit the big, robust boy square under the jaw so hard his brawny, strapping body left the ground like a rocket ship taking off. He landed on his backside with a terrible thud; he was left dazed and stunned like he was seeing stars.

“Got any more questions?” my father asked. Sylvester Huggins sat on the ground, reeling, still trying to figure out what happened.

“Anybody got any questions?” my father asked addressing the group on the other side of the fence. There were some whispered murmurs, but nobody moved.

“OK, then. Get the hell away from my house. If I catch your asses back here I’m a bust loose real big. You all hear me?” my father growled.

Still no one moved. Like animals caught in the headlights, they clearly wanted to run, but were petrified. It was an eerie moment. My father broke the spell.

“Scat! Hot-damn-it,” he barked, and stomped his foot.

The spellbound pack jumped in unison, like they all just realized they were standing on burning coals; they scrambled back to their respective cars. Sylvester Huggins struggled to his feet. My father made a quick but fake move, as if he was going to leap into the air. Huggins back-peddled so fast he fell backwards over the fence.

“This ain’t over, Sheriff,” he said, spitting blood and rubbing his jaw.

“It is for now, boy,” replied my father.

Edna and I ventured from the house and stood on the porch and watched as the procession of cars roared away, leaving dust and exhaust roiling in the air.

The dust had barely settled when Stone’s Throw Mayor, Old Duncan Durante, drove up in his brand new, bright orange, 1955, 2-door, convertible, Lincoln Custom Sports Coupe.

Old Duncan had served as village mayor for as long as I could remember. He was a flashy, “high-yellow” man with processed, straightened hair, and two dazzling gold front teeth. And like Old Saul Shepard, he worked as a railroad line conductor. His duties as village mayor were largely ceremonial; he presided over the monthly village council meetings and he signed my father’s paychecks.

“Hey, now, Cockeyed Bill. Looks like some excitement finally come to Stone’s Throw,” he said as he walked through the gate.

“Hey, now, Old Duncan. Yeah. I know you heard by now. About the murder and all.”

“I got in from my three-day run this afternoon. Heard all about it,” the mayor said, gently patting the shimmering, processed waves in his hair.

“From what I hear Cockeyed Bill, you got a white fella down at the can.”

“I do. And he sick as a skunk in bath water.”

“Well, I don’t know about this situation developing here, now,” the mayor began slowly. No one in the village liked being on the wrong side of one my father’s bad moods. Not even the mayor.

“I think this situation calls for higher authority. They found that Emmett Till boy murdered down South. Folks all over are pretty upset about that. Now we got a black girl dead here, in the village, and they think a white man did it. Sooo, I... Well, I called the state police in to handle this thing we got going on here.”

My father’s eyes widened and the lines in his forehead furrowed so deeply you could have planted corn in the rows that formed.

“Hey, now, Cockeyed Bill...” The mayor took a couple of steps back as he struggled for the right thing to say. But before he could say another word, two black and white state trooper cars, with red lights flashing, came barreling down the dirt road and screeched to a halt behind the mayor’s buffed Lincoln. It was near the day’s end. The pink sunset mingled with the purple twilight and long, red-streaked evening shadows pulsed and rippled into twisted, lurid shapes. The world seemed hollow, like a hallucination, like a dream.

My father stood in the front yard, holding his Brooklyn Dodger’s baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head. Four, white state troopers emerged from the two patrol cars.

“Well, now, the Mayor say you come to take charge of my prisoner,” my father said to the approaching law enforcement officers. From his tranquil, composed demeanor, one would never have guessed that, only moments before, he’d cold-conked one of the meanest bullies in the tri-county area.

“Yes, Sheriff. That’s exactly why we’re here: to pick up your prisoner and take him to a safer

place of confinement,” said one of the state troopers.

To me, the officers were daunting, intimidating. Their “Smoky” hats sat evenly on their heads. Their severely starched uniforms were accessorized with thick, black leather utility belts, equipped with rounds of ammunition and hand guns stuffed into shiny holsters, and outfitted with sleek black batons, and silver handcuffs glinting in the fading light.

“You all got papers for him? ‘Cause I need to see some kind of court order before I can turn him over. Now, I’m sure you all understand that.”

“Well, Sheriff, it’s like this...,” the lead trooper patronizingly said. “You’re holding a white man in that rusty, tin carton you call a jail. It’s not safe for him, and quite frankly, it’s not safe for you or your family.”

“Well now, I sure do appreciate your concern. But like I’m saying now...” “Sheriff!” The state trooper shouted like he wanted my father to snap to attention. He put a hand on my father’s shoulder and continued.

“You’re holding a white man, charged with murder, and we’re here to...”

“Now you hold it,” my father interrupted. “Who say he’s charged with murder? I’m holding him as a vagrant.

“It ain’t no matter to me that he’s white; and it shouldn’t be no matter to you all. This is my jurisdiction. Old Duncan here ain’t had no right calling you. He’s the mayor. I’m the sheriff. I was elected and I’m going to do my job. Now, get your god-damned hand off of my shoulder.”

“Now Cockeyed Bill...” Old Duncan began.

“Goodnight Mayor! We’re done here.” Just like that my father dismissed them.

“We will be back, Sheriff,” the lead trooper said.

“Well, I can’t say you will be welcome,” my father said. He stood in the yard and watched as the state troopers and the mayor got in their cars and drove away. Night fell like a widow’s veil over the village. My father turned to Edna and me.

“You got ten minutes and you best be in bed.”

“Now Pa, it’s Billy’s bedtime. But I stay up like I want to.” Edna protested because she was going to be a senior in high school in the fall and my father had already started treating her like she was a grown up.

“Now Edna,” my father wearily said, “everybody tells me what a smart girl you are. Now, show me how smart you really are. Go to bed! Both of you!”

A half-hour later, I was in bed, tired, but still awake. All the lights in the house were off. I heard my father shuffling around in the kitchen. He wasn’t alone. He whispered and fumbled in the dark. I heard the trap door to the cellar squeak open and flop shut. There was muffled movement beneath the floor. Lying on my back with my bedroom window opened, I saw the velvet sky. A zillion stars sparkled like diamonds.

The next morning my father didn’t have to tell us he was keeping Jiggs in the cellar. We could hear the sick man, thrashing about and wheezing and groaning.

“I’m thinking about sending you both down South to visit your Auntie Mayda,” my father said when Edna and I came into the kitchen. He was making us a breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast.

“No, Pa, we can’t go anywhere,” Edna insisted as she poured cold, refrigerated water into the glasses on the table. “School starts in less than three weeks. My teachers say I have a chance to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test they give to white kids before they go to college. Colored kids don’t get many chances to take those tests. I think I can do really well, Pa. But I’ve got to be here.”

“Honey, now, it’s getting dangerous around here. I’m afraid for both of you. I don’t know how this thing is going to come out with this murder and all. People are getting awful upset over this thing. I got the prisoner in the basement. I’m going to stay around the house for a few days. I ain’t going to be making my rounds in the village. In fact, I got Old Doc Simone coming over here in a few minutes to talk about the dead girl, and when she’s going to be buried and all.

“I just think you all will be safer away from around here, down South with your Auntie Mayda.”

“That Emmett Till boy was from up North, Pa,” Edna said softly. “He was visiting relatives down South, in Mississippi, and white folks killed him.”

My father fell silent. Edna’s logic was too much for him. He put sizzling bacon strips and heaps of steaming, intensely yellow, scrambled eggs on our plates and said:

“Sit. Eat.”

My father didn’t join us for breakfast. Instead, he poured some boiling chicken broth into a mug, lifted the trap door to the basement, and disappeared beneath the kitchen.

When Old Doc Simone arrived, Edna tapped the broom handle on the wooden floor.

“Pa, Old Doc Simone is here for you,” she said.

“Send him down,” my father yelled.

“Thank you, Miss Edna. Billy. How are you doing?” Doc Simone patted my head, and put his black doctor’s bag on the floor next to the trap door.

“How are you children holding up?” he asked as he lifted the trap door and began his descent.

“Fine,” Edna said.

“Well, your father’s a good man; a strong man. He’s going to take care of things, so don’t you

worry.” Old Doc Simone’s polished, balding head was still above floor level when he reached for his black bag and towed it with him beneath the floor.

Edna and I hurriedly tip-toed to the living room to stand by the grated floor vent, so we could better hear my father and Old Doc Simone talking. Their voices were muffled, but when we put our ears close to the openings in the vent, we could make out what was said.

“He’s still delirious, Sheriff. Has he eaten anything?”

“Not much. I tried to get some of this here broth down him, but he just heaved it right back up. The rum fits got him so bad I can’t question him.

“Don’t know much about him. All he had on him was a pocket knife, and some old, ragged Army discharge papers. Had his name, serial number and the unit he served with. He was a lieutenant. I think he fought in the war ‘cause the papers say he got some kind of medal for bravery. I was busy yesterday, but I managed to get some telephoning done. I’ve been calling all over Albany, and Washington, D.C., and I got a call into Fort Bragg, the Army base in North Carolina. The Mayor’s going to love me when I give him the phone bill.”

While my father and Old Doc Simone were talking, Jiggs was moaning and gagging.

“It’s been a couple of days since he’s had a drink. It is going to take a couple of more days before he’s un-stewed. This is about the worst case of alcohol poisoning I’ve ever come across. I’m going to give him a shot of morphine. That’ll calm him down awhile.”

“Whatever you think is right, Old Doc. What about the Shepard girl? How’d she die? Was it the stabbing, the choking or the drowning?”

“Well, I’m not a forensic specialist... I can tell you that the knife punctured just beneath the sternum but it wasn’t a fatal wound. There wasn’t any water in her lungs, so she was dead before she was

put in the river. Her larynx and trachea were crushed. It took a good deal of strength to accomplish that. My best bet is that she was stabbed first, choked to death and then thrown into the river. “

“You know Old Doc, that Shepard girl was a good li'l girl. Regularly went to Old Reverend Larkin's church. Her and my Edna were classmates 'til the Shepard girl dropped out of school a couple years back. I ain't never heard nothing bad about her. That in itself is strange. You know this village, if you sneeze, folks around here tell it like you gone and got pneumonia.

“That's the truth, Sheriff. Speaking of gossip, now Sheriff, what I'm going to tell you next is kind of ugly. We're going to have to keep this to ourselves for awhile.” Old Doc Simone was silent for a long time. Eventually, in a low voice he said:

“She was raped... Probably by more than one... She fought back... Whoever killed her probably has some deep scratches on his arms or back or somewhere because her finger nails were broken.

“Well, your prisoner man here is resting now. I don't know what else I can tell you.” We could hear Old Doc Simone putting things back in his bag, preparing to leave.

“You ain't said nothing about the girl's funeral.”

“The day after tomorrow.”

Old Doc Simone's bag snapped shut. Edna and I rushed out of the house and onto the front yard so we could pretend we hadn't heard anything.

It was a morning when the brilliant summer sun showered our country village with radiant, golden light. But for me, it was a counterfeit glow, forged and false, because it did not expunge the blue and gray gloom I felt.

* * *

It rained on the day of Sheila Shepard's funeral. Big, torrential drops of water fell from the

heavens and washed over the ground like tears on a baby's cheeks.

“The Lord knows how to show sadness,” Old Lady Bailey said. She was at Simone's Funeral Home, dressed in black. More than half of the village was there: Old Miss Saunders, the barber; Old Man Wicks, owner of the General Store; Old Duncan Durante, the Mayor, Old Man Henry, and other folks, the people you hardly ever saw, unless you stopped by their shack because you heard they were ill or they needed help or something.

My father was conspicuously absent but everyone knew why. He was attending to his duty as sheriff, guarding the man who most people said they thought had killed Sheila Shepard.

Sheila Shepard was in a closed, smoky-gray casket that sat on a silver funeral bier, surrounded by dozens of young, tender, red roses. Her father, Old Saul Shepard, sat on a folding chair next to the coffin and sobbed. People were packed into the first-floor viewing room. They stood on the carpeted stairs that led to a second-floor balcony. They leaned over the railing so they could see and hear.

Old Doc Simone, regal and somber, elegant and stately, stood like a sentinel, protecting the building's double-door entrance.

Old Reverend Larkin, wearing his green and black preacher's robe, walked among the hushed throng. When he reached the front of the first-floor viewing room, he stopped, lowered his gaze, stretched his arms wide, raised both hands above his head and, by all accounts, gave the shortest, most eloquent prayer he'd ever delivered.

He said:

“Dear Lord, we are so sad that this tragedy happened to one so young, still so new to the world. We are bruised because it happened here, in Stone's Throw. We are reminded about how much we need to love one another. The blood that was lost must be replenished by the hope in our hearts. Today we lay this young soul to rest and we look to You, Dear Lord, for justice, for comfort, for mercy. Amen.”

At the cemetery, the rain fell in sheets that slapped the black umbrellas.

The gray casket was lowered into the dark ground and the rain fell.

But the rain could not wash away one man's pain. Old Saul Shepard looked up toward the weeping sky and called his daughter's name.

Even now, on random rainy summer mornings, I recall the day Sheila Shepard was laid to rest beneath the lonely lawn.

CHAPTER THREE

I finally had the chance to meet Jiggs.

I slept late on the morning after the funeral. When I awoke, the sun was shining. I smelled breakfast. Silverware clinked against porcelain plates.

I went to the kitchen in my pajamas, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

My father and a ghostly, string bean of a man were seated at the table. Edna fussed around the stove.

"Jiggs," my father said, nonchalantly, "this is my boy, Billy. Billy this here is Jiggs." With that introduction, the sleep flew from my eyes and I stood staring.

The emaciated-looking, thin, white man gave me a half-hearted wave and I noticed his hand trembled. He was trying to fork some grits and lift the food to his mouth, but his hand shook so badly

that the chow fell back on to the plate.

“Well, Billy if you can’t say good morning, at least go and get washed and dressed and come on back and eat some breakfast.” My father was acting as if everything was normal, like we always had scraggly white men over for breakfast.

I stood where I was momentarily because the gawky stranger in our kitchen mesmerized me; and because I was shocked that my father would let a man thought to be a murderer sit at our kitchen table. But I did as I was told and a few minutes later I returned.

Jeffery Jiggs struggled to stand. He put both hands on the tabletop and pushed himself up. I almost burst out laughing.

Wearing my father’s clothes, Jiggs looked like Lilliputians had dressed him. Jiggs was very skinny and very tall. My father was very robust and very short. My father’s old trousers looked like high-water, Capri shorts on the long-legged Jiggs; and his elongated, scrawny, chalk-white arms looked like oversized pipe cleaners poking out from the all-too-short sleeves of my father’s old, tattered, plaid shirt.

My father jumped from his seat to lend support to the lanky, weakened man who was swaying like a high-rise in a Tokyo earthquake.

“I’m taking him back to the cellar,” my father told Edna. “When Old Doc Simone comes over, I want you to come down with him. Bring a pencil and some paper ‘cause I need you to take down what we say.” When Old Doc Simone arrived, Edna told me to wash the breakfast dishes and she went to the cellar.

I started clattering the dishes in the sink, acting like I was busy washing them. But I couldn’t stand it. I had to know what they were talking about down in the cellar. I tip-toed to the living room and took up my position by the grated vent, so I could hear into the cellar.

This is what I heard:

“Well, there, Jiggs,” my father began, “you know we got to get to the bottom of some things. Now that you feeling a li’l better.

“This here is Old Doc Simone, he’s been tending to you these past few days. He’s here as an official witness to hear your statement. My Edna here will take it all down. She knows shorthand, and she’s good, too. So, she can get it all down.

“Now, do you know why I’m holding you?”

“For being drunk in public?” Jiggs’ voice sounded dry and tired.

“Yeah, well, I got’cha on that. You’re right. But we got a girl gone dead here in Stone’s Throw. Now, be careful about wha’cha say. Do you know anything about it?”

“No, no. I don’t even remember how I got here. How long have I been here?” I could hear a stitch of panic creeping into Jiggs’ voice.

“I don’t rightly know all the answers to that, but I pulled you out from under Old Lady Bailey’s porch about five days ago. Where did you come from?”

“I’ve just been traveling. For a long time.”

“I called the Army folks about you. Ain’t heard nothing back yet.”

There was a long pause.

“I...I’ve been having a bad time since I came back from the war. I drink myself to sleep most nights. We lost a lot of good men over there, damn it. Damn it.”

“Ok, now take it easy there. Just about when do you think you came to this area?” My father only had a fifth-grade education but he had what I came to call “world wisdom.” He impressed me with

the way he was handling Jiggs.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I met up with a couple of men and we were drinking and hopping trains. I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t care.”

“Were they white men? How many men?”

“Yes they were white. There were three of us. I can only think of one guy’s name. It...It was Skeet. I didn’t know either one of ‘em before but I remember they told me they served in World War Two, just like I did. So we talked about the war and we drank wine. They kept coming up with more wine. So I hung around with him and the other guy for a few days, I guess.

“I have killed people. A lot of people.”

“Now what do you mean by that? Are you confessing to murder?” My father asked incredulously.

“They made us kill. We had to kill.” Jiggs’ voice had completely flown off the octave scale until the word “kill” scratched the air like a painful screech from a madman’s violin.

“Well. You’re talking about the war? You killed people in the war?” My father’s whispered, calm voice restored sanity to the discussion.

“Yeah. Yeah,” Jiggs sobbed.

“OK. That’s enough for now. Old Doc, can you give him something to calm him down?”

“Sure, Sheriff. He’ll be asleep in a moment.”

After a couple of minutes, when I sensed things were concluding in the cellar, I started back toward the kitchen so my father would think I’d been washing the dishes.

As soon as I took a couple of steps, there were several loud thumps at the front door. Startled, I

jumped, ready to run and hide behind the sofa.

When I spun around I saw a familiar-looking State Trooper through the screen door. I recognized him as the Trooper my father had summarily dismissed a couple of nights before. He had a sheath of papers in his hand.

“Get your Pa, boy?” he demanded, pulling at the screen door as if to open it. But it didn’t budge. Old Doc Simone had thought to lock it when he came in.

I gulped and nodded.

“Well, go get him. We have business.” The same four officers who came with him before accompanied the brazen State Trooper.

I got to the kitchen just as my father was coming up from the cellar, followed by Edna and Old Doc Simone.

“Sta...State Troopers!” I whispered hoarsely.

My father winced and cursed under his breath. He motioned for Edna and Old Doc Simone to go back down into the cellar. They lowered the trap door softly after them. My father took a moment to compose himself and pasting a wide, cheesy grin across his face he stepped lively into the living room.

“Gentlemen, what can I do for you?” he said approaching the locked door.

“Well, Sheriff,” the lead Trooper smugly began, “You said something the other night about court papers. Well, I got ’em.”

“Well now, ain’t dat sump’n?” my father said, scratching his head like he was just a simple, confused colored man. He was deliberately dumbing-down, portraying the kind of black man bigoted white people could relate to.

“I don’t rightly know how helpful I can be to ya’all. That ol’ boy done gone. Sho’ did. He gone. Ain’t nowhere ‘round here, no mo’.”

The Trooper attempted to open the screen door. My father made no move to unlock it.

“What are you saying, Sheriff?”

“I’m sayin’ dat he gone. Escaped. See, we had the funeral the other day. I had to go to de funeral and some’a dem ol’ tramps, friends’a hisin, must’a come’n sprung ‘im out’a my jail when I was grievin’ with de other folks.” My father was clearly fibbing. He’d stayed at home the day of the funeral, guarding Jiggs.

“You can go on down to the can and look if you want to. Ya’ll know where it is. He ain’t there.”

The lead Trooper motioned to the other officers and two of them jumped off the porch and started running down toward the “can.”

“How’d you let that happen, Sheriff?” The Trooper’s face was getting so red I could see him change color through the gray screen.

“Ya’ll Troopers ain’t never lost a prisoner? Seem like I remember a time when ya’ll did.... Wasn’t it last year...?”

“Yeah, well that wasn’t a suspect in a murder case,” the Trooper interrupted .

“The man I had wasn’t held on murder, either. I told you that I arrested him on a vagrancy charge. I ain’t never charged him with murder.”

“Well, we’re coming into your house and see if you got him stashed in there.” The Trooper angrily slapped the screen door with the papers he was holding.

My father dropped the dumb black man act and turned deadly serious.

“Oh no, no. No you’ ain’t coming into my house. Now you all can look in my jail. That’s public property. This is my home. I got my family here. You can’t come in here without a search warrant. Now don’t be messing with me. I’m a Sheriff and I know the law.

“You can wait on the porch ‘til your Trooper boys come back, then I’ll be expecting you to leave.”

The two Troopers who left to look at the “can” came back to the porch out of breath. They shrugged, indicating there was no one at the makeshift jail.

The lead Trooper crumpled the papers he held. Once again, he was frustrated and foiled by my father.

“We’ll be back, Sheriff,” the Trooper vowed, growling.

“You all take your time, now, you hear,” my father chuckled.

After the State Troopers left in a huff, Old Doc Simone and my father stood on the front porch talking.

Edna and I decided to do our weekly chores of sweeping and dusting in the living room. The truth was we were trying to stay close enough to hear what the men were saying.

“Sheriff, I have a lot of faith in you but I sure do hope you know what you’re doing. Telling those Troopers that Jiggs escaped may come back at you in an unpleasant way.”

“To hell with them, Old Doc. Sanctimonious white folks don’t scare me.

Besides, that Jiggs boy didn’t kill that girl. I know it just as sure as I know I’m black and the sun glows.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Jiggs had his jack-knife on him when I pulled him out from under Old Lady Bailey’s porch. The

knife we found stabbed into the girl was a switchblade, the kind of knife used in a street fight down in the city.

“Plus that Jiggs, I know he’s shell-shocked from the war and all, but he probably was too drunk and too weak to be attacking anybody. He’s been suffering the rum fits for a long time.”

“He did say he was traveling with some other men,” Old Doc Simone reminded my father.

“Yeah, that do be a problem. Tonight, after dark, I’m going on down there to that hobo camp by Pokey’s Pond. See if I can scare them boys up enough to get some information out of them.”

We had two guns in our house: The walnut stock, Winchester Model m-100 was my father’s rifle, which he taught me how to shoot when he started taking me on hunting trips when I turned 10-years-old; and the other gun was the Walther, P-22, semi-automatic pistol, which my father used for shooting practice and kept locked in the bottom drawer of the bureau in his bedroom.

That evening, he got the hunting rifle out of the living room closet, loaded it, and leaned it against the sofa. He went to his bedroom and strapped on his brown leather hip holster and shoved the loaded pistol into it.

“Billy, I’m leaving the rifle here for you. You’re my deputy, tonight. But you ain’t to touch the rifle unless it’s critical, now. You understand?”

“Edna, I need you to tend to Jiggs in the cellar. He’s harmless to you. I’m convinced of that. So, in about an hour, see if he can get some hot cereal down him and some milk.”

The orange sun was slowly slipping behind the mountains when my father slid behind the steering wheel of the red Chevy. Once again, the shadows and the night waltzed into the world.

My heart pounded. I was afraid for Edna.

“Hush, Billy,” she said, waving me off. “Pa said he’s not dangerous and I believe Pa. Besides I was down there with him today. I saw his eyes. He’s sad and he’s sick.

“You stay up here and watch the house like Pa told you. And if anything looks wrong, even a little bit, you get on the telephone to Old Doc Simone. I’ll be alright.”

Edna lifted the trap door and climbed down into the cellar to attend to Jiggs. I went out to the front porch and sat in the wicker rocking chair. The summer night sizzled. A crickets’ chorus sang a shrill song. Lightening bugs blinked lime-green lights, on-again, off-again. The humid, hypnotic night lulled me to sleep.

Suddenly, I felt as if something dreadful was near. Panic pushed me to run and hide behind the picket fence, but it was too late. The thing I dreaded saw me, shivering, shaking. It was ugly hatred stalking—dark-hearted, wicked and withered. It was hideous human hatred carrying death in a sack slung onto its hunched back.

My instinct screamed: “Get away! Run!”

Instantly, I was on my bicycle, madly peddling along the gloomy, dirt road. The fear-filled forest folded around me.

“Here... Here... Here...” A cool wind whispered, cleansing the sullied air.

A soft light, a lucid lake and the most beautiful lady I’d ever seen appeared. She smiled. Suddenly, I felt safe.

“Mom,” I breathed, “is that you?”

My beautiful mother kneeled and spread her loving arms. I ran to be embraced but stopped in my tracks when I saw she was not alone. Two other figures came into focus.

There was a slender, bloodied boy. His face, oozing puss, was puffed and bloated. One eye was

missing, the other swollen shut. Blood trickled from a bullet hole in his forehead like wine from the mouth of an uncorked bottle spilled at the table's edge. He was the dead boy in the newspaper: Emmett Till.

The second figure was a girl, slightly older than the boy. Her dress was torn. A knife protruded from her bosom. Her broken neck caused her head to loll loosely. Her wide-opened eyes stared at everything, but seemingly saw nothing. It was Sheila Shepard.

“Mom?” I cried, groping. But she was gone. The hate-monster returned, still hunting, hot, horrible, green, red-eyed. Sharp teeth gnashed. In the frigid heat of fear, I knew this omnipresent, omnivorous hating fiend wanted to devour me, snap me up, wolf me down, spit me out and watch me squirm on his slimy platter of loathing.

“Billy, Billy,” a soft voice called. “Billy, Billy, wake up.”

Edna was bringing me back to the sizzling summer night, the electric singing crickets and the lightening bugs' blinking spasms.

“Come on, Billy. Let's get you to bed.”

In the darkened distance, a truck engine rumbled. Two bright, yellow lights, round with wide-eyed wonder, flew through the thick night. The red truck appeared gray in the white moonlight. My father was home.

“Edna? Billy?” he called, leaping from the vehicle. “Everything OK here? You all go on in the house. I got business to tend to.”

I couldn't restrain myself. I leaped from the porch, ran like a fool, snatched the gate open and circled my arms around my father's waist. Burying my face in his abdomen, I hugged him with all the life I had in me.

“I saw Mom. I saw her,” I sobbed.

“OK, Billy-boy. OK. I know you did. I see her, too, from time to time.” His voice ricocheted like he was standing in an echo chamber.

“Your sister is waiting on the porch. You go along, now. I’ll come to see you when I get through here.”

That’s when I noticed them, lying on their stomachs in the truck’s flatbed with their hands tied behind them: two men, skinny, sallow, jaundiced. Stringy, dog-like hair, matted with sweat, clung to their skulls. Dark-ringed eyes sank into depressed sockets. Filthy, ragged clothes barely covered their skeletal bodies. They smelled like death on toast: puke, urine and rot-gut wine.

Reluctantly, I let go of my father and watched him hustle the men out of the truck and herd them along the path leading to the “can.”

I was in bed when he returned to the house and came into my room. “How are you doing deputy?” he asked quietly and sitting on the edge of my bed.

“I had a dream. Mom was in it—and Sheila, and the boy who was killed down South.”

“Well, Billy-boy, it’s only natural for you to have bad dreams. All this talk about killing. Everybody in these parts is taking the Shepard girl’s death hard, real hard. I can see how that’ll make an impression on you.”

“When I close my eyes and think real hard I can see Mom. She was really beautiful, wasn’t she?”

“Oh, yes, yes, son,” he said after a moment. “She was. You were a lot younger than you are now. I worked for the railroad back then. I couldn’t be home. The night she died, I was stoking coal into the belly of a train engine.

“You just turned four when she took sick. Old Doc Simone did everything he could. It didn’t

take a year and she was gone from us. Oh, my heart was so heavy. I thought I'd never go on. If it weren't for me having you and Edna to lean on, I most likely would have ended up like Jiggs, a lost soul drowning in a bottle. It don't seem like it sometimes, but the Lord don't put nothing on good folks that they can't carry."

My father wanted to comfort me, but I still felt anxious and confused. For a moment, we were silent, serenaded by a cacophony of night sounds: Crickets chirping loudly off-key; Old Man Anderson's dogs baying at the moon; a haunted train whistle.

"Why do white folks hate us so much?" I asked.

I think my father knew I was struggling with a gnawing awareness of the vicious power of racial prejudice. For all practical purposes, Stone's Throw was a segregated "colored" community, even though it was located in the integrated North. My exposure to racist venom and abject bigotry had been limited. But the brutal slaying of Emmett Till, a harmless teenager; and the flap that was made about my father holding a "white man" prisoner, and the contempt exhibited by the white State Troopers, were forceful, fearful signals.

"You ain't had to experience too much of the shame in this world, Billy-boy. Lord knows, if I could, I'd make it so you never had to know about it. If I can't protect you from it, I can try to prepare you for it.

"Not all white folks hate colored folks; but those that do go out of their way to make things difficult for you. I count it up to their fear. See, they're afraid that if they treat us rightfully, we'd prove good enough to stand alongside of them. For some reason, a lot of white folks are afraid of that. What's scares them even more is that some of us will prove to be so excellent that we'd get to stand ahead of them. And for some white folks that notion makes them shake like a polar bear skinned naked in the winter."

“But you aren’t afraid of anything.” I said. My esteem for my father approached mythical proportions. He was the strongest person I knew. I felt that if Hercules ever met my father, he would admire him, too.

“Oh, no,” my father chuckled. “Don’t you believe that. Plenty scares me. But you can’t go through life afraid. Fear is like quicksand. You have to take that fear and lift yourself up with it or you can sink in bitterness.”

I struggled to stay awake, but sleep stood heavily on my eyelids, forcing them shut. I slipped into a world of half-awareness. My father lingered quietly for a while. When he left the room, I felt his absence.

Stories about the new prisoners spread like wildfire.

“No jive, Cockeyed Bill’s got two mo’ white bums in de can. Sick as rats,” Old Man Wicks told Old Man Henry.

“Yeah, well I heard dey gang raped dat po’ girl,” Old Man Henry told Old Miss Saunders.

“Cockeyed Bill chased dem tramps on down. Dey tried to cut ‘im. Like I always say, ‘you rue de day you mess with Cockeyed Bill,’” Old Miss Saunders told Old Man Anderson.

“Yeah, I heard dey cut Cockeyed Bill sump’em fierce, but he brought ‘em in. He sho’ did,” Old Man Anderson told Old Duncan Durante, the Mayor.

Old Duncan Durante knocked at our front door. It was almost noon, the day after my father apprehended the two, transient men. My father spent most of the morning talking over the telephone.

“Come on in, Mayor,” my father said, unlocking the screen door.

“Well Cockeyed Bill, you know I’m concerned. I’ve heard a lot of things. They say you got cut up.”

“Do I look cut up?”

“No, you’re looking fine as a fiddle,” Old Duncan admitted.

“That’s the Stone’s Throw gossip mill. You can depend on it,” my father chuckled.

“I’ll tell you just what happened. I went to Pokey Pond last night. Now you know that Pokey Pond is a place where mostly colored hobos camp out. You know America frowns on whites and coloreds socializing and mixing. Even white tramps don’t usually hang out with no colored bums. It just ain’t Kosher. But I got to thinking that maybe them white bums figured nobody would look for them among the black bums.

“I hid in the bushes and watched and sure enough there they were, sitting like two onions in a bushel of carrots. There must have been thirty colored tramps and those two white bums, sitting around a fire, all of them farting and drinking wine.

In fact, they had so much wine and did so much farting, I was afraid the alcohol fumes and the human gases would blend with the fire and start a combustion.” My father laughed loudly.

Old Duncan didn’t laugh.

“The funny thing is that the white bums seemed to be supplying the booze for the rest of them. Don’t know where they got it but they kept coming up with a fresh bottle. At one point, I think almost every tramp in the camp had his own jug. I didn’t think there was that much cheap wine in the whole county.”

Old Duncan rolled his eyes like he didn’t want to hear the gritty details. My father ignored the Mayor’s demeanor and continued with his account of last evening’s events.

“When I got ready, I just walked up and announced myself. ‘I’m the Sheriff of Stone’s Throw,’ I said.

“Not one of them tramps made a move to try to get away. In fact, most of the colored bums started laughing so hard they rolled on the ground.

“The two white tramps just sat there looking up at me, swooning and swaying like they was sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Well, I got the two white bums to the truck. When I patted them down, I found eight pints of wine. They had bottles stuffed into their back pockets, stuck in their waist bands and taped to their legs.

“I could have swore I got all the wine they had. But when I got them back to the can, I found two more bottles. And this morning, when I went to check on them, they was drinking from yet another bottle of wine.

“I poured it all out on to the ground. I don’t want all that rot-gut around my house. Wasn’t no label on any of the bottles but it looked like that sinful Muscatel shit winos drink. You know, dark yellow, like piss soaking in the sun.”

“Well, be that as it may, Sheriff, what’s all this got to do with the dead girl? Are we any closer to solving this here murder?” Old Duncan, the Mayor, was clearly agitated.

My father stood in the middle of the living room with his Brooklyn Dodger’s baseball cap in his hand and scratching his head.

“Well, now Mayor, to answer your first question: the two white bums I brought in last night are the ones who hopped a train into the village with Jiggs. So I thought I needed to question them.

“To answer your second question: No! We ain’t no closer to knowing who killed Sheila Shepard. I guarantee you them white bums ain’t had nothing to do with it. They been skunked so long they

couldn't kill a chicken.”

Edna, who was attending to Jiggs, had just come up from the cellar when Old Doc Simone knocked at the door, opened it and came into the house without being invited.

“Sheriff,” he said, “You’ve got company.”

My father went to the door. Edna, Old Duncan and I went to the window.

A crowd was gathering on the dirt road. Sylvester Huggins and his raucous pack of juveniles from Troy and Schenectady were out there. Their cars weren't in sight, which meant they parked down the road because they hadn't wanted to attract my father's attention until they had assembled.

Seemingly out of nowhere, five battered pickup trucks pulled to a stop so abruptly they created a swirling ball of dust. At least a dozen fuming, white-cracker farmer-types disembarked from the vehicles cursing and carrying sticks, baseball bats, and pitch forks.

As if that wasn't enough, two State Trooper patrol cars dashed along the road, speeding toward the men gathering in front of our house. Red lights flashed, sirens wailed. I sensed the danger.

My father sucked in his breath through clenched teeth, went to the living room closet, grabbed the loaded Winchester and went out on to the front porch, alone.

“What's going on out here?” he asked. He held the rifle in his arms like he was cradling an infant.

A big, bearded farmer wearing soiled overalls spoke up.

“I ain't speaking for them,” he said, pointing to Sylvester Huggins' group.

“The rest of us came to notify you that we take exception to you rounding up white folks and holding them in that oversized sardine can you call a jail.”

“Fuck you, whitey,” Huggins shouted.

“Fuck you, black boy,” the farmer shouted back.

A loud “pop” made me flinch.

My first thought was that my father had shot someone. I soon discovered that a State Trooper had fired his pistol in the air. It was the same Trooper who came to the house with a warrant to take Jiggs.

Everyone froze, immobilized into a tableau of anger and hatred. I held my breath.

“Break it up,” the Trooper commanded. He held his pistol with the barrel pointing skyward and began walking through the mass of menacing men.

“My boys are calling for back-up. If I have to, I’ll take all of you in for disturbing the peace. Got it?” he barked.

It took a few moments, but the cluster scattered. The white farmers got in their beat up trucks, cursing and swearing revenge against everyone involved. Sylvester Huggins and his crew left the scene shouting anti-Caucasian epitaphs.

My father stood on the porch facing five State Troopers who stood shoulder-to-shoulder outside the picket fence. The scene was reminiscent of a gunslingers’ showdown in an old Western movie.

“What can I do for you all?” my father asked.

“We came for your prisoner. We know he’s here. I’ve got ‘papers’ as you call it. They’re in my patrol car,” the Trooper said smugly.

“How’d you all know he’s here?” my father queried.

“It doesn’t matter how we know. Come on, Sheriff. Give him up. You’ve got your family to

think about. Somebody's bound to get hurt. Could be your boy. Or your girl. This situation is out of hand."

My father turned toward the window, where Old Duncan, Edna and I stood watching.

"Ok, you can have him," my father relented.

"Edna, go on down to the cellar and get Jiggs up here," he said loudly.

"But, Pa, he didn't...", Edna protested.

"Go on and get him, girl!" My father had that certain sound of firm finality in his voice. It was a tone that Edna and I knew meant he wouldn't tolerate any more discussion.

Old Duncan rushed out on to the porch.

"Now, that's better, Sheriff..." the Mayor began.

"Shut up, Old Duncan. You got your way. I know you told them Jiggs was here. Maybe it is best," he said resentfully.

The Trooper who did all the talking stood at the gate with an arrogant, I-gotcha-now look on his face. My father made a big show of spitting on the ground like he was trying to rid himself of a bad taste in his mouth.

It wasn't long before Edna came back into the living room.

"He's gone, Pa," she said loudly through the screen door.

"What do you mean he's gone? This ain't no time for games, now, Edna."

My father pulled the screen door open so fast and hard that it flapped back and slammed shut before he could step into the house. Old Doc Simone, who was standing just inside the door, jumped like a cat with

a firecracker tied to its tail.

When my father did get in the house he was followed by the bossy, talkative State Trooper.

“Is this one of your tricks, Sheriff?” The Trooper was furious.

My father didn’t answer. He rushed into the kitchen, lifted the trap door and jumped down into the cellar. When he re-surfaced, he had a puzzled look on his face.

The Trooper stared at him in disbelief.

“Look for yourself if don’t believe me,” my father insisted.

“What kind of shit are you pulling here, Sheriff?” the Trooper asked as he climbed down into the cellar. When he came back up, his face was as red as a ripe tomato.

My father was already going out of the back door, headed toward the “can.” Everyone followed him. My father was followed by Old Duncan Durante, who was followed by Old Doc Simone, who was followed by all of the State Troopers, with Edna and me bringing up the rear.

When we got to the boxcar jailhouse, the big sliding door, which my father swore had been locked, was opened wide. The “can” was empty. The two hobos my father brought back from his trip to Pokey Pond were gone and there was no sign of Jiggs.

My father stood with his Brooklyn Dodgers’ baseball cap in his hand, scratching his head.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said. “I know I put the padlock on that door.”

Just as my father made that observation, one of the Troopers picked up a silver padlock from the ground.

“You mean this padlock, Sheriff?”

“I don’t know how they did that.” My father fished around in his pockets and pulled out his

jangling key ring. “I still have the key. The one and only key.”

“This padlock hasn’t been pried open or tampered with in any way, Sheriff. In fact it is still securely locked,” the Trooper said.

The lead Trooper was frustrated and foiled again.

“What kind of law enforcement officer are you? You can’t even keep a couple of drunken hobos locked up overnight,” he said with disgust.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something sparkle in the grass.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing.

My father went over to the object. Looking down, he gave a soft whistle of amazement. He removed his cap and scratched his head again before stooping to pick up a pint bottle filled with amber-colored liquid. He removed the gold cap and put the opened bottle up to his nose.

“Ughh. Cheap, rot-gut Muscatel.” My father dropped the bottle like it had suddenly turned into a deadly rattlesnake.

The hot, noon-day sun was like an egg frying in the sky. Not a single breeze stirred. A strange stillness fell over the land, a quietness that had the texture of a hum and an echo, like the sound preceding a cyclone. The leaves on the trees rustled. Since there was no wind, we all looked upward to see the force that moved the branches.

We saw nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The mystifying morning stretched into a sweltering summer afternoon.

Lusterless leaves dangled from limp tree limbs like lifeless withering hands, their darkened palms living only by sheer willpower in air so hot, so moist and thick, it caught in the throat and labored normal breathing. The surly state troopers had left in a huff. My father was busy calling military bases and veteran's hospitals around the country, vainly trying to find information about the vagrants who'd slipped from his custody. Edna was cleaning the cellar and Old Doc Simone had left to make his rounds; he promised to return to have supper with us.

For me it was a puzzling afternoon of loneliness and longing. Sitting on the front porch, I couldn't help but think about the morning's strange events. What happened to Jiggs and his friends? Where did they go? How did they replenish the bottles of endless wine? Why were the troopers so disrespectful to my father?

Grotesque thoughts whirled like a crazy carousel gyrating out of control. The chimera of demons and the pulsing confusion lingered from the nightmare I'd had the evening before. I was still stunned by the thought of seeing the graceful aura of my dead mother and the gut-wrenching image of the murdered Emmett Till and the sad, broken shadow of Sheila Shepard; all the while, I relived the pursuing hatred and fear the dream had evoked. I'd let myself get lost in an echoing canyon of calling memories, tumbling recollections that were somehow driven by the pummeling heat. Mostly, I couldn't help but remember the hot summer days when my mother lay sick and dying.

Summers in upstate New York were sometimes more horrible hot than Down South, at least that's what the old folks said. Folks like Old Lady Bailey who was born in Georgia so long ago no one thought about keeping birth records for "colored" babies, she often said.

"Mamma told me I was born somewhere around 1880, best she could recollect. Pappy say it was before that. Don't nobody know for sho'."

Old Lady Bailey wasn't much for keeping company with other villagers.

"Don't like folks much," she'd declare. "Can't trust 'em. Everybody wants sump'em."

But my Pa was one of the few people whom she admitted to really liking. When Mom was sick she came to our house nearly every day, nursing her and caring for Edna and me. When Pa had to work on the trains, and he'd be gone for several days at a time, Old Lady Bailey would stay over to "make sho' they gets cared for."

I was little but my memory had already begun to take hold. I remember Old Lady Bailey and Old Doc Simone busying themselves at my mother's bedside.

Old Doc Simone was a good doctor, he'd attended medical school; he'd even practiced medicine in the Army, on the battlefield and in an Army hospital in Albany.

"I'm just a country doctor. But even so, there's no cure for what she has." I heard him whisper to my father one night when Mom was coughing uncontrollably and spitting up blood.

When I got a few years older, about nine years old I guess, I kept pestering my father to tell me about what took Mom away. At first he said he didn't know and he didn't want to talk about it. He saw the puzzled, hurt look on my face and finally he sat with Edna and me and told us what Old Doc Simone had told him.

"Your Momma had some kind'a rare lung disease." He said Old Doc Simone had only seen it once before.

"A soldier's wife got hold of it. No sense trying to tell you the name of it, he said. It got a name so long that nobody could ever remember it. The Army sent for military doctors from all around the country. They tried to help the soldier's wife, but they couldn't. They even had one doctor come all the way from Germany."

Old Doc Simone had attended the soldier's wife but it was the other doctors who identified what was wrong with her. He said Old Doc Simone told him that when he got a chance he looked up the disease in all the medical journals, he read case reports, and he studied the disease the best he could.

It turned out it was an ailment that strikes only women; women between the ages from twenty to forty, Old Doc Simone told him.

"Your Momma was only thirty-two years old when it hit her. Only about one out of one million women get it," he said.

"I couldn't believe it! No! A million women, and your Momma was the one, out of all those women, who got it. She had all the symptoms, the coughing, the chest pains, blood spit and she had terrible trouble breathing. Your Momma suffered so... She suffered so...much.

"I cursed God. Old Doc didn't know what to do. Nobody did. She suffered so... I prayed for the Lord to come and rescue her. And He did."

Edna and I cried and my father cried, too.

Sitting on the hot porch, I remembered those times when Mom was sick. The house was always shushed and gentle. I was little when it all happened, but I remembered how Old Lady Bailey was with Edna and me then. She was tender and calm, quite the opposite of her public reputation as being cantankerous and tetchy.

Indoors and out, Old Lady Bailey wore a stiff black straw hat with a flat-topped crown encircled by a ribbon and a flat narrow brim. She was toothless, so her lips folded into the inside of her mouth. She could only eat soft foods like soup or finely chopped collard greens, mashed yams and white potatoes, boiled turnips, and bread sopped in gravy or water. She was as black as a licorice stick and as thin as one. Behind her back Edna and I often joked that she was so skinny that when she turned

sideways she looked like a walking cane. But she did show us kindness and we were fond of her, too. Though she wasn't in the habit of talking to too many people, she loved telling us stories about her life.

After Mom had been bathed, given her medicine and had settled into a fitful sleep, Old Lady Bailey would sit on the front porch and tell Edna and me stories about growing up in Georgia. Her mother had been a Mammy, nursing two white children and living on a plantation, even though the Civil War had been over nearly thirty years by the time Old Lady Bailey was born.

“Even tho' the war was done, my Mamma and my Pappy stayed on with the Bailey's, that's the name of the white folks what owned the whole shebang. That's how I got my name.... Henrietta Bailey...that's the name they give me,” she recalled.

“What was they gonna do? Wouldn't nobody hire 'em. They had ta eat and take care of me.

Old Lady Bailey told us how her mother had raised a white boy and a girl, giving them most of her time and affection.

“By time I were born the white children was nearly already growed, weren't long before they went off and left the homestead. The girl, she went ta Chicago and married some doctor. Don't know what happened to the boy 'cept when his Daddy died, next thing we knowed they went and sold the place, everything gone, and we had ta go, too.”

She told us how her family went to Atlanta and fell on hard times. Sometimes her father worked killing and gutting pigs; sometimes he'd find a job caring for horses and other kinds of work as a farm hand or a street sweeper or hauling garbage. Her mother took in white folks washing, and when Old Lady Bailey was a young girl she would help bleach and scrub sheets, pillow cases and undergarments. She'd hang the heavy wet laundry on the line to dry in the sun while her mother pressed the dried sheets and things with a hot flat iron heated on a cast-iron, potbellied, coal burning stove.

“It was hard work an’ we only got pennies for a day’s wash,” she’d say, wiping her furrowed brow. “But we did it ta help Pappy keep food on the table and pay the seven dollars-a-month rent on the shack we lived in. Yes, suh, times was hard. But we was a family, altho’ my Mamma and Pappy never was married, proper.”

With that Old Lady Bailey would stop talking, sit back in her chair, and with a faraway look stuck in her eyes, she’d fan her face with an open hand.

It was always Edna who would break the trance by asking her to tell how she almost got married and how she had to leave Atlanta before it could happen.

“Oh, child, you know I don’t hardly think about that no mo’,” she’d say. But after a few deep breaths, she’d wrap her dark, thin arms around her chest and, invariably, she would begin the story of how she’d once loved a “superior” man.

“He was a man of ambition, he was. He learned ta read and write and wanted me ta learn, too. And I did learn some. I learned to write my name and read the signs “For Colored,” “For Whites” just so I wouldn’t git in no trouble. I learned ta read the newspaper and the Holy Bible.

“He taught me how ta count, too. How ta count my money change, so I’d know when white folks was cheating me and so I’d know not to trade with them no mo’.”

Old Lady Bailey told us that the love of her life was a man named, Robert Simms. He drove a mighty wagon, drawn by two fine, strong horses, delivering fresh milk in the morning to all the rich white people living in high priced Atlanta neighborhoods such as Tuxedo Park, Buckhead, Sugarloaf and the like.

Robert Simms courted her for about two years. She was a young woman and it was about time for her to get married. Always with his hat in his hand, Robert Simms would bring her huge bouquets of

dandelions that grew in the pastures where the dairy cows grazed; and sometimes he brought freezing-cold bottles of refreshing buttermilk, iced all day in his big, beautiful milk wagon.

On his days off, he'd go fishing and come by with a mess of catfish and one time he brought a five gallon pickle jar crammed with butterflies of every speck and hue; there were red-spotted purple wings, goatweed-gray-leafwings, spangled sparklers, milkweed monarchs and queens and True Bushfoots like green commas, painted ladies, question marks and red admirals. Old Lady Bailey told us how, many years later, she'd found a book with the pictures of all the butterflies of Georgia printed in it.

"I looked at them pictures. I studied them and remembered the names of all the butterflies Robert had caught and brought to our house.

"That's why I like your Pa like I do. He reminds me of Robert. Robert was like your Pa, strong but soft and quiet, too. He used ta tell me that from the time he was a boy, catching butterflies wasn't nothing ta him. He say he put his hand out and them little creatures just come right ta him, set on his hand and never fuss when he put them in the jar. That's what he used ta tell me and I believe him."

Her father fried the catfish Robert brought and her mother served it with boiled corn, covered with butter. Robert stayed for dinner and he let the butterflies go free to flit around the room as they ate the catfish. After dinner, Robert took out his harmonica and let loose with tunes he'd made up. Some of the songs, she said, were so soothing and fetching that every now and then a butterfly or two would alight on his shoulder, or rest on his head, or land on one ear, its colors blazing, its beautiful wings fluttering slowly as if listening to a melody that told the story of their short lives.

Once again, Old Lady Bailey would pause and look into the distance with watery eyes. Then like a bright day dissolving into a storm, her luminous countenance would darken like a gray sky, brooding and menaced.

“Pappy was working a farm and a mule kicked ‘im in the head. The white farmer what hired him made him work the rest of the day but wouldn’t pay him. Say he didn’t give a good day’s work. He came home staggering... couldn’t hardly stand. Pappy died that night,” she said. “We didn’t have enough money ta bury ‘im. But Robert and some of his friends pitched in and we got a box and put ‘im in the ground.”

Then came the Atlanta race riot of 1906.

“This is history. Y’all kin look it up. It happened,” she said with insistence.

Years later, I did “look it up.” It was true. In September of 1906, “Atlanta had erupted in racial violence,” according to reports I found in old copies of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Time has blurred the reasons why white mobs attacked blacks in the streets or dragged them from their homes or violently pulled them from moving trolley cars. None of the reports agreed about the number of innocent black men who were shot or beaten to death. The accounts also disagreed about the number of lynchings that took place in the three days of rage and death. The whites claimed it was because black men had been sexually assaulting white women. Other reports assert that the carnage occurred because white men were unnerved by the “economic and social success that certain blacks were experiencing in Atlanta.” Georgia newspapers reported that sixteen “Negros” were killed. Northern papers I read said more than forty guiltless black men were killed in the massacre.

“Pappy been dead only a few short weeks when it happened. Atlanta was on fire,” Old Lady Bailey lamented. “Robert came ta the house in the middle of the night. He give Mamma fifty-two dollars. He say he had been saving it so me and him could get married. Told us ta get in his wagon. We left Atlanta with nothing but what we was wearing.”

She told us how Robert took them to a town outside of Atlanta and waited with them at a remote train stop. “There’s a place up North where colored folks is settling. Go there.” He gave Old Lady Bailey a piece of paper with the name, “Stone’s Throw,” written on it.

When the train came, he hurriedly ushered them aboard the caboose and told the black conductor to see to it that they got to Stone’s Throw in upstate New York.

“I cried: ‘Oh, Robert, come with us! Please come with us!’” He told her he had to stay and help his friends but that he would join her soon, real soon. And then he was gone. “Swallowed up in the night.”

The conductor instructed them regarding which trains to switch to and two days later, Old Lady Bailey and her mother arrived in Stone’s Throw. They got jobs cleaning houses for wealthy whites who lived in Albany. Old Lady Bailey said she “waited and waited” but Robert never did come to her.

“He just slipped away from me,” she’d say.

Later that summer, when my mother died, it was Old Lady Bailey, who held my hand at her funeral. When it was all over, she knelt down and held me tight against her.

“Don’t give up, child,” she whispered. “There’s a light in you. You are loved.”

I sat on the sun-drenched porch, thinking about Old Lady Bailey and the day my mother was buried and what my father had told me the night before about not being afraid, when the jangling telephone in the living room made me jump.

I ran inside, picked up the receiver and said: “Sheriff’s office.”

The caller said: “Tell that nigger Sheriff Daddy of yours to let them white men go or he’ll be sorry for the day he was born.”

* * *

The full moon, round and yellow, made the night sky look like the Lord punched a hole in the dark universe just so a shaft of pale light could funnel down to Earth.

There were so many questions. I was with my father, and Old Doc Simone, who came to our house for a late supper. The two men were trying to find answers. They sat on kitchen chairs on the front porch, talking. I sat in the wicker rocker, listening.

“The thing those tramps have in common, other than being drunks, is that all three of them served in the Army,” my father said. “Each one of them had old, ragged discharge papers on him. I spent most of the afternoon on the telephone, calling every Army base from here to Kalamazoo. I gave their names and serial numbers, but I got nothing.”

“Well, that’s the government for you, slow as January molasses. I’m sure someone will contact you soon,” Old Doc Simone said with assurance.

Edna finished up in the kitchen and brought a chair so she could sit out on the porch, too.

“Pa,” she asked, “where do you think those men went? When I came up from the cellar, Jiggs was still down there. A few minutes later, when you told me to go get him, he was gone. He was still too weak to go very far.”

“It’s not your fault, Edna,” my father said. “Don’t you worry none.”

“It’s strange all right,” Old Doc Simone said, perplexed. “Seems to me like somebody in Stone’s Throw would have seen three white tramps staggering around. They couldn’t have even gotten as far as Pokey Pond without somebody seeing them and calling you, Sheriff.”

We sat in silence for a while. The nonjudgmental moon watched over the world, an unblinking eye floating above us.

“Pa?” Edna began. “Last night, and even this morning, when I was tending to him, that Jiggs fellow just kind of talked out of his head.”

“What did he say, Edna?” my father asked.

“I couldn’t make out everything, but he was having nightmares, I guess. He kept saying things like: ‘No more... No more! I’m tired of killing. I’m tired of dying.’ He said things like that over and over and he cried.

“And, oh yeah, he kept calling out two names. He kept calling, “Skeet! “Jo Jo!” Like he was warning them, telling them to watch out for something.”

“Hmm,” my father mused. “The names on the Army papers I found on them two hobos from Pokey Pond were Ted Skeetsky and Joseph Johnson.”

“Hey, yeah, didn’t Jiggs say one of the guys he was traveling with was called “Skeet?” Old Doc Simone was rubbing his chin and thinking aloud. “And Joseph Johnson, “Jo Jo,” for the first two letters of his first and last names.”

My father’s brow wrinkled like he was trying to fit pieces into a jigsaw puzzle.

“Far as I could tell, Jiggs must’ve have known the other two during their military service. They all were in the Army and they fought in World War Two.”

“Was that the only things he said?” Old Doc Simone asked Edna.

“Yeah. Pretty much. He moaned a lot and every few minutes he’d cover his ears and start shivering and shaking all over.”

“I was an Army medic during World War Two. I was in a colored regiment, but when those boys, white boys included, came in all bloody and torn up, they didn’t care who provided relief.” Old Doc Simone stared out into the dim night as if he expected someone to come out of the darkness. “I

served a year in France,” Saw a lot of wounded, dying men. I doctored men who survived gory, bitter battles. Long after their physical wounds healed, they ended up wishing they had died. But they didn’t die. They lived to take the war home with them.

“There is a look they carry in their eyes. It’s a look that says the human soul is a barren place, where nothing grows. I saw that look in Jiggs’ eyes.

“People call it being ‘shell-shocked.’ I think there’s more to it than that. War changes a man and nothing is able to change him back to the way he was.

“I think that’s what happened to Jiggs and his two buddies. They’re forever scarred. Medicine can’t cure them. They say ‘time heals all wounds.’ Hell, even time can’t cure what ails them. That’s why they drink the way they do.

“It’s easy for people to look at a wino like Jiggs and condemn him without knowing his story; never realizing he fought while they slept in safety; never understanding how he sacrificed and suffered so they could be free to go shopping.”

Tears filled Edna’s beautiful, crossed eyes until they shimmered in the moonlight.

* * *

Jittering specks of light jumped and danced on the living room walls. Smoky shadows scurried across the floor.

I was running into the living room when my father scooped me up in his arms and took me into Edna’s bedroom.

I didn’t understand what was happening. I vaguely remembered Old Doc Simone saying goodnight and my father putting me to bed. Cursing and the smell of burning wood awakened me.

“Stay here with your sister, deputy,” he whispered. “I’m going to be right outside the door. Shhh... Don’t be afraid.” My father closed the bedroom door.

Edna pulled the window shade down.

“What’s happening, Edna?”

“Shhh...”

“You bastards need some lead in your asses!” my father shouted. The front screen door opened and slammed. I jumped at the sound of rifle fire. One, two, three shots. Then, except for burning wood crackling, all was silent.

After what seemed like an eternity, my father whispered through Edna’s closed bedroom door.

“Edna. I need you to get on the phone. Call Old Man Anderson and get him over here with the water truck.”

The water truck my father referred to was the village’s only firefighting apparatus: a 1940’s, 1,000-gallon, mobile tanker that Stone’s Throw purchased from Schenectady after that city acquired modern firefighting equipment. The truck-mounted tanker, which was kept at Old Man Anderson’s farm, was outfitted with a pressure pump that spewed water through a canvas hose.

I followed Edna into the living room. From the front window, I could see a blaze roaring at the edge of the road. My father returned to the front porch, guarding the house and watching the burning cross.

“Those chicken-shit bastards. I couldn’t make out who it was, but I saw three jerks running into the woods,” my father told Old Man Anderson when he arrived with the water truck.

Old Man Anderson and my father doused the flaming wood cross with water and dirt until it smoldered like a gigantic candlewick.

Dawn brought fire to the morning sky, turning it into an inferno-red roof that morphed into deep orange sheets dappled with pink and yellow patches vanishing into a vast, icy, blue canopy. And there were billowing clouds: mammoth, silver-white, fluffy islands of cumulus vapor magically suspended above the earth.

The morning brought another showdown in front of our house.

Old Man Anderson came with his .22 caliber squirrel-hunting rifle. My father had his pistol strapped on and the Winchester was propped against a tree. Old Doc Simone drove up in his big, black hearse with Old Man Wicks and Old Man Henry as passengers. Old Doc Simone wore his pearl-handled .45 ensconced into a leather holster strapped to his waist. Old Man Wicks and Old Man Henry carried their hunting rifles.

Old Miss Saunders, and Old Duncan Durante, the mayor, who left his new Lincoln at home, headed a pack of about twenty other villagers who came on foot, carrying guns, sticks, sling shots, and other weapons. Even Old Lady Bailey was among them, precariously waving her double-barreled shotgun.

“We heard about the cross burning, Cockeyed Bill. We came to help,” Old Duncan Durante said.

Soon after the villagers assembled, about forty white farmers came out from the wooded areas surrounding our house, where they had surreptitiously assembled during the night for the cross burning. They came into sight gradually, in twos and threes, seemingly appearing from behind the trees and from the bushes until they formed an ominous crowd milling across the road. They, too, were armed with an assortment of rifles, pistols, baseball bats, sticks, and pitchforks, anything that could be used to do bodily harm.

Before a confrontation between the villagers and the farmers could ignite, Sylvester Huggins and his band of about a dozen, rowdy teenage boys showed up in their growling, souped-up cars. They

jumped out of their vehicles, swinging heavy chains, flashing knives and proudly packing pistols stuck in their waistbands, gangster style.

“We gonna rumble, today,” Huggins announced.

My father turned, frantically searching the faces in the crowd around him. When he finally saw Edna and me standing on the front steps, he yelled:

“Edna! Billy! In the house. Now!”

We went back in, but we stayed by the window so we could see.

Sylvester Huggins and some of his crew removed their t-shirts, exposing rippling, athletic torsos.

“What? We supposed to be scared cause a nigger takes his shirt off?” laughed a loud-mouthed farmer.

“You ain’t going to be livin’ long enough to be scared, white motherfucker,” Huggins taunted.

I hoped the state troopers would show up. But they didn’t come this time. Instead, something else happened. Something remarkable: something that, to this very day, fills me with awe.

My father stood in the middle of a swirling circle of angry people who were ready to shoot, stab, and club one another to death.

We smelled them before we saw them. Even from where we were in the house, Edna and I got whiffs of the mercilessly awful, pungent stink of cheap wine and sour body odors. Appearing out of thin air, three, ghost-white, sick-looking tramps stood next to my father, reeling on their feet and skunk-drunk. I recognized them. It was Jiggs, still wearing my father’s ill-fitting clothes. The other two scarecrow men were Skeet and Jo Jo, their tattered, soiled and ragged clothes draped upon their undernourished frames.

Astonished, the crowd murmured. “Where’d they come from? Did you see that? What the hell...? They came out of nowhere.”

The three men moved like inebriated phantoms, staggering apparitions, saying nothing. Jiggs positioned himself in front of Sylvester Huggins. Skeet and Jo Jo, each placed themselves next to two other shirtless, young men from Huggins’ group.

“What you doing, filthy thing? Get away from me,” Huggins shouted.

The big football player balled his hands into sledge-hammer-sized fists and issued a walloping, right-handed, haymaker at Jiggs, delivering enough power to break a good man’s jaw. When Jiggs didn’t fall, Huggins took another violent, circular swipe at the gaunt man. He hit nothing. Jiggs was standing right in front of him, but Huggins’ powerful blows never connected. It looked as if Huggins’ fists passed right through Jiggs’ head, like the emaciated tramp was made of smoke and light, not flesh and bone.

The next eerie thing happened when Jiggs took his trembling hand and placed it upon Huggin’s broad, bare shoulder. Huggins tried in vain to lift the hobo’s bony hand and push it away from him. He could not.

“Look at his back,” Old Doc Simone said, pointing toward Huggins.

“He’s got scratches on his back. The Shepard girl scratched her killer. She fought so hard she broke her nails.”

“I should have known it,” my father said to Huggins. “That was your switchblade we found stuck in Sheila Shepard.”

Huggins was still struggling, trying to loosen Jiggs’ grip on his shoulder.

“Who are the other punks that helped you rape and kill that poor child?” my father asked.

I heard a click and saw a slender, silver blade winking in the sun. Skeet stood next to a shirtless teenager who pulled a switchblade and brandished it. The teenager Jo Jo stood next to sprang into action by pulling a homemade zip-gun from his waistband and randomly pointed it at the people nearest to him.

“I knew we shouldn’t have messed with that girl. I knew it.” The teenager waved his homemade weapon wildly; his bugged-eyed expression conveyed his panic.

“Shut-up, fool,” Huggins shouted. “These goddamned hicks don’t know shit. Shut-up.”

Huggins thrashed about trying to get Jiggs’ hand from his shoulder. He couldn’t dislodge the wino’s grip.

“I ain’t going down for this, damn it,” the switchblade-wielding teenager vowed.

“Huggins killed her. We was just trying to have some fun. She went crazy. Huggins said she’d tell everybody what we done to her. He killed her. He killed her, damn it!”

The teenager’s unexpected confession caused the crowd’s mood to change. Shock replaced anger. Everyone seemed stunned and surprised.

I don’t know when Old Saul Shepard, the dead girl’s father, joined the melee. I don’t remember seeing him before he made his way through the throng, stepped forward and shot Sylvester Huggins at close range with a .38 Saturday night special. Jiggs removed his hand from Huggins’ shoulder and the burly teenager crumpled to the ground, clutching his abdomen.

“That was my daughter; my baby you killed.” Old Saul was sweating, crying and shaking with rage and grief. Before anyone could stop him, Old Saul Shepard put the smoking gun-barrel to his own temple and fired.

The moment was pushed into slow motion. Chips and pieces of Old Saul’s skull separated and floated in the air like feathers. His face contorted into an agonizing grimace; his eyes rolled upward until

the pupils disappeared, leaving two white ovals that looked like hard-boiled eggs. He collapsed gradually, sinking into a heap upon the ground. The slow-motion spell snapped and more chaos quickly unfolded.

The teenager with the zip-gun attempted to fire the flimsy weapon, which was made from an automobile antenna, a piece of wood, a rubber band and masking tape. Instead of issuing a .22 caliber round of ammunition as intended the crude, homemade gun simply exploded, severing all five fingers from the boy's hand.

The teenager waving the switchblade tried to escape through the crowd. He took a couple of rapid steps, tripped and fell on his own knife. Old Doc Simone said later that the sharp blade pierced the boy's heart, killing him almost instantly.

Old Saul and the boy with the knife lay dead on the dusty road. The boy with the severed fingers writhed in pain, his injured hand bled freely. Sylvester Huggins coiled and twisted in the dirt. Apparently he'd gone into shock. He shuddered violently and held his bloodied hands over the seeping gunshot wound.

Old Doc Simone rushed toward Huggins to help him. Jiggs waved a thin, trembling hand, motioning for him to stop.

"There's no need. He will never know peace," Jiggs said, his voice lingering like an echo.

Most of the villagers who were present that day acknowledged later that they would never forget the look on Jiggs' face at that moment. At that instant, he seemed completely consumed by inner conflict and torment.

"There was a pleading, aching look in his eyes," Old Doc Simone said. "It was like he suffered, but not just for himself. It was like he suffered for the whole world."

“He was burdened with a heavy sadness,” Old Lady Bailey said. “I saw it in ‘im the moment I found ‘im hiding under my front porch.”

“He looked like a man with a troubled soul,” my father said.

But to me, Edna described it best.

“He looked like he carried everyone’s worst hurt deep down inside of him. The way Jesus must have looked on the cross, dying for our sins,” she said.

* * *

The state troopers finally came. Edna and I ventured from the house and stood on the front porch.

With wailing sirens and flashing red lights, two patrol cars screeched to a stop. Their arrival created a diversion. The white farmers lowered their weapons and moved to the road’s edge like innocent passersby. The villagers gathered in a group by the picket fence surrounding our front yard, acting as if they had every right to be there and to be armed. The unruly teenagers dispersed, concealing their weapons behind their backs and trying to appear as if they were just casually heading for their vehicles.

The familiar, officious lead trooper jumped from his car with his weapon drawn. He saw the water truck parked in front of the charred, wooden cross.

He saw Old Saul and the teenager dead on the ground. He saw the badly wounded Sylvester Huggins and the squirming boy with the missing fingers.

Looking over his shoulder, he yelled to his fellow troopers.

“Get on the radio. Get an ambulance and get backup out here, now.”

He turned to my father with an I-told-you-so look on his face. “Well, it finally happened!”

My father wasn't listening. He stood in the middle of the road with his Brooklyn Dodger's baseball cap in his hand, scratching his head.

"Did anybody see what happened to Jiggs and those other two hobos?" he asked. I automatically looked to the places on the road where the men were standing just seconds before. They were gone.

"They're gone, Cockeyed Bill," Old Durante, the Mayor said.

"What's that there?" Old Doc Simone asked.

My father looked down. On the ground at his feet was a clear, unlabeled pint bottle filled to the neck with yellow Muscatel wine.

"There they are," someone yelled.

I turned to see Jiggs, Skeet and Jo Jo, walking--not staggering--strong and upright. The road extended north and south. All the parked vehicles, the water truck, the cars the teenagers drove, my father's red pickup, Old Doc Simone's black hearse and the troopers' patrol cars blocked the road a few feet to the north of our house.

The three hobos headed toward us, eerily advancing from about one hundred yards to the south. I wondered how they could have gotten so far away so quickly. Only seconds ago they stood in the middle of the seething crowd.

Jiggs, who still wore my father's old clothes, didn't look so odd anymore;, and Skeet's and Jo Jo's garments didn't seem so dirty and ragged. As they came closer, I could see that their bare feet no longer touched the ground, yet they continued walking toward us.

Everyone saw them: The farmers, the villagers, the teenagers, the Troopers, my father, and Edna and I. It was a warm day but a cool, wandering wind whipped past us as the three hobos approached.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked repeatedly, not believing what I saw. The three men were walking on the air. With each step they ascended higher and higher as if they were climbing an invisible staircase.

A stronger, colder wind gusted, stirring dust and blurring my vision. When the dust settled, I saw that Jiggs, Skeet and Jo Jo were joined by four other spectral human figures. They all walked above the ground, ascending skyward with each step.

As the images came nearer, I could better identify the individuals who'd joined Jiggs and his two companions. It took a breathless moment for me to realize what I was witnessing, and when I did, a shivering, tingling sensation coursed through me.

Sheila Shepard, the girl we buried only a few days before, was on the left of Jiggs. She was slender and pretty, the way I remembered her. To Sheila's left, and holding her hand, was her father, Old Saul Shepard. Strangely, I knew his lifeless body was lying in a heap upon the dirt road. Yet, there he was walking into the sky. It was as if his spirit had risen and walked alongside his daughter's spirit. He wore his black train conductor's uniform with its shiny buttons gleaming in the dazzling sun.

On Jo Jo's right, walked a teenage boy, his brow untroubled, and his eyes clear and bright. My shocked senses struggled to grip reality. I was witnessing the resurrection of the slain teenager, Emmett Till. I recognized him from pictures in the newspaper that were taken before he was so viciously mutilated and murdered.

Next to Emmett Till, walked a beautiful, beautiful woman. Her hair was long and black; sunlight illuminated her bronze-colored skin. My heart recognized her before my mind could. It was the woman in my dreams. I was watching my mother, marching upward, into the heavens, with the others.

Rapture compelled the crowd. It seemed like we all were given a chance to glance beyond the stars to see into our own wounded hearts.

My father stood in the middle of the road. Like everyone else who was there, he appeared dazed and bewildered by seeing the magic and majesty of seven souls ascending into the blue. I ran from the porch to stand by his side. Edna followed me and we watched the images lift and rise higher and higher, until they looked like small birds soaring above us. Fluffy clouds parted as if separated by the hands of some powerful, unseen Almighty. Suddenly they were gone from sight, disappearing into the floating, silky-white cloud.

No one knew what to say. In the dirt at our feet there was death, blood and pain. And we did not know what to say. So we said nothing. The circling Earth turned with such force that I feared I would be flung into outer-space.

Anxiously, I scanned the faces of the people who witnessed the phenomenon of Jiggs, my mother and the others walking into heaven.

I looked at the white farmers lined up at the edge of the road; their anger seemingly melted into compassion. They'd dropped their weapons. Their hard eyes softened.

I looked at the villagers gathered by the fence; they seemed more humble, reverent. They shook their heads in disbelief and murmured: "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord."

I looked at the state troopers; they seemed powerless. Their arrogance was muted. They seemed to know they were in the presence of a higher authority.

I looked at the young black men who had come to our house that day to fight and kill. They cried like the children they really were.

I looked at my father and my sister and understood how fragile and gentle were their beating hearts.

Everyone there had been touched. They watched the sky. I knew they would watch for the rest of their lives.

* * *

Sylvester Huggins died on the way to the hospital.

A month later, the boy who blew his hand apart with the homemade gun died from a massive gangrene infection.

Summer had died, too. One cool, early autumn morning our telephone rang.

“Sheriff’s Office,” my father answered.

“Yes, I am the one,” he said. “What’s that again? You’re calling from what Army base? Oh, Fort Bragg. Yeah, sure. I called about a month ago. I was asking for information about three men. What’cha got for me?”

A hollow silence filled the room.

“OK,” he eventually said. “Thank you for calling.”

My father replaced the telephone receiver like it was made of egg shells. He went to the front door and looked toward the inexplicable sky.

“What happened, Pa?” Edna asked. My father had his back to us so we couldn’t see his face. He shrugged, shook his head as if to say “nothing,” and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“No, Pa. What Happened?” Edna pleaded.

“Oh, that was the United States Army finally calling me back about Jiggs and them other fellas.” He deliberately refused to turn in our direction as he spoke. We knew he was upset because his voice trembled and he gulped like his mouth was thick with saliva.

“Well, what did they say, Pa?” Edna approached him and put an arm around his waist.

He turned slightly and we could finally see his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks like silver ribbons rippling against the dark earth.

“That was an Army general. He called to tell me that the men I wanted to know about were killed in action overseas.

“Skeet and Jo Jo died in France in May 1944, more than 10 years ago. Jiggs was killed a few months later.”

My father, Edna and I went out on the front porch and silently watched the sky.

###

The White Lie

The leather whip's long, sharp tongue pops like a firecracker. A heart-breaking scream shatters the star-dusted Southern night sky. Blow-by-rhythmic-blow, scream-by-chilling-scream, these are the sounds of cruelty's maddening meter as tragedy pulses through the slave quarters of Hiram Hampton's South Carolina plantation.

It is the seventh day of the seventh month in the year of our Lord, 1859. Heaven and Hell know Hanna will die tonight. The over-worked slaves—the under-fed men, women and children who shiver with fear inside their makeshift hovels—they know Hanna will die this night. They pray for her as well as for themselves.

The well-dressed guests from the main house have left Hiram's pre-nuptial celebration to suck what joy they can from the blossoming carnage—they know the slave wench will die this night. They wonder how long it will take.

The worms and the slugs and the bugs and the leaves on the trees and the musky magnolias down by the hedges, they know Hanna will die on this sickly sweet summer's eve. They wonder marvelous nothing. They do what they must. They wait, they listen and like all things of the earth, they understand that atrophied blood and murdered human flesh nourishes the American soil. The soil sows the American crops and the reaping of those crops makes cannibals of us all.

The slap of the whip, the bite of its tip, the spurting blood, the tender flesh, the ripping flesh. The scream is so far away now the sound no longer comes from inside her. Hanna knows she will die this hollow, unholy night.

The wicked crack of the surly whip breaks its brutal beat:

“We found ‘em, Master! We found de pearls. She had ‘em cooking in a pot, ‘bout a mile down road, off into de bushes, under de moonlight.” It is a young slave boy, no more than fifteen years old, who delivers the message.

The first thing Hiram did when he received word that the pearls were missing was to dispatch his white overseers and a few trusted slaves to launch a search of the plantation’s grounds. The next thing he did was to snatch Hanna out of her shack, and chain her to the spank-worn whipping post, where he assaulted her, abused her and beat her like she was a beast he feared.

Hiram knew Hanna had stolen the missing pearls. She had access to the main house and she had cause for grievance. He’d bought her when she was estimated to be twelve years old. She’d borne two sons by him, and she hated him for selling her teenage mulatto boys in exchange for the precious gems he intended for his bride’s dowry.

Now he stands sweat-soaked before this mound of open wounds and sprouting sores that, not more than an hour ago, had been a young, attractive African woman that someone had named Hanna.

“Did ‘ya bring the pearls?” Hiram demands of the boy. He is malevolent, menacing. His frowning brow shades darkly gleaming eyes.

“No suh, no suh, Master. Dem pearls, dey was boiling in somthin’ like a stew. Yes suh, dey was cooking with rat heads, and snakeheads and all dey guts and all dey chopped up body parts. Nunn’a us wanna touch dem pearls, Master suh.”

Hiram viciously backhanded the boy, sending him sprawling onto the blood soaked ground. On this night Hiram is fiftyish, tall, broad shouldered, and a bit portly. He looks like a man who enjoys the excesses of Southern aristocracy and its mystique of exclusivity, where white skin is an emblem of privilege, where black skin is a victim’s flag.

“What kind of pickaninny, voodoo juju you trying to pull?” Hiram growls.

His remarks are meant for Hanna but she can't hear him. His whip has torn one of her ears from the side of her head. The other ear is split and hanging by scraps of flesh, flapping like an old shutter threatening to fall away from the window. One eye is missing, the other swollen shut; her shredded lips are covered with a bloody froth. From head to toe, she is a massive welt of slashes, bruises and opened wounds. Already, flies are buzzing in a circle, anticipating a sticky feast.

“Black magic cannot save your black soul this sinful night, you wicked wench. Leave her chained to the post,” Hiram commands. “Leave her be as an example to all the thieving minded nigras on this plantation. Remember dumb darkies, if you steal—this is what you get -- misery, pain and death.”

He spits on the blood-red ground then drops the whip like it's a hot iron. He wheels on the boy and commands, “Get your lazy black ass up and show me where them pearls are.”

Mortally ravaged, limp and nearly lifeless, Hanna hangs from the whipping post, shackled and connected to the whirling world by the thinnest thread. Her essence exists within the confines of the smallest spot, a special, precious, impregnable space that offers some solace, some safety. She is a fetus in the womb of time, reborn in the quiet center of her storming soul, perilously lost, yet profoundly protected. She is nowhere in the middle of everywhere. She is in a calm place where she can reflect upon the curse she set in motion with the rat heads and the snakeheads.

It is a fleeting, beautiful breath of cognition, a serene knowledge that her hex will survive with immense power. She welcomes the death that swaths her with the knowledge that her revenge will be delivered.

Hiram recovers the precious pearls, plucking them from Hanna's slimy brew with his bare hand. He sends for the jeweler from Charleston, who stays on the plantation overnight, cleaning, polishing and

restringing the impeccably formed, marble-sized gems.

Hiram is married the afternoon following Hanna's death by his hand, chained to his phallic whipping post. Before the ceremony, Hiram's guests and his white overseers beg him to remove Hanna's body from public view.

They plead: "Throw her into the big pit with the rest of the dead darkies. Throw lime over her corpse. Let her bones bleach with the other trash. You have your justice."

Hiram refuses: "She left her place. She left her place. She chose to rebel against me, a transgression no white man can countenance. Death is not insult enough. Let her stay. Let everyone see her corrode."

The rich, the beautiful, and the *crème de la crème* of Southern society attend the wedding. The nuptials take place on the mansion's lavish west lawn, far removed from the stench of death wafting from the horrific fruit rotting in the Southern sun; a lonely lingering lump of flesh that now serves as Hiram's monument to fear and intimidation.

Hiram's blushing bride, Lila Lee Bethel, plays her part to perfection. She is the poised cultivation of beauty, the archetype young woman of the Old South's upper class. She is privileged and pampered, flirtatious yet chaste in her demeanor. She is a prize and a trophy for Hiram Hampton, who is twice her age, a man she will never grow to love, but a man who can solidify her position in a culture where money is everything.

The wedding vows are exchanged against a rich backdrop of gently flapping linen that covers elaborately appointed tables laden with fancy cuisine that includes roast duck, stuffed game hens, wild rice, succotash and cornpone. A crowd of genteel men and women gather around the bride and groom to witness the presentation of the pearls. They have all heard so many stories about these mystical, magic beads.

It is rumored that the iridescent jewels were retrieved by two generations of native Fiji divers, diving deep on foray after foray into lava-lined lagoons, holding their breaths for untold numbers of minutes, flouting schools of man-eating sharks, ignoring the flesh-numbing stings of armies of jelly fish to procure over half a century, thirty of nature's most excellent artistic creations.

Another story claimed the pearls had once belonged to Edward Teach, better known as Black Beard the pirate. It was said Black Beard exchanged them for a single night of sexual favors from the Duchess of Devonshire.

Now the legendary pearls are in the hands of Hiram Hampton, slave trader, slave owner, master of all he surveys. Hiram paid five thousand dollars and traded two of his high-priced Negroes for this string of pearls.

The Charleston jeweler does Hiram proud. The pearls glow in the crushed velvet box, luxuriously cushioned on a bedding of soft satin. This is Hiram's proudest moment. At long last he has picked a bride from the South's finest cotillion; his presentation of the pearls is the final touch to his self-certified pedigree.

The pearls are brought out on a shining silver tray. Hiram begins his speech, declaring the pearls to be the official Hampton family heirloom.

Overhead, a swift swarm of thick, dark clouds blacken the sky. A sweltering summer wind billows the white linen on the tables. A jolting flash of lightning, a frightening clash of thunder -- a sudden onslaught of heavy, pelting rain sends Hiram's guests scurrying for shelter on the mansion's wide veranda.

The velvet box spills from the silver tray, blown by the wind, and the pearls fall to the ground. The fierce rain and wind swirls across the veranda, driving the guests inside, where they gather like wilting weeds. The women's waterlogged and broad brimmed straw hats droop; the men's drenched white

cotton suits wrinkle.

The luster of the event is tarnished. Hiram presents a string of muddy pearls to his bride while the wind shrieks and the rain pounds angrily against the elite mansion.

The cleansing downpour baptismally washes over the mutilated remains of a wretched slave girl who dared to appeal to both heaven and hell for justice.

In the year and a half that follows Hiram's wedding, he continues to prosper, buying, selling and owning human souls. His dutiful wife gives him a son to ensure the perpetuation of his line. He has long forgotten Hanna, erased his memory of her hatred for him and the brazen act that she knew would mean her death.

All is well with Hiram Hampton. He is safe and his vision of the world is secure.

He is unaware of the serpents uncoiling and slithering across the South's wide swaths of sprawling, ebullient plantations, the scrappy miles of poorly watered cotton fields and mosquito infested rice fields, the disjointed crazy quilt of sharecropper farms and the dank, patchy forests of pine and oak.

There is talk of civil war and secession. The hollow winds of war blow off shore and ripple the murky waters of the Charleston Harbor, where Hiram's moored slave ships gently bob, waiting to be dispatched, their empty holds hungry for human cargo.

The South gathers to preserve its way of life, the underpinnings and the underbelly of which is slavery. In 1860, when war is a certainty, Hiram has a choice to make. He can rally with his Southern compatriots, risk losing his wealth and resources, and live up to the pledge of his segregationist convictions.

Instead he chooses, as Hanna could have predicted, to sell the plantation, the ships, and the

slaves. He sells everything while he can still get a pretty penny for his holdings. When his Confederate colleagues hear of this, they confront Hiram.

“Gentlemen, I assure you all that by liquidating my holdings I can better help our Glorious Cause. I can help finance the war for the rights of white men. As a Southern gentleman, this I will surely do. I pledge my property, my wealth and my life.”

So Hiram assures his fellow plantation owners. But on April 21, 1861, when Confederate ships fire on Fort Sumter, Hiram Hampton and his vast fortune are nowhere to be found. No one hears about the Hamptons until after the April 9, 1865 surrender at the Appomattox Court House in Richmond, Virginia.

The South is devastated and licking its wounds. Rumors trickle in, that Hiram has settled in upstate New York where he continues his penchant for purchasing flesh. This time his market is not human flesh, but horse flesh. But in the South there is no heart to pursue a deserter, a coward and a reprobate.

Hiram emerges as a post Civil War Yankee with lucrative holdings in the budding sport of thoroughbred horse racing. His enemies charge that he fixes races, sabotages the stables of his fellow competitors, and buys off politicians to protect his turf. Aside from his location, nothing much has changed about Hiram Hampton. He is odious, perfidious, and contemptible. Even into his eighties he is driven by an amoral greed that abates only when age and illness bring him to death’s door.

On the night of his death—after his family has deserted him, when the doctor and the nurse leave him for the moment and he is all alone in his big bed—a ghastly, ghostly figure steps from the shadows of his darkened bedroom.

“Your time has come, now you will drown in lakes of fire!”

Hiram barely lives, but the phantom’s presence stirs the embers of his declining verve. He manages to utter, sotto voce: “Who’s there?”

“I am your nightmare and I have come to issue your final, unending punishment. You can never harm or hurt anyone ever again. You will be chained underground to crawl with rodents. You will never rise. I bind you to the sulfur. I sic snakes upon you so that you may scream in pain as I once did. I put everlasting torment on you, forever.”

“Closer... come closer,” Hiram croaks. “I do know you...”

“You never knew me. You only knew your pleasure and your anger. You came to my bed, even when I was a child. You left your spunk and took my goodness. I bore two sons, the only good to ever come out of you. You ripped them apart like paper, trash you traded for pearls. I cursed those pearls. I prayed to the Devil below and the Lord above and both deities granted my wish: You will burn in hell forever and so, with the exception of my two innocent boys, shall all who possess one drop of your poisoned blood. This curse will extend for seven generation. It will end when the last Hampton slithers into hell.”

“Hanna!” Hiram rasps.

“You said you would never sell my sons. You lied. *You lied!* And it will be a lie that ends your corrupt bloodline. When each generation of your descendants meets their self-devouring end, I will be there to usher them to join you in hell.”

“You’re Hanna... You’re Hanna...” Hiram trembles. “B... b... Hanna was a dumb niggra slave... You don’t talk like a niggra... You can’t be...”

“I am all things. I am the wisdom of the ages. I am the knowledge. I am the universe. I am the one you whipped to death! What you did not understand is this -- when you whipped me, you whipped yourself. You whipped your race and mine. You condemned our human family to generations of injury. You inflicted sores that will not heal.

“*I am* Hanna. I never was a niggra. I never was a slave. I never was dumb. The woman you

whipped to death was a creation of your evil desire, your wanton self-righteousness and your gratuitous racial hubris.”

The apparition moves closer to Hiram’s bed, and is transformed, cloaked in a sudden radiant light. His last vision on this Earth is of a beautiful young African woman.

The woman who would have been had she not been stolen from her mother as a child. The woman who would have been had she been left free to live and love and hope.

On the seventh day of the seventh month of the year of our Lord 2007, Janet Hampton busies herself tidying the second-floor nursery of her well-appointed and newly constructed two million dollar home, located in the heart of the Royal Oaks Country Club community, a short forty miles from downtown Houston, Texas.

She doesn’t mind doing a few light household chores two days each week. After all, she considers herself a housewife, albeit a privileged one.

Most days, Hattie cleans the house and sees to the children while Janet writes letters or make phone calls in the downstairs den, her time devoted to organizing charity fund-raisers. But Hattie called in sick today. The third time this month.

Janet decides she must talk with Greg; they need a new domestic service provider, preferably one that does not employ African American help. Janet does not consider herself a racist, but she thinks Negroes are an imperfect people. Slavery was a long time ago; shouldn’t they be able to adjust to the modern world by now? But they are undependable, lazy and untrustworthy.

One day she caught Hattie looking at her pearls. The black housekeeper actually picked them up and held them against her breast while looking into a mirror.

Hattie is a dark skinned, heavy set, middle-aged woman with huge dark rings circling her eyes, and Janet isn't that impressed with Hattie's work. She cleans house well enough, she keeps the children clean and fed, but Janet can't use her to serve at her posh fundraising parties. The older black woman is just not attractive. She's lived a hard life and it shows on her face and in her demeanor.

Beyond all those considerations, Janet doesn't feel comfortable around Hattie. At times, the black woman seems surly toward her, like she resents her. No, Hattie has to go. Janet makes up her mind. She will fire the black woman and change the home services agency to one that can supply suitable domestic help.

It's just as well that Hattie isn't here. Today Janet needs to keep busy. Her husband, Greg, once the darling of the Houston financial scene, is being vilified in the press as the "Junk Bond King of the Southwest." True to the Hampton family tradition for swindling and profiteering, he faces felony charges for violating securities laws.

Today Greg is attending a preliminary court hearing. He is accused of selling millions of dollars of junk bonds through his New York-based investment firm. Greg could spend years in prison if found guilty. He could lose his fortune.

Janet is concerned but not worried. After all, she'd been warned about the Hampton men. They were marvelous money-makers, but doubts about their methods always hovered over them. Greg had faced legal challenges before and always prevailed. He had the money, the lawyers and the insider's influence to ward off charges of impropriety and under the table dealings. Even though she is apprehensive about today's court decision, Janet is confident that her husband will prevail. He always has.

At thirty-two years old, Janet Hampton is attractive, tall, shapely and physically fit. Her long, straight blond hair is pulled back from her forehead and held at the nape of her neck by a filigreed 14-carat gold clip. She is smartly dressed, even at home, doing chores, and as she always does, she wears a necklace of rare pearls, a gift from her mother-in-law.

The collar of a silky white blouse peeks from beneath a soft, lavender mohair sweater. Her slim waist and curvaceous hips show to sultry perfection in her designer jeans. A preferred customer at Neiman Marcus, everything Janet buys looks designed just for her. She wears a new pair of stylish running shoes, her thick white socks folded to just below the ankle the way she likes to wear them. She hopes to get a little free time later to go jogging on the deluxe treadmill in the fully equipped exercise room, where Greg lifts weights most mornings before he leaves for work.

On her left hand are two elegant rings: a gold wedding band studded with a half-dozen modest-sized diamonds and a more plain, yet still elegant, silver engagement ring that Greg gave her when he proposed marriage.

Janet's father was a successful Texas politician. Her mother served as a dean of academics at an exclusive all-girls private college in Dallas, where Janet grew up. Her whole life has been one of promise and advantage. Her parents are retired now and spend their time traveling where their whims and the travel consultants lead them.

Janet met Greg Hampton six years before at a retirement dinner held in her father's honor at an exclusive downtown Dallas hotel. The daughter of a popular local politician, Janet had attended many such functions. She wore midnight blue Valentino and moved around the lobby chatting up the guests as they waited to be seated for dinner.

When one of her father's associates introduced her to Greg, their eyes met and locked. Clichéd as it seemed, she knew he was perfect for her. He was tall and very good-looking with emerald green eyes, wavy sandy hair, a classically straight nose, thin lips and a strong, square chin. She learned later that he'd graduated Magna Cum Laude from Princeton with an advanced degree in business economics. He was in his early thirties and already eminently successful. He'd asked her for a date at their first meeting and she'd accepted.

Because Greg lived in New York, their romance began slowly. Over the next three months she

saw him only four times, during his business trips to Dallas.

One day Greg called and asked if she would visit him at his parents' estate in upstate New York. She agreed and flew to New York City. Greg picked her up at the airport. He drove a sparkling new, gray and silver Mercedes. The two-hour drive to the Hampton's posh manor was dreamy.

New York State was quite gorgeous. Green, tree-lush hills rolled alongside the smooth highway. Apple orchards for as far as the eyes could see gave the late summer air a scent of fruit and freshness. Sunlight poured like honey from a powder blue sky.

The Hampton's 1500-acre estate was located just north of Saratoga Springs, the charming city known for its Revolutionary War history and its chic, big stakes horse racing. The main house was a sprawling, impeccably cared-for antebellum mansion.

Huge white pillars vaulted upward to form a wide, expansive veranda. Doublewide oak doors with polished brass doorknobs and beautifully refined brass knockers opened into a grand hallway of shining floors and walls lined with museum-quality paintings. A dozen finely sculptured busts sat on rigid pedestals like stony sentinels guarding unspoken sins.

Colored servants quietly carried her bags up the carpeted staircase while Greg guided her into a huge library lined with floor-to-ceiling mahogany shelves stacked with expensive leather-bound law books and other rare tomes that would be the envy of any scholar. With its dark leather furniture and its thick velvet drapes, the large room exuded wealth.

"Mom? Dad?" Greg said softly.

A matronly woman and a distinguished-looking older man rose from two high-backed leather chairs that were positioned so they faced away from the room's entrance.

"This is Janet, the girl I've told you so much about."

“We are delighted, my dear. Welcome to our home,” Greg’s mother said, walking toward her and extending a delicate hand.

She is a darling woman, Janet thought. A small dumpling of a lady, Greg’s mother wore a tailored, finely knitted blue dress and matching jacket. A string of opulent pearls hung loosely around her neck. Her pearl earrings were embroidered with gold. Her coiffed hair was white and flawlessly arranged. She was grandmotherly and sweet looking.

Greg’s father was a big man, tall and portly in his mid-seventies. The slightly distended paunch, the head of snow-white hair and the white handlebar mustache gave him an air of distinguished confidence. He reminded Janet a little of Santa Claus. He stepped forward and offered a huge, meaty hand.

“Well, well,” he said, his clear green eyes sparkling with affection. “Now I do see what all the fuss is about. Thank you for coming, dear. I was beginning to think my egghead son only cared about business. I am proud to see he does have an eye for beauty. I am Irvin Hampton. This is my wife, Grace.

Janet’s planned three-day visit turned into a ten-day stay. She and Greg went horseback riding on his family’s beautiful estate. The Hampton’s stables were among the finest in the country. Each year several of their foals brought high prices at the famous Fitz-Tipton auctions held at the racetrack.

The couple attended the Saratoga races. Greg didn’t like gambling on horses, even though some of his family’s money came from the racing industry.

“I don’t mind taking chances but only when I can control the events,” he told her.

He encouraged her to bet on several races, which she did. When she won a couple of times, Janet found the sport exciting. During her stay, Greg had to attend several business sessions in New York City. On these occasions, he took a helicopter from Albany to the city, returning eight to ten hours later.

One day, one of the colored servants came into the study to tell her that Mrs. Hampton would appreciate her company. The servant, a dignified older black man, accompanied Janet to a third floor sitting room.

“Come in Janet, please. Have a seat. Greg won’t be home for a while. I was hoping we could take time to talk more. Get to know one another a little better.”

“Why, certainly, Mrs....” Janet stopped, and then said, “Grace. I would love to.”

Janet took a seat in a comfortable cushioned chair opposite the older woman. She noticed the older woman loved to wear her pearl necklace. She’d worn it every day Janet had been here.

“Jason,” Grace said to the old servant. “Please bring us some tea and maybe something to snack on.”

“Yes, em,” the servant said obediently. He quietly left the room.

“I’m sure you know a lot about us by now,” Grace Hampton said. “Irvin is a retired New York State Supreme Court Judge. He sat on the bench for many, many years. I was nearly thirty years old when Greg was born. Irvin was almost ten years older. The Hampton family’s great wealth was amassed generations ago, and not without controversy and scandal. Irvin’s great, great, great grandfather made huge profits from the antebellum slave trade.”

As she spoke, the older woman absent-mindedly fumbled with the string of pearls adorning her neck. Janet took the opportunity to comment about the pearls.

“That necklace is extraordinary, Grace. I notice you wear it daily, even though the pearls appear to be quite rare and extremely precious.”

“Yes, my dear, they are exceptional and very valuable. They are an heirloom and inextricably connected to the so-called wicked Hampton family history. There is a reason why I wear them on most

days. Perhaps I am revealing too much, my dear, but I sense that Greg is very serious about you.”

“Oh, please,” Janet implored. “I am honored you feel you can confide in me.”

“Well, I suppose you should know,” the older woman said with what seemed to Janet a sense of relief. “I’ve been keeper of the family hush-hush for so long. I’m not even sure how much Greg knows about his ancestors or even about his father’s affairs.

“The pearls came into the Hampton family with my husband’s great, great, great grandfather, Hiram. He was a slave trader of ruthless ambition. Just before the Civil War, Hiram decided to take a bride. He wanted to give his young and beautiful new wife the most exquisite wedding present he could find.

“The pearls supposedly belonged to a plantation owner of vicious repute. Hiram bought the pearls for five thousand dollars and two young slave boys. The boys he traded were the sons of an African woman known for casting spells and practicing voodoo. “The plantation owner treated his slaves brutally. It was just the way things were in those days,” Grace Hampton said matter-of-factly. “No one thought of Negroes as being people. The voodoo woman’s sons tried to run away. They were caught and tortured and killed. A vicious lie circulated at the time that Hiram had sired the boys, but I don’t believe such nonsense. Some whites did mingle with the Africans they owned, but I do not believe that Hiram, or any Hampton man, would ever commit such a vile act as to spread his seed among God’s lost souls.

“In any event, the African slave woman placed a curse on the Hampton pearls. She foretold that one day calamity would befall the family, a tragedy so vile and fitting that it would completely destroy the bloodline.”

“Oh, my,” Janet said, inhaling deeply. She didn’t realize it but she’d been holding her breath during Grace’s narrative.

“Such a thing has obviously not come to pass,” Grace Hampton continued. “I’ve always treated it

as just a story. Most families have skeletons in the closet, especially wealthy families such as ours. These pearls were passed down from generation to generation and finally given to me. We laughingly call them ‘pearls of fears,’ simply because nothing has ever come of the old black woman’s curse. I wear the pearls nearly every day in defiance of the superstition that surrounds them.”

“So, the Hampton family started out in the South,” Janet said, summarizing what she thought she knew about the family, “yet you have a wide reputation as well-respected Northerners.”

“There is more to tell. There always is,” Grace Hampton said dryly. “The slave trade, of course, ended with the Civil War. Carpetbaggers took over the South. Hiram couldn’t do business in that environment, so he took his fortune and his family and settled here, in New York State, where we’ve gained Old Money status.

“Greg’s great grandfather was an arms merchant. Rumor claims he tripled the family’s sizeable fortune by selling guns and ammunition to both the United States and the German governments during the First World War. Irvin’s father, Greg’s grandfather, doubled that fortune when he partnered with Joseph Kennedy. Jonas Hampton and Kennedy supposedly engineered the stock market crash of 1929. The Kennedy’s have not fared so well despite their position and power, but no right-thinking person would attribute their travails to notions of curses or payback for supposed past evils.

“Most recently my dear Irvin was accused by the *New York Times*, that filthy, muck-raking Jew rag, of being rewarded handsomely for using his position as a state supreme court judge to pass rulings favoring big money corporate interests over the common man. The article accused us of living the ‘white lie,’ implying that the Hamptons are part of a culture of Caucasian hypocrisy, feigning respectability while exploiting the misfortunes of others. The article called us ‘old-school, die-hard John Birchers,’ members of the American aristocracy of bigots.”

“My, my. How colorful,” Janet exclaimed. “It sounds like a case of serious jealousy. The have-nots bemoaning their fates.”

“I am glad you feel that way, my dear,” the elder woman continued. “We’re an old Eastern family with sentiments that tie us to the segregated South. We are not ashamed of our past. We don’t believe in race mixing, although we want the blacks and Mexicans and such to rise to their own levels of prominence. Being from the Southwest, I am sure you understand these ideas.”

Janet had heard similar sentiments at home, and so she nodded.

“Already there are ugly rumors about Greg trading something called junk bonds. I don’t care what they’re called, Greg will be as successful as his forefathers. The Hampton women have never concerned themselves with the business interests of their husbands. I feel that is the way things should be, and I see that it is important for Greg to have a wife who has breeding. Someone who knows her position in the world; someone who can give him a proper family life. Someone who can help him succeed.”

There came a light tap at the door, followed by the entrance of the old, black servant. At the end of the day, the two women had become great friends. Janet felt like an insider. Her sense of self and her feelings of entitlement began to grow.

After supper that evening, Greg returned from New York City. He said he’d eaten at a restaurant before leaving the city and now he felt like taking a walk. He took Janet by the hand and led her into the cool evening air.

They stopped and stood under one of the huge elm trees that lined the long driveway. Bright stars studded the night sky. The full moon lit the landscape like a huge theater spotlight.

Greg turned to Janet. He fished a small, velvet box from his pocket. The silver ring glinted in the yellow moonlight.

“Janet. Will you marry me?”

Janet threw her arms around him. They kissed passionately.

“Oh, Greg. Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Six months later they were married. At the wedding reception, Grace presented Janet with the string of rare, prized pearls she'd worn over the years. Janet was flabbergasted. Grace whispered: “You are keeper of the family hush-hush, now.”

Greg used the occasion to announce to his parents, his new-in laws, and his guests that he and his new bride had decided to build a home in the suburbs of Houston, Texas. Greg had spent the past two years building strong business ties in Texas. Now he was ready to open a new office in Houston. He would head the Houston office and his trusted business partner would run the more-established New York office.

A year after the wedding, Irvin and Grace Hampton were killed in a horrible automobile accident. Irvin lived long enough to tell authorities that the car crashed when he swerved to avoid hitting an old black woman who suddenly appeared in the middle of the road.

The house the newlyweds built, and where they now live, is a large modern Palm Beach style home with five bathrooms and five bedrooms. In addition to the exercise room and spacious den, there's an indoor pool, a family room, a den, and a well-stocked gunroom. A Texas native, Janet grew up with guns in the house. She knows how to load them and shoot them. Her father took her on hunting trips.

Greg is a gun advocate who likes to hunt wild game. It was good for business to take clients out to shoot duck and wild geese. Greg has a fine collection of rifles, shotguns, and handguns. He insists that he and Janet visit the shooting range at least twice a year. Greg wants his wife to be always able to protect herself if there is danger when he's away from home.

The entrance to their newly built home sports a finely laid Mexican tiled walkway leading to a classically constructed Spanish arch door. Once inside the front door, a foyer leads visitors to the left or right. To the left is a fabulously laid out living room. It is roomy and sparsely endowed with furniture of

the modern style. A black baby grand piano is the room's stunning centerpiece. To the right is a fine dining room where a crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling and gold-framed mirrors hang from the walls. The four-car garage houses the Ford Explorer SUV Janet uses for trips to the store as well as Greg's sporty new Jaguar, which he uses to commute to the office.

This is the world Janet Hampton lives in with her husband Greg and their two children, five-year-old Lisa and three-month-old Jeffery. It is a world far removed from strife and commonality. It's the good life, the best life. A life that is as stainless as her stainless steel kitchen, pure, sterile and spotless.

As Janet busies herself in the nursery, she looks toward the crib where her three-month-old son, Jeffery, gazes happily toward the ceiling. He stretches his pudgy fingers upward, trying to touch the colorful cutouts of fish swimming in the air and strung from a mobile just out of his reach.

"Who likes fish? Who likes the pretty fish?" Janet asks in her cutest baby language voice. The baby responds by grinning toothlessly and drooling spit bubbles.

"Come see, Mommy," Lisa says. "I am cutting out flowers from my book for Daddy. Come see, Mommy."

Janet turns to see her five-year-old daughter standing in the doorway of the nursery. It has taken Janet the better part of an hour that day to bathe Lisa, comb and brush her blond hair and dress her. The little girl wears plaid shorts with suspenders and a white linen blouse, embroidered with little blue flowers on the collar.

Lisa turned five a week ago. One of her birthday presents was a gorgeous coloring book. The present included a full set of Crayolas. The pictures in the book are big and outlined in black so a child can cut them out and paste them on places like the refrigerator door.

"Be careful with those scissors, honey. They look a little too sharp for you."

“I got them off the table, Mommy. These are big girl scissors. I don’t want to use baby scissors, Mommy. Come see, Mommy. Come see.”

Janet smiles patiently and lovingly. “In a moment, honey. Mommy is busy. Judging by the odor in here I think someone needs his diapers changed.”

“I wanna help, Mommy. What can I do?”

“You can watch, honey,” Janet says patiently. She strides over to the counter, picks up a fresh cloth diaper, a container of powder and several moistened baby wipes.

Moving deftly, Janet picks the baby up and places him on the changing table at the foot of the crib. She lays the baby on his back and removes the soiled diaper, careful not to let the contents spill.

Jeffery responds by giggling and burbling more spit bubbles. Janet wipes him clean.

“What is that, Mommy?” Lisa points to her brother’s small red penis, protruding from between his fat cherub-like legs. “I don’t have one.”

Janet isn’t quite ready to introduce the idea of gender and sexual differences to her five-year old daughter; she thinks it might be best to keep Lisa innocent to those concepts right now. Her job is to keep the family pure and unspoiled. She thinks it best to tell a little white lie.

“Oh, that’s just something the doctor forgot to cut off,” she explains with a smile.

Just then, she feels the small cell phone vibrate in the breast pocket of her blouse. She retrieves the instrument, punches a small button and holds the phone to her ear.

“Hi, honey,” she says, her face lighting with one of her bright smiles. “I’m changing the baby. You need a telephone number from your address book? The last time I saw it, it was in the nightstand drawer by the bed. I know you don’t like talking to me about business but how’s the

hearing going?’

Placing the baby, diaper-less, back in the crib so he won’t fall on the floor, she runs along the carpeted hallway to the master bedroom.

She’s gone only a couple of minutes. She finds the address book, recites the number to Greg, and repeats her concern about the court hearings for the fraud charges he faces. She tells him she loves him and snaps off the phone.

That’s when she hears the baby cry. At first it seems to be a tiny gasping. Then it grows to an abnormal howl. Janet drops the phone and runs toward the nursery. When she arrives at the doorway, she cannot believe what she sees.

Jeffery is holding his breath, gathering enough strength to create another wail. Blood spurts from between his legs. The baby’s face is bright red. Finally, he howls a piercing scream. Lisa stands by the crib, holding the scissors in one hand and a small piece of flesh in the other.

The sound begins deep down in Janet’s stomach and grows louder as it is forced up to her throat, escaping from her expanding mouth. “*Nooooooooo!*”

Blood gushes from the baby in red surges. It completely covers the crib’s mattress and drips to the floor. Janet’s panic is lunatic.

Lisa knows she’s done something wrong. Beginning to cry, she drops the scissors and the piece of flesh on the floor and runs from the room.

Janet does not know what to do. She thinks about calling 911. She can’t find her telephone. She’s forgotten she dropped it on the bedroom floor. She looks around for something she can use to stop the bleeding. She sees a couple of baby blankets. Quickly she wraps the baby in the blankets and rushes to the side of the crib. She picks up the baby’s severed penis.

“Oh, no,” she sobs. “Oh, no.”

She doesn't know what to do. The nearest neighbor is about ten minutes away by foot. She must get the baby to the hospital. She picks the infant up. Blood spills from the blankets on to her trembling hands. She places the small penis in the blanket, between the baby's legs.

“Jeffery,” she coos. “Jeffery. Shhh. Mommy's going to take care of everything. Don't cry. Please don't cry!”

One of her blood-splattered hands flies to her forehead; in desperation she clutches her hair. Blood streaks her blonde locks.

Janet is so frightened that her skull feels like it is encased by a tight bathing cap she can't remove. She thinks about the SUV sitting in the garage. If she can get the baby to the hospital before he loses too much more blood, maybe someone can fix this. Maybe there is a chance, she thinks.

She holds the swaddled infant close to her breast and wildly runs to the flight of steps, sprints downstairs, darts through the living room and dashes toward the garage. The keys to the vehicle are where they always are, on a hook by the door. Snatching them, Janet scrambles to the vehicle. Flinging the driver's side door open, she leans in to place the baby in the passenger's seat. He is wailing, bleeding profusely.

Oh, my God. My God. Help me, she prays.

She jumps into the driver's seat, shaking uncontrollably. The keys slip from her bloodied hands. She fumbles, gains control of the keys and finally slips the correct key into the ignition.

The engine roars to life with a huge growl. Janet snatches the gear into reverse. The big SUV jumps into action, shoots backward out of the garage, lurching down the cement driveway.

Janet glances over at the baby. His face is blue. Just then, the backwards-moving vehicle hits

something in the driveway. There is a horrible sounding thud and a thump, followed by a bump, bump.

The vehicle continues its backward thrust until it stops suddenly when Janet slams the brakes. Inertia throws the swaddled baby from the seat to the floor of the vehicle.

From the front windshield she can now see what it is she's backed over. She's run over her child, Lisa, who, confused, had run after her mother and was standing behind the SUV as her mother hurriedly backed the automobile out of the garage.

"Oh, my God! What have I done!" she screams.

She places the vehicle into park, jumps from the cab and kneels over the lifeless body of her child. The little girl is bruised from her legs to her forehead. She looks as if she's sleeping, but she is dead. The monster car has crushed her limbs and internal organs. Janet attempts to pick up her daughter's lifeless body. The girl's limp head tilts to one side. Blood trickles from her slightly parted lips.

Janet is out of her mind with hysteria. Thinking of Jeffery makes Janet run to the passenger side of the SUV. Snatching the door open, she sees her three-month-old infant, lying face down, his tiny hands balled into fists, which are pumping up and down, beating the carpet of the vehicle like little pistons.

When she turns the baby over, Janet knows it is too late to save him. His lips are blue, his eyes are glazed and he's choking, trying to breathe, while swinging his arms and legs wildly. The baby's severed penis is missing. Janet doesn't know if it was lost in the blankets or if it had fallen beneath the seat of the vehicle. Janet gingerly places the blanketed baby on its back on the front seat and steps back from the car, drenched in horror, frozen in terror.

Her bloodied, shaking hands flutter to her own scorching throat. Immediately she feels the string of pearls, the rare jewels her mother-in-law had passed down to her. "*You are the keeper of the family*

hush-hush, now, my dear.” Those words echo in her head, over and over. Finally, she tears the jewels from her neck. The pearls bounce and roll down the driveway, scattering like marbles.

In Janet’s twisted, pain-racked mind, there is only one thing she can do. Her perfect family, her perfect life is ruined in an instant. No one could have foreseen these events. She had been in control. She had expected to be always in control. Now there is nothing. She has killed her two children. She can never face her beautiful husband again.

Janet finds herself in the gunroom, standing over the glass case that holds Greg’s silver .45-caliber handgun. She doesn’t open the drawer with the key, she pounds the glass case with her bare fist until it breaks. Ignoring the cuts and shards of glass stuck in her hand. She picks up the pistol, finds the ammunition, loads the weapon and goes back outside.

Standing over Lisa’s lifeless body lying in the driveway, Janet’s entire soul aches at the vision of her child, dead on the pavement before her. She kneels and kisses the child’s bruised, lifeless forehead. She feels like she’s moving under water. Everything is slow motion. There is a weighty resistance to every movement.

When she looks at the infant lying on the car seat, Janet knows he is dead. He is motionless; his little face is scrunched and frozen in pain. Blood is everywhere. There is no gurgling sound, no struggling to breathe. He is dead and she was powerless to stop it.

The whole world spins around Janet as she stands there. It starts slowly, and then spins faster and faster until she feels she is at the center of a Ferris wheel where an irresistible centrifugal force threatens to cast her from the fixed center and throw her upward and outward into the chaos of outer space.

Suddenly, she is aware of another presence in the garage.

“Help me! Help me!” she shouts.

She looks around searching to see who is there. Her vision is fuzzy. She is an axis and the world spins around her. Her heart stops along with the spinning world when she sees a blur moving quickly toward her. The blur takes shape... Is it...? Is it...? It's Hattie, the housekeeper she plans to fire.

“Hattie. Oh Hattie. Help me!”

“I am Hanna,” the dark woman says. “No one can help you now. I lost two children myself... myself... myself.”

“Hattie! Hattie! I won't fire you. I just need to...”

Janet crazily realizes that no one is there. The image of the old black woman evaporates and Janet is left alone, insanity her only companion.

Janet Hampton releases the safety from the gun, places the nozzle beneath her chin and pulls the trigger. She falls in a heap beside the open door of the vehicle, where her infant son lies dead on the seat and not far from where her young daughter lies broken and lifeless in the driveway.

Greg Hampton is depressed. Driving home from a brutal day before a court that refused to see things his way, he is forlorn and murderously angry. He paid good money for witness testimony that has been discredited. His attempts to negotiate a private deal with the judge have failed. He knows he is only days away from arrest and being charged with defrauding thousands of people and profiting from his deceit. He could lose everything. All of his money, his inheritance, his property -- everything!

As he turns his Jaguar on to the dusty rural road where he lives, he is thankful that he at least still has his beautiful family. His sweet children and his sweet wife are waiting for him. As long as he has them, he feels he will make it. His mother had told him that Hampton men continually face adversity, but

they always prevailed with the strength and support of their families.

Out of nowhere a woman appears in the middle of the road. Greg slams on the brakes. He hadn't seen her a second before but suddenly there she is, standing in the midst of a whirling dust devil. Greg is not in the mood to confront this creepy old woman who, by all appearances, has wandered away from some mental health institution or old folk's home. She wears a tattered blanket that's thrown over her head and shoulders.

Following an impulse driven by his anger over his legal problems, Greg rolls down the window and yells: "Get the fuck out of my way, you old bat!"

The old woman laughs -- no, she cackles.

Greg spins the rear wheels of his Jag and cuts forward and around the old woman. He looks in his rearview mirror, but doesn't see the old woman. The dust devil is gone. No one is standing on the lonely road.

No one's crazy imagination could conjure the ghastly scene Greg sees when he turns into his driveway. His first instinct is to back out and drive away. Surely he must be at the wrong house. Dried blood streaks the pavement, the SUV sits at an absurd angle, a small hand lies lifeless at the edge of the vehicle's front wheel.

Time circles on itself, stands still, rushes forward. The only sound he hears is the thundering in his chest. He steps from the car not feeling the ground. He sees two human feet lying askew in the cryptically cool shade of the garage. They are clad in familiar footwear with white socks folded down at the ankles. The SUV's door is slung wide open on the passenger side. His thumping heart stops. Fear stirs in the pit of his stomach; yellow-green bile involuntarily spews from his mouth, erupting with gut wrenching violence. Greg Hampton instantly inhabits another world, another reality.

He steps cautiously forward. His eyes see what his mind cannot process. Janet lies on the cool

garage floor, a dark pool of maroon spreading in a circle around her head. The opened passenger door of the SUV lures like an ominous cavern into which one is compelled to look, even though every instinct says *don't look!*

Greg does look. What he sees is beyond all human capacity to untangle. Sanity is suddenly an egg crushed underfoot. The baby on the car seat is a dark thing, a shriveled fleshy thing, lifeless, caked with dried blood.

Time is a sucking instrument drawing him into a vacuum of fear and agony, leaving him limp and shapeless. He moves to the front of the SUV, he spies his daughter. She lies dead, bloated from internal bleeding.

“Honey are you okay?” Greg rushes to kneel beside his child’s supine body. The idiotic ludicrousness of his beseeching slices through him like a hot knife. His daughter is dead. His baby boy is dead. His wife is dead.

Greg’s initial sob is a guttural, primordial scream, a chainsaw ripping into the fabric of the universe. His mind turns to mush with the need to understand the world. He mumbles and mutters: “Who? Why?”

Those two questions churn in his mind. He sees a marble-sized ball stuck at the end of a trail of blood where it spun to a stop. He picks up the orb like it’s a fallen cherry, rolls it between his thumb and his forefinger. It is one of the pearls from the family’s heirloom necklace. One of the gems his mother kept close to her breast all his life. He stands and turns in circles, like a man trapped and looking for an exit.

The old woman steps forward, seeming to come from nowhere.

Greg’s surprise sobers him. He recognizes the woman from the road. She’s old. A worn, filthy blanket shrouds her face.

“Who are you? What do you want? Is that you, Hattie? What are doing here? What have you got to do with this?” The questions slip from him like sand flowing through his fingers.

The old woman lets the blanket fall from her shoulders. With the unveiling, a young, strong, barefoot African woman stands before Greg. “I am Hanna,” she says. Her voice sounds like it is filtered through an echo chamber. “I am here to deliver you to your ancestors who live in hell. Your abominable, ancient grandfather Hiram Hampton waits to receive you.”

Greg is so filled with horror the crazy woman somehow makes sense to him. Overcome by shock and dismay, he mutters gibberish and Hanna takes her supremacy.

“It’s your turn to pay. Your turn to sacrifice your children, your love, and your life. Now you are on the other end of the white lie, the great falsehood that white skin gives you the right to kidnap and kill, take land and steal money. The lie that you believe grants you amnesty for your sins against man and the universe.

“The white lie is the notion that nothing stands between you and God but the blue sky. The white lie is one lie too many. The carnage you see is your reaping for the lies you’ve told and for the lies you live.”

The round sun is an orange ball balanced in a bruised sky of purple and yellow. Hanna, the ghost—the undying spiritual energy that has twisted the fate of the Hamptons like a slave turning in the lynch man’s noose—has come for his soul. Before he knows it, Greg picks up the blood-encrusted gun his wife used to end her life and in a swift, thoughtless moment, he blasts a hole in the side of his head.

The world goes black and silent. The deed is done. Hanna’s time to rest has come.

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The Town Of Insanity

My rented Ford Focus sped along the narrow rural road. It was nearly midnight and I was sleepy as hell. I shouldn't have been driving.

The waitress at the diner where I'd stopped for coffee told me there was a motel about fifty miles up the road. That was 67.4 miles ago according to the odometer, and I hadn't seen anything but sinister darkness and the towering black forest defending both sides of the desolate road. I hadn't seen any other cars. There were no streetlights -- no neon signs, no yellowed windows glowing from random houses. The only illumination came from a star-pocked night sky and from a lean slice of a pale, waning moon.

I dozed off, felt the vehicle swerve and snapped awake, heart thudding, I was so tired, so tempted to stop and take a nap, but the dark forest was foreboding. An escaped convict could climb in the car and kill me. It was an irrational notion, but that's how I felt.

I nodded off again and the car swerved. I opened my eyes in time to see a blurry shape in the headlights -- very large, very broad -- standing directly in the path of my car. I yanked the steering wheel to the left, wildly over-correcting in my panic. The rented Ford shot toward the shoulder. I slammed the brake, but too late. The car plummeted down a steep embankment, crashing through limbs and branches, and smacked into a thick stand of trees.

The airbag exploded in my face, stunning me. I was conscious, but barely, heard a loud crackling sound and wondered numbly if the car was on fire.

My door flew open. A very large, very hairy hand unfastened my seat belt. I was grasped roughly by the shoulders and pulled out of the car. The crackle was now a roar, and I could see through my blurred vision that the Ford was nearly engulfed in flames. Then I passed out.

When I came to, I was slumped against a rock. Everything was blurred. A wet cloth covered my forehead. Through the thin material I saw the flicker of a campfire. Some *thing* was in front of me.

“What happened...? Where am I...?” I tried to stand but fell back.

“Hold on, partner. It’s gonna take a minute for you to get it together.”

My vision focused, and I gasped! Was I talking to a bear or a man? I decided it was a man: a big, hairy man wearing nothing but a skimpy loincloth.

“You... you saved my life,” I sputtered.

“I’m gonna heat up some tree bark tea,” he said. “You need something nice and hot inside of you.”

I blinked and saw big tin can simmering on a makeshift grill. In the background there was a soft gurgling sound, like a bubbling stream. I assumed that’s where he got the water to dampen the cloth on my forehead and for the “tea” he was brewing.

My entire body ached, especially my head. I stared at the large hulk crouching beside the fire. He was the hairiest person I’d ever seen. He had a low brow and his bottom jaw jutted outward. He looked more like a Neanderthal than a modern man.

“What brings you out here on a lonely night like this?” he asked.

Given the caveman looks, his cultured, urbane speech surprised me.

“I’m trying to get to Utica, Utah,” I replied. “I’m supposed to meet someone there first thing in the morning. I’m a reporter. My newspaper is publishing a special edition on the town.”

“Uh,” the hairy man grunted. “The town is in ruins. Anyone who might be living there is a renegade, and probably dangerous.”

“The person I’m supposed to meet is a doctor, a scientist. I don’t think he lives there but he did extensive

research on the town and what happened there about thirty years ago.” I paused, then said, “I saw something out there on the road. It stepped in front of my car. I --”

“You’re groggy from the crash,” the shaggy man interrupted. “Be careful about telling stories about things you see up this way. What’s the name of this doctor or scientist you’re supposed to meet?”

“That’s just it,” I said. “He called the newspaper and asked for the interview. The city desk editor spoke with him, I didn’t. I was just told to ask for a Dr. Elliot... or Ellwood... something like that.”

“Have you been a reporter a long time?” he asked.

“No. I’m just twenty-four. I graduated a couple of years ago. This is my first staff writing job. My editors still consider me a cub reporter.”

The hirsute man picked up a small tin can from the ground and poured some steaming hot liquid into it. He passed the can to me. It was so hot I almost dropped it. I looked into the container and saw a dark, frothy liquid. Whoa, I thought, I’m not drinking that.

“Don’t worry, it’s what you need,” he said. “Take a sip.”

I did, and gagged. “Aagh. What *is* this?”

“I told you, tree bark tea.” He poked a stick at the fire. “I was born in Utica. I lived there until I was about ten. My mother had relatives living on the east coast. We ran away -- er, uh --

I mean we left town and I lived with her in Boston until she died last winter. I know all about Utica, Utah. I can tell you anything you need to know.”

I was still nursing the foul drink he gave me. It did make me feel better.

“I came out here for a story,” I said. “Go ahead, tell me what you know.”

There was a long silence while he drank from his tin can. Then in a soft, guarded voice, he began his tale.

It was a long narrative and I can't quote him verbatim, but this is a summary of what he told me:

It so happened that on or around October 30, 1975, a cosmic cloud visited our galaxy.

It was a haze as thick and as expansive as the Milky Way. It covered millions and millions of miles of deep space. Scientists were puzzled and scrambled to discover its origins and determine its particulate composition. They used geostationary satellites to calibrate the behemoth fog's polar orbits, attempting to predict its traveling pattern.

The theoretical physicists were so absorbed with their instruments and their mathematical factoring they didn't notice when an obscure puff of the cloud separated from the foggy nebula and began a rapid descent toward Earth. The separated portion was about as big as a good-sized cumulus vapor formation.

It was crimson, flat on the bottom and puffy on top and at the edges. It sparked with electrical impulses that seemed to come from the heart of it. When the cloud reached Earth's atmosphere, it coagulated like a dark bruise in the sky and settled like a roof over the valley town of Utica, Utah. A gloom settled over the quiet houses and burgundy shadows rippled the tree-lush landscape.

Forty-year-old Charles Crocket lived with his 69-year-old mother. He awoke that morning and went through his usual ritual, running his fingers through his thick red hair and consulting the bathroom mirror to check his sleep-shot eyes. He poked his tongue out looking for discolorations or abnormalities that might foretell an on-coming illness. Satisfied all was normal, he reached for his bathrobe and headed for the front door.

As usual, the paper boy missed the front porch. The folded *Morning News* lay in the middle of the lawn. Barefoot, Crocket descended from the porch and stepped into the moist grass. He felt a drizzle. Looking skyward, he saw the scarlet cloud. Huge ruby-colored rain drops fell onto his upturned face and pelted his shoulders and chest. Pollution, he thought, contaminated smog. The government is going to kill us all.

He picked up the newspaper and ran for the cover of the porch. Even in that short space of time, he got pretty wet.

He went into the house, made coffee and started to read the newspaper. He couldn't concentrate. He wanted to laugh. He couldn't explain it but a chuckle began somewhere deep within his solar plexus, forced its way up into his chest and burst from his throat and mouth.

"Mm, mm, eh, eh, eh, ha, ha, haaa," he laughed. Oops there it was again -- "Mm, mm, eh, eh, eh, ha, ha, haaa!" he bellowed. Then he did it again, and again. He laughed until he woke his mother.

"Charles!" She yelled from her bedroom. "Stop that! It's too early in the morning for nonsense."

"Yes, mother," he said, giggling.

Charles Crocket tried dressing for work. He put his pants on and took them off. He put his shirt on and took it off. Clothes seemed heavy and unnecessary. He stripped down to his bare skin, naked as the moment he was born. He snatched his car keys from the hook where he kept them. He headed for the back door when he noticed his mother's hair dryer on the kitchen counter. The funniest notion hit him. He wasn't going to work. He laughed again, thinking about how he could have some fun. In the spur-of-the-moment, he grabbed his sunglasses, picked up the hair dryer and left the house, naked as a puppy.

A few minutes later he backed his car into the entrance to the town cemetery. The vehicle faced the road where he was sure passing motorists could see him. He put on his sunglasses, rolled down the driver's side window and held the hair dryer like it was a police traffic radar gun.

Approaching cars slowed down so fast they skidded; all the drivers thought they'd just been caught in a radar trap. Boy, did Charles Crocket laugh!

Judy Jordan Frogly, the town's first grade teacher, was late for school and driving ten miles over the speed limit. She saw the hair dryer waving at her, assumed it was a radar gun and slammed the brakes. The car skidded into an out of control slide and spun around in a complete 360 degree circle.

Crocket threw his head back against his seat and howled with laughter.

Judy Jordan Frogly was not amused. She saw Crocket in his car, laughing his head off and snatched her umbrella out of the backseat; the black bumbershoot had kept the weird red rain off her when she'd left home. When Judy turned around she saw a naked man running toward her car. It was Charles Crocket, whooping and hollering, and jumping up and down, his penis flopping from side-to-side.

Judy Jordan Frogly was 39 years old, a virgin, and fast on her way to being an old maid. She wore her brown hair in a bun and wire rim eyeglasses pinched her nose. She'd never seen a naked man before and she screamed, terrified, and pressed on the accelerator.

Her car shot forward into the intersection and broad-sided a flat-bed garbage truck driven by Chip Axelrod. The crash sent garbage tumbling onto the hood of her car and flung heaps of rotted lettuce leaves, fish skeletons, coffee grounds, old milk cartons, rancid chicken bones and the like all over the street.

Chip Axelrod had started collecting garbage at 5 AM that morning. By six he was sopping wet with crimson rain. He sat in his truck cackling with glee like he was watching a Charlie Chaplin movie. Buck naked, he climbed out of the truck's cab.

The garbage man had a barrel chest. He was balding on the top of his head; the rest of his body was covered with coarse, thick hair from his broad neck to his short, muscular legs and his flat feet. Judy Jordan Frogly almost fainted. Two naked men were coming toward her.

The schoolteacher dropped the umbrella and leapt from her car. She ran only a dozen steps before she stopped and held her palms up, smiling at the big, wet, cherry-red drops soaking her hair. Judy smiled, stood in the middle of the street and kicked off her old maid's pumps, peeled off her stockings, stripped off her skirt and blouse and threw away her wire rimmed eyeglasses. Wearing only her bra and panties, she pulled the bobby pins from her hair so that it fell, wet and curling around her white shoulders. She was giggling like a schoolgirl.

Chip Axelrod thought Judy Jordan Frogly was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. When Judy turned and saw Chip, she thought he was attractive, too, even though he was very hairy. He reminded her of a

teddy bear she had as a child.

Disappointed that Chip had beat him to the schoolmarm, but only for a moment, Charles Crocket chuckled his way back to his car outside the cemetery gate. What a beautiful morning! Crocket grinned, looked through the chain links of the fence and stared, suddenly transfixed by what he saw inside the graveyard.

Pug, the Australian kangaroo that Willy Goode kept in a cage in his backyard, was loose and hopping over the marble and granite gravestones. Willy's cousin had shipped the marsupial from Australia when she was just a joey. It was against all civic ordinances to keep a wild animal on private property, but Willey Goode didn't care about the rules and neither did the town's people. Pug became an unofficial town mascot. Everyone thought she was cool.

With her soft gray fur drenched and tinted pink from the rain, Pug was leap-frogging over the perpendicular slabs of gravestones, headed toward the 20-foot high fence where Charles Crocket stood. When Pug spotted Crocket standing by the gate in his birthday suit, she hopped up to the fence and sat on her strong hind legs. Her nostrils expanded and contracted in a pattern that suggested she was sniffing, trying to smell the naked man. Obviously excited, Pug jumped at the fence, trying to clear it to get on the same side as Charles Crocket.

Crocket guessed that Pug had gained entrance to the cemetery from a hole in the back fence because the kangaroo couldn't jump high enough to make it over the 20-foot-high fence. Normally kangaroos can jump as high as forty feet, but Pug was still quite young, and since she was domesticated her jumping ability was under developed.

Laughing like a child, Crocket reached inside the gate and unhooked the latch. He flung the gate wide open and ran into the cemetery. When Pug saw Crocket, she hopped eagerly toward him. Crocket ran toward Pug. They closed on each other in slow motion, like lovers on a beach, thirsty for each other's arms.

When Crocket reached the kangaroo he extended his arms, and Pug reached forward with her short, frail forearms. His hands gently clasped her paws and the two began to dance. Well, sort of. Charles Crocket jumped

into the air as high as he could. When he landed on the ground, Pug, still holding the man's hands, jumped in the air. And that's the way it went. Each one jumped in turn so that one of them was in the air all the time.

While Crocket and Pug hopped -- er, danced -- Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod were skipping along the sidewalk, arm-in-arm. They giggled and laughed insanely. When they reached the entrance to the cemetery, they broke into a run and soon disappeared behind a huge grave marker bearing a big sculpture of a winged angel. What they were doing behind that gravestone, one could only guess.

“So this mysterious cloud with its seductive rain,” I said, breaking into the story, “caused people to become amorous? Is that it?”

“Listen, if you want to hear this story, at least have the good manners not to interrupt,” the hairy man admonished. He poured more tea into my tin can and saved some for himself.

“Now, let me pick up where I left off.”

Things were happening all over the town of Utica, Utah. Kids walking to school were rained upon. Once the drops soaked through their clothes, they dropped their books, shed their jeans and shorts and t-shirts and ran across the school grounds naked and laughing uncontrollably.

Any living thing that was exposed to the mysterious downpour reacted in similarly silly way. In the town square, a dozen dogs chased their tails, running around in circles until they fell over with dizziness. They lay on their backs, panting till they caught their breath, then they leaped up and started chasing their tails again. Cats lost their fear of dogs and wove between the the canines' churning legs, like they were participating in Saturday night do-si-do.

Hundreds of chattering squirrels ran up and down, up and down the tree trunks until they fell over on the ground, wheezing and out of breath. Once rested, the squirrels' frantic scrambling resumed. Chirping birds zoomed like dive bombers, darting in and out of tree branches, bushes and scrub until they, too, dropped to the ground, exhausted, their feathers ruffled. Once rested, they returned to the sky. Even mice and insects crawled

all over each other in bizarre emulations of copulation.

The dogs in the square chased their tails at the feet of a bronze statue of Brigham Young, the polygamist leader of the Latter Day Saints religious movement who died in 1877. Electric sparks popped and crackled mischievously in the cloud hovering above the statue, then spit out a single bolt of bright red lightning that struck the old patriarch straight on his bronze head. The bolt hit with such ferocity it flipped the statue off its pedestal. The acrid smell of singed metal wafted in the damp air.

The hairy paused and took a deep gulp of tree bark tea. I reached inside my jacket and pulled a notebook and pen from my pocket.

“Oh. So now you’re gonna write this stuff down,” my host said, nodding. “Well, that’s all right as long as you don’t interrupt again. If you think what I’ve told you so far is odd, wait until you hear what happens next. All I will say about the next part is that it deals with facts, facts so strange and astonishing that no lie could match them.”

Once the cloud gathered knocked the replica of Brigham Young on its ass -- the bronze figure of the Mormon began to move. The damn thing sat up, rubbed its bronze head, and then stood like a giant. Of course it was heavy, weighed almost 500 pounds. It was eight-feet tall. *Que horror!*

It moved stiffly at first, but within moments its agility increased until it was fairly lithe and clanking around the square, turning its great head this way and that -- until its bronze gaze fell on Mildred Maude, the old homeless woman who lived in the bushes around the town square. Like everyone else who had been drenched by the red rain, she’d stripped off her clothes. She sat on the ground, naked and giggling.

Old Maudy Maude, as she was called, wasn’t the most tidy of persons. Her wide, square feet were black and grimy. Her varicose-veined legs were cellulite-riddled stumps. One had to count the numbers of stomachs that fell in fat pleats across her lap and, thankfully, hung low enough to hide her furry vagina. Her breasts hung like huge bloated goats’ bladders. She was toothless and her tangled hair lay matted against her scalp.

The Brigham Young statue clanked its way toward her. In one powerful move it scooped her up in one of its massive bronze arms. Maudy Maude giggled and tittered like a maid.

Back at the cemetery, Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod were still hidden behind the enormous grave marker with the marble carving of a protective angel. They were moaning and groaning, deliriously enjoying one another.

Charles Crocket and Pug had been joined by a couple dozen naked people who had taken hold of each others' waist and formed a kind of nude, hopping conga line, each person jumping up and down in sequence. When the person in front landed, the one behind jumped into the air and so on.

All the citizens of Utica, Utah were affected by the red rain cloud -- except for old Aunt Bidy, the 88-year-old great- great-grandmother, who rarely left her house. She had sense enough not to go out in the rain, red or otherwise. She didn't know what was going on and if you asked her she'd have told you she didn't give a damn.

The giggling, laughing and naked reverie went on in the town of Utica for more than 24 hours before any one on the outside had a notion that something had gone wrong. The kids stayed out all night, running around naked because no one told them to stop. The adults had lost all common sense and all lost all restraint of their libidos. The town had gone loony tunes.

It was the Chief of Police in the City of Logan who first became aware of peculiarities. Logan provided community policing for Utica. The two officers assigned to patrol that area had not reported in since the day before. His cops couldn't contact them on the radio; all they received was static.

When the chief personally tried the radio, he heard the static, and over that he was also able to hear high-pitched giggling. He dispatched two more officers to investigate. When those officers didn't report back after a couple hours, the cops tried radioing them, too, with the same result -- static and giggling.

Being a top-notch law enforcement officer, the police chief deduced that "something was wrong." He

notified the state police who had just been notified by an area meteorologist that a mysterious cloud formation had settled over the town of Utica, Utah. The state police notified the governor, who notified the federal government. The government notified the National Guard who set up a post at the edge of the town. A team of specialists carrying instruments and wearing protective bio-suits entered the city limits of Utica.

By the time the bio-suited team reached the town square, the cats and dogs were completely exhausted. They were dog-tired, cat-tired. They lay limp like rags on the ground. The mice and insects were lying on their backs, wearily waving their legs skyward. The team saw where the statue had been uprooted from its pedestal but there was no sign of the statue itself. They saw Maudy Maude's pile of dirty clothing.

The team moved on to the schoolyard, where they found naked, exhausted children lying listlessly upon the bars of the jungle gym, slumped in swings, drooping in the grass. The team summoned an emergency medical squad. The EMT's set up bio tents where the children were treated and given nutrition.

When the bio team reached the cemetery, they stared in astonishment behind their clear masks at dozens of exhausted, naked people propped against gravestones. They were bushed, whacked, done in, and danced out.

The most remarkable discovery was Charlie Crocket and Pug.

People don't realize it but kangaroos are very cuddly creatures. They like to hold on to their partners and nuzzle and kiss, so when the team saw the naked man, Charles Crocket, and the kangaroo, Pug, locked in what looked like a lovers' embrace, they didn't know what to think. The man and the kangaroo. The kangaroo and the man. Wow! They didn't know what to think.

Suddenly, the hairy man stopped talking. The abrupt silence made me feel like I'd been pushed off a cliff.

"What happened?" I cried. "What happened?"

The hairy man didn't answer, simply turned his face up and sat staring at the dark sky. He gazed toward the heavens so intently, that I looked skyward, too. I didn't know what I was looking for but it seemed important.

We both sat silently for such a long time that when he did speak, he startled me.

“I don’t know how I know this,” he said. “It’s more like a premonition or intuition than it is really factual. I’ve thought about it for years.”

“What?!” I shouted. “What?!”

“Scientists called the cloud an, ‘*undulates asperatus*,’ which is Latin meaning they didn’t know what the hell it was. My theory is that the red cloud from deep space was made up of zillions of intelligent molecules. Some of the molecules were older than others or more atomic than others. The old molecules were like the leaders, the elders. They governed the massive body. They gave orders. They ruled. A giant mind made up of separate infinitesimal particles.

“The small portion that visited Earth -- the part that broke off from the tail and went unnoticed -- was made up of younger molecules. Those young molecules were like juveniles, like kids. They saw our little blue planet and came here to have fun, to play jokes. That’s what they did. They came here and pulled a prank on Utica, Utah.”

“You can’t believe that,” I scoffed.

“I do believe it,” he growled. “All right, I’m gonna finish telling this story. Maybe by the time I’m done, you’ll see what I mean. Now, where was I...? Oh, yeah...”

The kangaroo and the man. The man and the kangaroo. The team was contemplating what to do about the unusual pairing of Charlie Crocket and Pug when they heard muffled moaning sounds coming from behind one of the big grave markers. They peeked over the angel on the top of the stone and discovered Judy Jordan Frogly and Chip Axelrod.

The couple appeared to be glued together, stuck in the missionary position. They had been at it a long, long time. Judy Jordan Frogly’s eyes were glazed. Chip Axelrod was dribbling drool. They didn’t know whether

to pull the man and the woman apart or what? They didn't know what to do about the kangaroo and the man. They were scientists but this was new territory for them.

They radioed back to the National Guard post outside town and asked for a team of medical doctors and psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors and sex therapists. They all had to be outfitted in bio-suits and they had to get there *fast*.

Overhead, the mysterious *undulates asperatus* -- the cloud -- began a rapid dissolve. It diffused, lost its cumulus thickness, became cirrus, and then stratus. It looked like a powerful vacuum cleaner was sucking the red vapor upward and drawing it out into the nether.

The scientists who'd been observing the deep space cloud phenomenon, later reported seeing a small, reddish cloud that adhered itself to the tail of larger, moving cloud. For all the world, they reported, the mass of particulates that visited Earth looked like impish molecular youngsters called home by their parents.

Within minutes the sky above Utica, Utah was as blue as ever. On terra ferma the bio-suited squads were busy, busy, busy trying to explain what had happened to the small town. They tested the red puddles and the red dew on the grass and determined that it was a compound composed of a powerful hallucinogen -- an extraterrestrial psilocybin mixed with a stringent, unidentified aphrodisiac.

The townspeople who'd been exposed to the red rain would never be quite normal, ever again; even weeks after their initial exposure to the red rain, they continued to refuse to wear clothes. They were prone to breaking out into fits of spontaneous giggling and uncontrolled laughter.

The scientists and doctors didn't know what to do. They suggested that the government quarantine the entire town for an unspecified period of time. The government got the idea to put a fence around Utica to keep people in as much as to keep people out. It took a couple of weeks, but they erected a 14-foot, chain link fence around the whole town.

The government denied that anything at all happened in the town of Utica, Utah, which worked for about

five minutes. First, there was all that fence they had to explain. Then there were the relatives of Utica residents who couldn't get in to see their loved ones. Then there was the media who refused to let it go. Every rumor, every scrap of gossip, heresay and so-called eyewitness reports were splash across every network and cable news program.

The government would never admit that aliens had visited Earth, so they called a press conference to announce that the townspeople had volunteered and agreed to become a part of a special, secret experiment that would benefit all mankind. That didn't work, really, but you know the government -- the more questions they were asked, the more they lied.

And as time went on, there was much more to hide:

Judy Jordon Frogly, the schoolteacher, became pregnant with a baby fathered by Chip Axelrod, the garbage man. No one could have possibly guessed that Pug, the kangaroo, would get pregnant with Charles Crocket's baby. Kangaroos have a gestation period of about 28 to 33 days. Pug's thumb-sized joey attached itself to a nipple in her pouch and went unnoticed by medical personnel for four months, until it stuck its head out of her pouch.

Pug's baby was boy. He had red hair like his father, big kangaroo ears and a human face and torso. He had kangaroo-like forearms, and his lower body and reproductive organs resembled that of a kangaroo. He had a big red tail and traditional kangaroo haunches, legs and feet.

The government called in veterinarians, animal psychologists and kangaroo experts to examine the hybrid. They named the baby "Manbit," the gynecological term for half man, half kangaroo. Everyone wanted to study the bizarre creature. Charles Crocket didn't care for the scientific name. He named his son "Joey."

With the exception of Charles Crocket, Pug wouldn't let any humans near her baby. If anyone came close, she'd kick them square in their belly, knocking them fifty feet away. Then she'd hop away so fast and jump so high no one could catch her.

By the time the hairy man stopped talking a red dawn had crept into the sky. I was breathing fast and furious like I just finished running a twenty-six-mile marathon.

“Shhh. Hush.” He scooped a huge handful of dirt over the fire. “People are near. I think that’s state troopers. They must have seen your wrecked care and they’ve come looking for you.”

Then he jumped to his feet and hurriedly ushered me deeper into the thick forest. I didn’t want to go that way. I wanted the troopers to find me, to save me. The hairy man was definitely weird; not normal. But he pushed me forward with such force that he sent me into a stumbling run. We ran for a quite a distance until we reached a tall, chain-link fence.

I was panting and huffing, trying to catch my breath. The hairy man wasn’t the least bit out of breath. He put a forefinger to his lips, warning to me to be quiet. He knelt and put his ear to the ground. Then he stood up and whispered: “Joey. Joey. It’s okay. Come on out.”

I heard bushes rustling and twigs crackling on our side of the fence. Fear swished around in my stomach. Tiny hairs on my neck bristled.

Then I saw him. It was him -- the manbit, the half man, half kangaroo, the incredible offspring of Pug and Charles Crocket emerging from the underbrush.

“That’s the thing I saw in front of my car!” I croaked.

“Save the commentary for the peanut gallery,” the hairy man snarled. “Don’t slight him. He understands what people say. Let’s get going.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes off of Joey. A tuft of red human hair sprouted between large, swiveling ears. His oversized blue eyes were round. He had a red beard and curly red hair sheltered his human chest. His slender forearms pranced in front of him. He hopped on both hind legs, and his long, thick tail menacingly slapped the ground.

“It’s okay now, Joey,” the hairy man said soothingly. “The coast is clear.”

Suddenly, Joey sank into his haunches, sprang upward, and jumped the high fence, disappearing into the brush on the other side.

“Let’s go!” the hairy man insisted.

We moved along the fence until we came to a place where the wire was loosened at the bottom. The hairy man pulled up the slack until it was raised high enough for me to scoot under. He followed by simply moving quickly beneath the breach before the fence fell back into place.

“You are now inside the compound that was once the town of Utica,” he announced. “There are a few people still living here. Some of the kids that scampered around in the park that day couldn’t be rehabilitated. They ran and hid when the government came to collect them. They’re adults now, and they’ve been clever enough to evade capture all these years. The local people call them crazy. I call them renegades because they live outside the laws of convention. Because of what happened here, they can never be just ordinary.”

“Are they dangerous?” I asked nervously.

“Not as long as you are with me,” he answered flatly.

I walked beside the hairy man through the remnants of Utica, looking at abandoned houses, rusted cars, and dilapidated street signs. When we reached the town square, I noticed the crumbling cement pedestal where the bronze statue of Brigham Young once stood.

“What happened to the statue?” I asked.

“That’s one of the most curious of all the puzzles. The government didn’t believe the account of the statue grabbing old Maudy Maude and making off with her. They thought it was an idiotic yarn concocted by the infected witnesses.

“You know the Latter Day Saints pretty much controlled Utah back then, just as they still do today. The

Mormons pooh-poohed the reports of the statue having its way with Old Maudy, but secretly they were intrigued. They sent missionaries into the area by the dozens to investigate every sighting of a full-of-life metal man.

“Supposedly, five missionaries came across the itinerante statue one morning while it was leaning against a tree. They had a solid wire cable in their truck and they used it to tie the statue to the tree until help arrived. Under the cloak of darkness they shipped the bronze thing to an undisclosed location in Salt Lake City. I think they’ve stored the statue down in the catacombs under the city and church leaders sacrifice virgins to it each month.

“I’m kidding about that last part,” he added quickly. “I don’t think there are that many virgins anywhere.”

The mid-morning sun floated high in the sky. The day was hot and humid. We walked toward the barricaded gate to the entrance to Utica. Two National Guard soldiers stood at their post outside the locked entry.

“I was supposed to meet that doctor or the scientist early this morning,” I said. “I thought I would meet him outside the compound.”

“You’ve already met him, my friend, and you’ve heard his story.”

“You?” I gaped at him. “You’re the doctor?”

“My name is Elliot Axelrod. I’m Judy Jordan Frogly’s son. Chip Axelrod was my father. Mother and I fled Utica about ten years after the red cloud. With the help of my pal, Joey, we were able to get over the fence. We went to live in Boston with my uncle. I was kept at home because I was so different. Mother feared people would ask questions and we’d be discovered. My uncle was a Harvard professor and my mother was a teacher. You can say I was home-schooled. With my uncle’s help I tested out scholastically and received my degrees without ever having to go to formal classes. I never liked wearing clothes. After mother died, I came back here. I came home.”

“Hey, Elliot!” One of the guardsmen shouted. “Who’s your friend?”

“He’s a stranger who got lost,” Elliot Axelrod shouted back.

“Aren’t we all?” shouted the guardsman.

“Call the state troopers,” Elliot yelled. “He’s gonna need a ride.”

“They know you?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course. They’re good guys but they don’t know that I can get in and out of here. I serve a purpose, keeping the renegades in line.”

“What happened to the remaining population of Utica?” I asked.

“They let the townspeople live in their own homes for a while, but there were socializing problems,” he explained. “People needed to be fed and cared for medically and that brought the outside in. Except for the people they couldn’t round up, the rest either died or they were shipped out to mental health institutions. A good reporter,” he advised me with a raised eyebrow, “would start by checking with the Dorothea Dix Institute in Washington D.C., or the William Jefferson Clinton Mental Health Foundation in Arkansas. Check the names of the patients against the names of town residents.”

The state troopers’ car speeded toward the gate. Elliot Axelrod extended a hand. I shook it, and felt the tremble in my fingers.

“You go back and write that story. It’s time for people to know the truth of what happened here.”

From the rear seat of the state trooper’s car, I watched the forest slip past. What a wild night. I needed to make sense of it, and the questions that plagued me.

How do you juxtapose absurdity with significance? How do you explain the vast, profound universe? How do you reconcile the simple graces of the human heart with compelling cosmic power? I didn’t know the answers to those questions. I was just a reporter, not a dream-weaver.

I glanced out the window and thought I saw Joey, jumping along in the forest; flashes of red hair and white skin. I thought I saw him, but when I looked again --I didn't.

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The Clay-born

Most of the people in the African village sat on straw mats eating their morning meals of maize-flour porridge in front of grass-thatched huts turned brown and parched by the sun. A child suddenly howled: “Simba! Simba!” *Lion. Lion.*

Children jumped to their feet, scrambling for cover behind the adults. Frenzied parents reached for their sticks. Something *was* out there, moving in the tall grass, making it sway and crackle. Perhaps it was a lion. The villagers knew they must beat it to death or the beast would surely grab one of them, drag the unfortunate one into the meadow and eat its own breakfast.

The thing that ruptured into the clearing was not a lion. It was, of all things, a mud man! The people had heard about the mud creatures that once lived in the mountains nearby. In every village in the vicinity, Africans told stories about the mud monsters. They often spoke of them in whispers around the big fire at night. But even the oldest among them had never actually seen one.

The clumsy, fearsome-looking creature possessed two arms, two legs and, a man’s torso and a human-shaped head, completely covered with bulky clay. Every orifice, its mouth, its nostrils, even its anal cavity, everything, except its blinking, gray eyes, was made of dried orange clay. Walking like a zombie, it staggered forward with one rigid arm raised, groping as if pleading for help, it fell into the dust and died.

* * *

Three months later

I stood on a flat, rough outcropping of metamorphic rock jutting over the jagged edges of Mount Margherita, the highest point of the snow-capped, cloud-enveloped Ruwenzori Mountain Range in Central Africa.

I am actually here, I thought. The fabled Mountains of the Moon. Looking down the steep mountainside, through a swarming veil of mist, I could barely see the precipitous, slanting terrain. I heard excited African voices rising from the slopes, echoes of Swahili chants crooned in unison. The voices belonged to the half-dozen Kenyan porters who were happily and rapidly descending the mysterious mountain.

“Mama Yuko? Ndio Yuko. Njoo kutuamkia,” they sang.

I don't speak Swahili but one of my companions translated the mantra when the porters had hurriedly begun their descent: *“Is the woman home? Yes, she is home. I hope to see her soon.”*

Mount Margherita rises to a height of more than 6,000 feet. My two colleagues and I had not yet reached the summit--but we were close. Previous explorers had found evidence that billions of years ago this mountain was the site of massive volcanic eruptions. Our mission was two-fold: To forecast the possibility of future explosive flare-ups; and to prove the existence of the Terracotta Troglodyte, the legendary mud man of indigenous lore.

On their backs, the porters had toted the fragile ultrasound and infrared seismic detection equipment needed to determine the potential for volcanic activity. Throughout the climb, they'd chattered nervously. They had lingered only long enough to help us position the high-tech tools. When told they could go home, they departed quickly, clearly relieved.

From my perch, I peered through the mist at the dimpled landscape of the Great Rift Valley below. The Ruwenzori Range consists of six massifs separated by deep gorges, covered with an assortment of vegetation, ranging from alpine meadows, to tropical rainforests, to mangrove wetlands.

The lofty view and the thin air were breathtaking, but it was the thought of the unknown, the possible encounters with hidden horrors that had me on edge. I understood why the natives dreaded this mountain. One could become lost or stranded and the oxygen-deprived air seemed haunted, troubled. As

I stood looking down upon the valley, I allowed my mind to drift back to how I came to be here, in Africa, at this moment.

* * *

Just a few weeks ago I was sitting behind my paper-strewn desk in a safe, comfortable, book-cluttered office on the campus of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

“I simply don’t understand why you don’t want to go on this expedition,” said Professor Vincent DeLoria, poking his head through the half opened door. DeLoria, the dean of Yale’s Department of Geology, looks like the proverbial absent-minded professor. He is not very tall; his droopy intelligent eyes are set in a wide and long face framed by a great shock of frizzled and very gray hair rising high from a lofty brow. His nose is fleshy and prominent, his mouth small, his lips full, his cheeks plump, his chin rounded. A bushy mustache covers his upper lip. His favorite attire is a rumpled salt and pepper suit, white shirt and black bow tie.

“My Lord, man! This is an invitation to greatness,” the dean shouted, abruptly entering my office waving a letter he’d received from Sir Robert Hest, the legendary paleoanthropologist, one of Oxford University’s most distinguished and accomplished academicians.

“You are the noted Dr. Thor Tillman, one of the very few African American geologists of considerable merit. You are summoned to explore an isolated region of Africa on an all-expenses-paid junket by one of the great scientific minds of our time. You respond by saying you are not sure if you can get away from your teaching duties.”

“That’s not fair,” I responded. “Sir Robert wants me to travel to England to meet with him to plan an expedition of unknown duration to a region of Africa notorious for claiming the lives of the bravest, most foolhardy scholars. And for what? He *thinks* we can unearth the remnants of some storybook creature that may or may not have ever existed.”

“Well, Dr. Tillman, you may not give a damn about your career, but I want this university to forge ahead in its reputation for exploration,” the dean snapped. “As of next week, you are on sabbatical. Professor Goldsmith will take over your classes until you return. I’ve taken the liberty to write Sir Robert telling him you are on your way.

“Go at it, son,” Dean DeLoria’s tone softened. “You’re young, only thirty six. You have quite a name on campus as being a tough touch football player. You jog at least five miles every day. You’re in great shape and you’re a splendid scholar. You can handle it. Travel arrangements are being made, Dr. Tillman. Be safe.”

* * *

London wallowed in a thick, hazy fog when I arrived at the home of Sir Robert Hest, Oxford professor emeritus, esteemed doctor of letters, el capo de capi of paleoarcheology.

A very stiffly dressed manservant led me into the huge private library where Sir Robert sat behind a highly polished mahogany desk. He looked quite old and frail hunched in a big leather chair. His many years of living and his many travels had taken their toll on him. With thin wisps of gray hair sprouting from and otherwise balding scalp and sunken, liver-spotted cheeks, he looked as if he kept life in his wasted frame only by grim concentration.

This man is in no condition to go exploring.

Seated in a cushioned chair at one end of the desk was a young woman. I could not help but notice her beauty. Her dark hair fell in soft curls just above her shoulders. Her intelligent, amber eyes were exquisitely framed by naturally long black eye lashes. The glowing red lipstick she wore made her full lips even more voluptuous. Her features and her opulent brown skin suggested that she was of African heritage.

“This is my granddaughter, Minkah. Loosely translated, ‘minkah’ is an African tribal word

meaning ‘justice,’” Sir Robert said with pride. His British accent gave him an air of lofty sophistication. I found myself gazing at Minkah. She stared straight ahead, her beautiful eyes seemingly fixed on the wall. I felt rebuffed.

“You seem surprised, Dr. Tillman?” Sir Robert observed. “Her grandmother was of the Ashanti tribe of central Ghana in Western Africa. I garnered much fame for my work with Louis and Mary Leakey, examining human remains found at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, but, for years, I explored other parts of Africa.

“I’ve managed to keep my private life private,” he continued. “I don’t need to tell you this, but most Europeans dislike the idea of interracial marriage. Not many of the upper crust know of my marriage to Mesi, Minkah’s grandmother. She refused to come to England. She was a smart woman. She died a few years ago at our home in Kumasa.”

“You don’t have to explain, Sir Robert,” I replied.

“Yes I do. You need to understand why I want you and Minkah to go to Africa together. Obviously, I cannot go. I am too old and too ill.

“Minkah is the child of my daughter and my son-in-law, British paleontologist, Dr. James Jones.

“James was exploring in Africa. He died a few weeks ago, killed by some creature that captured him and immersed him in some type of soil.” I looked toward Minkah but she sat still, not returning my gaze.

“James escaped from the creature. He managed to descend a very steep mountain before he stumbled into the African village where he died. He was covered with a thick coating of terracotta. It was an extremely adhesive substance he could not remove. He died, literally, of skin suffocation, an incredibly painful process that was exacerbated by the region’s excessively hot temperatures.”

“My father left a trail for us to follow.” Minkah spoke for the first time. She did not address me, but rather, she spoke to her grandfather.

“Several weeks before he died, my father wrote to us. He said he was on to a spectacular find. Something that would overturn everything humans think about how life began on this planet.”

“Minkah is an accomplished anthropologist in her own right,” Sir Robert offered. “She has studied at universities in Sweden and France. She’s fluent in nearly a dozen languages, including Swahili. She collaborated in the dating of fossil remains found in east Africa, the site now accepted as the cradle of human life.”

“Actually, I have heard of Dr. Jones and her work,” I said and Minkah shot a glance in my direction. “I had no idea she was your granddaughter.”

“But why me? Why choose me?” I asked. “I’ve never been to Africa. My work has been confined to explaining the geology of North America. In the most remote paleontological sense, I’ve studied fossiliferous rock formations found in the sedimentary layers of America’s numerous canyons. Only a small portion of my work lies in estimating dates of fossil records to get a purview of how life evolved across geologic time.”

“My grandfather is quite familiar with your work, Dr. Tillman.” Minkah’s tone of voice seemed dismissive. “Personally, I would have chosen someone else. Someone familiar with the African continent.”

I felt thoroughly rebuffed. What had I done to offend her?

“Now, now Minkah.” Sir Robert chided her, and focused his gaze on me. “Dr. Tillman, the papers you’ve published in geology reviews are quite intelligent. This expedition needs a geologist. My son-in-law wrote that he believed life on our planet harkens to a specific geological explanation. Some of your work has touched upon that theory.”

* * *

“Are you with us, Dr. Tillman?” Minkah shouted. Her loudly scolding voice shocked me out her grandfather’s London library and brought me back to Africa so quickly that I teetered and almost toppled over the edge of the rocky ledge I stood upon. A strong hand grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me backward.

“Whoa, don’t fall off the mountain,” said Dr. Damu Kimbili, the Kenyan-born, Oxford-educated paleontologist Sir Robert hired to assist with the expedition. “We can’t lose you now.”

Minkah was already scrambling up the narrow mountain trail. *She thinks I am so incompetent.*

“What’s a guy gotta do to get on her good side?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Tillman,” Damu said. “This is my third expedition with Minkah. She’s a serious scientist. She’s complicated.”

“Yeah, aren’t we all?” I mused. “You’re quite an interesting fellow yourself. How did you get to know Sir Robert? Through your studies at Oxford?”

“Actually, No. I am from the Ashanti village of Kokofu. When I was a boy, Sir Robert sponsored the mission there. Sir Robert took special interest in me. He taught me how to speak, write and read English and he paved the way for me to study in England.”

Dr. Damu Kimbilli was one of the most exceptional persons I’d ever met. His polished British accent was a dramatic contrast to his African heritage. His exquisite ebony skin was inscribed with the distinct facial scarring of his Aduana tribe. He was fluent in seven languages and he had the manner and bearing of African nobility, the temperament of a perceptive philosopher and the quick and curious mind of a dedicated researcher.

“You must remember,” he said, “Minkah has had to be extraordinarily strong. She is part British,

part African. She lives in two worlds. For her, any display of sentiment is a sign of vulnerability. Besides, she's a woman. We men are not supposed to know what she's thinking.

"Let's get going before she leaves us behind."

I picked up my gear and scurried after my colleagues.

We trudged upwards. The air became so bitterly cold that I could hardly believe I was in Africa.

"We can camp here. Is that all right with you, Damu?" Minkah asked. She did all she could not to address me or pay me any courtesy. I tried not to take it personally.

"This is fine," Dr. Kimbili said. "How about you, Thor? Is this spot okay?"

I looked around. A small alcove was carved out of the craggy mountainside. The recess extended to about eight feet inward. The interior was completely barren of snow. It was wide enough for three people and the rocky shelf above made a convenient roof.

"Sure," I shrugged.

We burrowed in and placed a tarp over the opening for a makeshift door. I noticed the rocks were warm to the touch. *That's curious, I thought. It was so cold just a few feet away. Could the warm rocks be a signal that the mountain is volcanically active?* I put a few rocks in my knapsack. *When I have a chance to examine them more thoroughly, I hoped they might provide some answers.*

We ate cold minced ham and scrambled eggs from cans. Minkah and Damu drank water from canteens. I took a few sips of brandy from my flask.

Morning came quickly. Mountain climbing left me sore and aching but I knew better than to complain. Minkah already thought I was out of my element. As if she was reading my thoughts, Minkah gave me a look of utter disdain and swiftly turned away from me.

Again, we traveled upwards. There was no longer any semblance of a path, just rock piles and boulder stacks. It took almost four hours to climb about eight hundred more feet. I calculated we were less than one thousand feet from the mountain's summit.

Minkah stopped climbing for a few moments. I leaned against a huge rock, exhausted.

"We are very close to where my father said we will find the fissure," Minkah announced.

"How do you know?" I asked, predicting her scorn.

"It's in the air, Dr. Tillman," she countered impatiently. "Use your sense of smell. My father said there would be an overwhelming odor of sulfur."

I inhaled deeply. The smell of rotten eggs filled my olfactory senses. Elemental sulfur is odorless. Hydrogen sulfide, sulfur mixed with water, is what stinks. I decided to keep the chemistry lesson to myself.

Clambering upward a few more feet, we found the fissure. The sulfide stench was so strong it cleared our noses causing mucus to drip to our lips. The opening in the mountain was very small. One-by-one, we crawled into the hole on our stomachs, pulling our knapsacks in after us.

Once inside the crevice, we stood to find ourselves in an enormous, cathedral-like chamber, decorated with sulfur-drenched, crystallized stalagmite and stalactite formations. Some of them were twenty feet or longer, brilliant colors and fantastic shapes. There was no need for artificial light. In warm temperatures, sulfur issues a soft yellow-orange and blue glow that provides an eerie illumination.

"Impressive," I said. "What now?"

"We explore," Minkah said.

We followed a down-sloping corridor studded with sickles, descending toward what sounded like gurgling water. The temperature rose to sweltering as we made our way deeper into the subterranean

grotto. My eyes stung from the caustic sulfuric fumes. The rocks around us were steaming.

I was having trouble breathing. I think the others were, too, but I said nothing as Minkah led the way. Damu followed her. I was behind him.

Suddenly, Minkah screamed, “Thor, help me!” Through the mist of sulfur fumes, I saw her collapse against the wall—then disappear. I was surprised that in that moment of fear, she called *my* name.

“Damu! Where’s Minkah?”

“Something just pulled her through the wall.”

“That’s impossible,” I shouted. “You can’t just walk through a wall of rock and sulfur crystals.”

“She was *pulled* through, Thor. I saw something that looked like huge arms reach from the other side and—*aagh!*” Damu gave a hoarse cry, and then he too, disappeared into the wall.

I blinked, stunned. This couldn’t be happening. Had the fumes gotten to me? Was I hallucinating? This could not be real.

I scrambled as far away from the wall as possible and opened my knapsack, retrieved my flashlight and switched it on. The light was not much help. It illuminated the vaporous, roiling gases but not much else. I inched toward the wall and gingerly raised my right hand. I expected to touch rock. Instead my fingertips made contact with a moist, gooey substance. I snatched my hand back and wiped my fingers on my khaki trousers.

The wall was composed of some kind of muddy membrane, like Silly Putty or bubble gum. Two huge arms had pulled Minkah and then Damu through the membrane. I hoped my arms were strong enough to push my way through it. What choice did I have?

My thoughts racing, I reached into my knapsack, fumbling for my large, silver-tone hunting

knife. Rummaging, I felt the rock specimens I'd collected from the alcove where we'd spent the night. I had surmised that they were pieces of iron ore. Thinking they might come in handy, I put them in my trousers pocket.

The membrane undulated before me, rippling, swelling and surging as if it were alive. I drew a deep breath and leapt into it, slashing and cutting with my knife.

The barrier offered no resistance. After my body pierced through it, the muddy gel simply folded back into place, leaving no trace of my entrance. The mucky divider was like a giant sheath of chewed bubble gum that left a layer of sticky sludge all over me. Peeling the membrane away from my eyes, I saw the source of the gurgling sounds.

I stood on the edge of a steaming, frothing, underground lagoon. In size it was about as big as an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

“Minkah! Damu!”

My shouts were swallowed by the raucous slosh and babble of the agitated lagoon. I sensed movement behind me but before I could turn, I was struck on the head.

Regaining consciousness was an insane exercise. My clothes were ripped from my body. Naked, I was forcefully rolled upon the ground, over and over. Soon, I was completely covered with wet dirt... Mud! No, clay! I was encased in a cocoon of clay.

My jaws were forced apart and something awful tasting, something like fish goo was crammed into my mouth. I could not spit it out because my lips were sealed quickly with some substance. My eyes blinked open. I saw a huge creature with indistinct facial features. The fishy substance made me feel sick. I wretched involuntarily, but I could not vomit. Suddenly, I was hoisted into the air, like I was being thrown over someone's shoulder and carried off.

Then, I was propped against a rocky wall; unable to move because the earthen shell restricted my movements. On the other side of the turbulent lagoon, I saw a creature, an abominable thing, standing over Minkah's prostrate, nude body. Minkah seemed to be in a merciful state of slumber. I could not make sense of what was happening.

The beast was man-like but was not a man. It was about eight or nine feet tall, with two legs and two arms. Its torso was spherical with no definitions of chest or abdomen. Its head was as big and round as a beach ball. Finally, I comprehended what I was witnessing.

The Terracotta Troglodyte!

This was the creature! This was the thing Professor Jones wrote about in his letter home. This was the thing we came to Africa to find. We found it!

"Minkah wake up!" I tried to shout but the sound I made was muted. My mouth was filled with thick, fishy slime. My lips were held closed by earthen clod.

I could not see Dr. Damu Kimbili but I thought I heard him next to me. He, too, was trying to yell. I could barely hear his muffled shouts. I assumed he was bound in clay, too. Both of us were forced to watch the crazy scene unfolding across the tepid lagoon.

The monster rapidly rolled Minkah in a chrysalis of clay. It seemed to handle her gently, though. Its hands looked more like paws. Once Minkah's body was completely covered, it scooped clay from the edges of the lagoon and pasted it over her face, leaving only her mouth and eyes uncovered. Once her mask of mud was in place, the creature stood, looking down at Minkah, admiring its work.

Turning to face the lagoon, the creature held its arms out over the bubbling brine. To my shock, a shimmering, snake-like eel shot straight up, like an arrow, flying from the fizzling pool—almost as if it had been summoned, as if the creature had called it. The creature caught it deftly and, skillfully ripping the squirming eel apart, it stuffed the fishy remains into Minkah's mouth.

What was this ritual? What was it for?

After filling her mouth with eel entrails, it sealed Minkah's lips with a clump of clay, picked up her shell-encased body and lumbered around the edges of the lagoon, headed toward Damu and me.

As it drew closer, I saw the creature better. It was dark red, the color of dried brick. It stood on two, tree trunk-like legs and flat elephant-shaped feet. Its facial features were vague. There was no nose, no mouth. Its eyes were two small, glassy disks.

It placed Minkah's clay shell next to mine, leaning it upright against the cavern wall. Minkah regained consciousness. I heard her muffled screams. I felt so helpless.

OK, Gumbo. What now?

What happened next was a marvel of sensation and psychological phenomenon.

The thing sat down in front of us, Buddha-like. It placed its paw-shaped hands on its round belly, and emitted a low, steady, guttural, chanting moan. I fell into a drowsy, hypnotic daze. Perhaps I was dreaming.

I had a sensation of spinning rapidly, counter-clockwise. I felt disorientated, mentally scattered, diffracted and I could feel electrically charged particles bombarding me; they made my skin prickle. The spinning thrust was maddening.

Time reversed. I was in high school, walking backward along a corridor. I was a boy scout, reciting my pledges, backward. I was a child, playing little league baseball, backward. I was an infant, crawling backward. I was an embryo, floating backward. I was a speck, flying backward. I still existed but only as part of a collective consciousness, a synaptic atom in a universal mind.

The spinning sensation ceased. I was comatose but strangely perceptive, alert and discerning.

I was no longer in a cave. The mountain no longer existed. The landscape around me was a

boiling geosphere, a teeming ball of exotic gases and sizzling rocks. The red sky bled fire.

I realize I was experiencing an altered state of consciousness. I felt the presence of Minkah and Damu. Their voices came through as vibrations.

“Thor! Damu! Are you there?” *It was Minkah! Her thoughts emanating psychically.*

“I am with you,” reverberated Damu.

“I am here,” I responded.

In this distorted state of awareness, Minkah, Damu and myself were psychically receiving and relaying information. We were telepathically connected, in synch with each other and to the creature.

Like an echo resonating within my disembodied psyche, the creature spoke non-verbally, yet I could translate its command.

“Come with me.”

The creature began to move. Minkah, Damu and I had no bodily structure. Our physical selves had been reduced to flickering points of light floating in space drifting behind the perambulating creature, which moved rapidly across the arid ground.

“Thor, what do you make of this?” Minkah spoke her thoughts to me.

“Do you mean this crazy, psyched up, out-of-body state,” I asked, “or our surroundings?”

“Both,” Minkah replied.

I was gratefully aware that Minkah’s attitude toward me changed. She was friendly, responsive. I could hardly contain the thought that she might actually like me. What a foolish time to consider it, I knew I’d fallen in love with her the moment I saw her.

“Geologically speaking, I think we’ve been transported back to the Precambrian period, when Earth was transforming from a dead planet to a living one.” My answer surprised me. I still had access to my academic knowledge.

“I think you are right,” Damu responded telepathically. “See the grass meadows? Grass was the first vegetation to emerge from the age of hidden life.”

“Yes, Damu, I see. And look there, to the left,” I said, amazed that we could “see” anything in our disembodied state. “The bands of rock in that outcropping are sedimentary strata, further evidence that this is the Proterozoic era, the age of “first” life.

“Then we are seeing Earth as it existed four and a half billion years ago,” Minkah marveled. “The moon hasn’t even formed yet.”

“Science has always asserted that life during this period was only microscopic or bacteriological,” Damu said. “How is our clay-born host even possible?”

I considered Damu’s question. The answer hit me like a lightning bolt.

“Sulfur!” I exclaimed. “It must be the sulfur in the fissure and the lagoon. The amino acids cysteine and methionine contain sulfur, as do all polypeptides, proteins, and enzymes. Our clay-constructed friend must be one of our earliest biological cousins. Somehow this clay thing, or clay person, has survived for billions of years because it was entombed in a sulfuric environment. We must accept that complex life has existed on Earth almost from the beginning of global formation.

“Yes! That must be so,” Minkah said excitedly, “My father’s body was found encased in clay. The only way this thing, this clay man, could bond with humans was to bind us in the sulfuric substance that serves as its flesh. My father managed to escape from the cave, but he could not shed the terracotta cocoon he was placed in.” Minkah’s contribution to the enigmatic puzzle we were trying to piece together helped explain our predicament.

“What about the eels? Where did they come from? And why stuff eel guts into our mouths?”

“We can only theorize, Damu,” I suggested. “But, did you notice in the lagoon, the eels subsist in hot, steaming, sulfuric liquid? “

“Yes, you’re right,” Minkah said. “What are eels but fish?”

I think I follow,” Damu replied. Earth’s very first organic life, even microscopic life, was culled in a protoplasmic ooze comprised mostly of water. Anaerobic bacteria, mingling with sulfate minerals, and incubating in a kind of hydrothermal placenta created the embryonic atmosphere that produced fish, or, in this case, eels.

“The clay people..., the clay-borns as you called them, Damu,” Minkah continued, “harvested eels for food.”

“That’s right, Minkah,” I agreed. “Eels possess strong electric charges. Electricity is generally agreed to be the allusive ingredient that animates life. By consuming the eels, particularly their intestines, the clay-borns generated locomotion, movement. It also means, they were fortified with a cerebral and emotional stimulus, derived from the organic electricity spawned by the eels.”

“So, you’re saying that these ‘clay-borns,’ were intelligent, expressively lucid beings?” Damu asked.

“I am,” I replied. “How else can you explain what’s happened to us?”

“Touché,” Damu murmured thoughtfully.

“Energy is radiated light,” I went on. “Universally, matter is held together by atoms and molecules. All things, and all animals, including humans, contain elements of electricity. That explains why we’ve been transformed into sparking, electrical fragments.

“Do you mean that the creature, the clay-born,” Damu asked, “fed us the eels guts to amplify our

innate electrical charges?”

“I believe so, yes. It converted our psyches to transmittable subatomic particles—neutrons and protons—to establish a reciprocal electromagnetic field between itself and us.”

“That’s how it channels thoughts to us and why we are able to channel our thoughts to each other,” Minkah said following along. “Astonishing! This primeval creature is applying fundamental physics and telekinetic communication,” Minkah deduced.

“Yes,” I concurred. “I suspect our flesh and blood bodies are still intact in the cave, still inside the clay cocoons. It is our mental energies that the creature is manipulating.”

“That means we are experiencing what the clay-born is experiencing through its thoughts, Damu concluded. Or better yet, through its memories.”

“Fantastic,” Minkah exclaimed. “We are experiencing mental time travel.”

Our clay captor was still moving swiftly, but it abruptly stopped and swung its great, round head from side to side. Floating above and slightly behind the creature, Damu and Minkah and watched the clay-born climb atop a mammoth meteorite and sit.

What happened next was the stuff of dreams.

* * *

Ensnared upon the rock, the clay-born assumed its Buddha pose; the clay-born plunged into another meditative spell, which produced a mental motion picture composed of its memories. The three of us not only watched the clay-born’s mnemonic scenes unfold, but we absorbed the creature’s emotional fluctuations, as well. We felt what it felt.

A kind of village...a cluster of dwellings appeared, each one a sculpted mound of reddened earth, hollowed on the inside and accessible by entrances shaped like enormous ovals. The clay-born focused its

attention on one dwelling in particular and soon, we saw what looked like a family of three clay-borns emerge from the abode.

One clay-born was clearly larger than the others. The second was only slightly smaller than the first and the third was noticeably smaller than the second.

It was not easy to discern their genders since the clay-borns did not possess visible anatomical distinctions and there were no apparent sex organs. Yet, judging from the way the biggest family member led the other two, I concluded the largest was the dominant one.

They trudged along a well-worn path leading to an enormous lake of boiling, steaming liquid; reminiscent of the geothermal fluid we'd seen in the cavern lagoon. Standing at the edge of the lathering lake, each family member stretched its arms over the brewing surface. Immediately, numerous electrically charged eels jumped from the swirling, bubbling brine. The soaring eels stretched their long, slimy bodies into the air like acrobatic snakes struck by crackling bolts of lightning. The eels had enormous, viciously sharp teeth protruding like daggers from their mouths. They looked dangerous.

But the clay-borns adroitly caught the slippery fish between their paw-like hands and pitched them over their heads. The wet, slick eels landed behind the clay creatures, plopping upon the dry, rocky ground, helpless. They flopped, slithered, and collected into a writhing, slinking heap that snapped and spit like a gaggle of downed live wires from telephone poles during a storm.

Once they had caught enough, the family sat upon the ground, facing the pile of writhing electric eels. Each clay-born picked up a sharp rock and carved a yawning hole in their clay chins. Then, we watched them snatch eels from the thrashing pile, pull off their heads and stuff the slick bodies into the maws they used for feeding. When they were finished, the clay-born resealed their crudely carved out oral cavities with clumps of clay.

Minkah, Damu and I had stopped communicating with one another. I had no words for what I

was witnessing. My companions didn't, either.

As the family lumbered to their feet, another large, hulking clay-born approached along the lakeshore. The biggest family member turned to face the stranger and assumed a menacing, defensive pose. It stood with its two elephantine feet wide apart and firmly rooted, and waved its thick arms, seeming to signal to the forth coming creature to stay away.

Undaunted, the advancing clay-born drew nearer to the group. When it was within a few feet of the stationary clay-born, it lunged into the other's outstretched arms. A brutal struggle ensued.

Neither would yield nor give way to the other. Suddenly, the stranger, who was slightly larger than the clay-born with the family, produced a massive amount of power, lifted the adversary high into the air and heaved it into the steaming lake.

The immersed clay-born splashed madly, struggling to reach ground, but it could not. Damu, Minkah and I watched, horrified, as the sinking clay-born was besieged by a swarm of electric eels. They gnashed it with their sharp fangs, biting and devouring bits and pieces of the submerging victim. Soon, the defeated clay-born vanished beneath the lake's frantic surface.

When the victor was sure the opponent was vanquished, it turned to face the two remaining family members who continued to stand in front of their diminished catch of the day. The next largest family member bowed slightly and deferentially stepped back. The smallest one sat down, dumbfounded, a partially devoured eel flipped its tail as it hanged from the gouged out feeding gap.

Because we were telekinetically channeling information through our clay-born host, we were also emotionally connected to it. We experienced robust sensations emanating from all the clay-borns. We sensed the agony of the drowned, eel-consumed clay-born. We were aware of the humility and fear of the submissive clay-born. But the most heightened surge of emotion came from the smallest, remaining family member. It was a gut reaction that was returned by the triumphant creature. I could identify with

this particular, delightful sensation because I had been reacting to a similar emotion ever since I met Minkah: It was the feeling of passionate love.

The mid-sized clay-born, who I now assumed was the mother of the smaller clay-born, stood a good distance away from the swooning couple, giving them wide berth.

In an instant I understood that we were participating in the romantic recollections of our captor. We had just observed a primordial mating ritual that took place billions of years ago, but this creature, who had survived the eons, was reliving the event as if it were happening now.

In order to win a mate, a clay-born apparently had to kill a rival. Afterward, the victor took on the responsibility of caring for its companion. This was a tale about the survival of the fittest.

Next our captor's thought turned to an instance of great joy and happiness: The delivery of an offspring. Clay-borns didn't reproduce as mammals do, but they did perform a kind of birth-giving ceremony. It took place on the lakeshore.

After a huge meal of electric eels, the two clay-borns, the victor and the smallest family member gathered mud from the lake's edge. They rolled the damp earth until they'd made three perfectly round, infant-sized clay balls. They stacked the spheres on top of one another, the way one would make a head and a body for a snowman. To make arms and legs, they rolled more clay into elongated cylinders, and then stuck the cylinders onto the orb-like body. When they finished this task, they had what looked like an anthropomorphic baby made of clay.

Vigilantly, they sifted through the discarded eel heads left over from their recent meal. They carefully removed the eel's lidless eyeballs from an eel head that they found suitable and pushed them gently into the clay surface of their creation's faceless head. Next they carved a feeding aperture in its small chin. Taking turns, its parents regurgitated eel flesh into the oral cavity. When the new creature's feeding hole was filled, the opening was sealed with a clump of

wet clay, allowing the regurgitated gunk to ferment. Soon, the nascent clay-born began to squirm, showing the first signs of life.

The clay-borns joy at their offspring was short lived. Earth was a new planet, constantly bombarded by huge meteors, asteroids, and comets flying through space at tremendous speeds. Frequent collisions with the planet wreaked fiery havoc that produced overwhelming atmospheric storms.

Our clay-born host remembered when it lost its family. Through its memory, it took us to the lakeshore, where it fished for eels to take home. Dark, rolling clouds covered the red sky. Booming, clapping thunder shook the bruised Earth. The clay-born had stopped taking the family to the lake because of the onslaught of perilous weather, including episodes of profound, torrential rainfall. Too much rain was hazardous to clay-borns.

Our host had already moved the family out of the clay house into the mouth of a distant cave. The house was water soluble, and could be washed away during the relentless rainstorms and so could the clay-borns, dissolving in mere, soggy clumps of waterlogged mud.

Remembering this day frightened the clay-born, and us, too. Thousands of blazing meteors and other wayward celestial bodies streaked through the thick cloud cover, landing in the lake and on the ground like steaming, smoky missiles that split open upon contact, leaving vast craters and spewing smoldering ashes everywhere.

Because it was alone, fishing for eels, the clay-born was separated from its family when the big meteor storm came. It took cover in a lakeside cave, hoping to rejoin its loved-ones when the tempest subsided but the meteor blizzard continued to rage.

Earth rumbled, growled and wobbled. Red-hot, molten rock seeped across the searing landscape. Finally, there was a great, shocking uplifting of terrain, a grand and magnificent upheaval of rock and soil, and the Ruwenzori Mountain Range was formed.

Because it had sought shelter in the lakeside cave, the clay-born was sealed into an underground grotto. All that remained of the once enormous lake is the subterranean lagoon where we first encountered the mysterious clay creature.

“So,” Minkah said softly, “that is the story of how the clay-born came to live in a cave in Africa.” Minkah was the first to speak thoughts since the clay-born began its meditative journey after it sat upon the huge meteorite. Minkah, Damu and I were still telepathically linked and channeling our thoughts to each other.

“Yes, yes, yes...” I said excitedly trying to express all that was making itself clear to me. “The clay-born continued to exist, alone, for billions of years. The lagoon produced enough eels to keep it alive. At some point it found a way to leave the cave. It may have even constructed the elastic, mud-covered threshold we entered through.”

“And when it found its way out,” Minka continued, “it went looking for its family, hoping by some miracle that they survived, too. The villagers had chance encounters with It. Just like the sightings of the Yeti in Asia or Big Foot in North America. They told others about the creature, especially their children. Over time and through the generations the legend of the clay man came into existence.”

“Something is happening,” Damu said. His telepathic voice was faint. “I think we’re headed back, now.”

Damu was correct. I experienced another spinning sensation, only this time, the motion was clockwise and I was being thrust forward. In an instant, I flickered through ancient space. I visualized Earth’s development from rock to forest to jungle. I witnessed the age of dinosaurs and their terrible demise, fathomed the nativity of human civilization with its wars and its progress. I floated in my mother’s womb, experienced my birth, re-lived my childhood and grew into a man. I saw myself studying, teaching and finally, when the spinning stopped, I was once more trapped in the clay cocoon, aching to be free. More than four billion years have flashed before me and now I’ve returned to real time.

I could not speak because eel tissue filled my mouth. The clay-born rose from its Buddha pose, its movements sluggish, its energy drained I guessed by its meditative state. I was aware of the lagoon and the cave surroundings. I reached for Minkah and Damu, but they were no longer in my head—the telepathic, psychic connection was broken.

What now?

The clay-born approached the clay pods containing Minkah, Damu and me. Our eyes were the only portions of our bodies not covered in clay. The clay-born came very close to me. It peered directly into my eyes. The creature's flat, eel-like gaze sparked with intelligence. The creature turned from me and moved toward Damu. Then last, it turned to Minkah.

Since I could not turn my head, I could not clearly see what the clay-born was doing, but I caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of my eye, then nothing for quite some time. I guessed that the clay-born had moved the clay sarcophagus that held Minkah.

Once again, suddenly, the clay-born confronted me. I could do nothing—neither speak nor react. Abruptly turning from me, the clay-born moved again toward Damu. I heard a muffled scream. A moment later the clay-born appeared in front of me with a clay cocoon lifted above its bulbous head. Its arms heaved and the cocoon splashed into the briny lagoon. The surface of the water fizzed from the rapidly dissolving clay. I could see Damu, now free of his clay imprisonment, his head bobbing barely above the surface, his arms swinging crazily as he struggled to stay afloat.

Next the creature lifted my cocoon and pitched it into the lagoon. The clay encasing my body began to dissolve on contact with the hot sulfuric waters. I flailed, flinging melting clay from my limbs. Soon, I was almost free. I tried to keep my wits about me, but I admit panic set in.

I floundered in a half-circle toward Damu in time to see a group of vicious electric eels close in around him. The lagoon became a spasm of voltage. I felt electric shocks, but Damu was the focus of the

seething, biting eel attack. They feverishly bit into his flesh, severely wounding him. The yellow green surface of the lagoon splashed with bright red stains.

Finally free of the clay, I swam toward Damu, grabbed his groping hand and pulled him with me toward the dry embankment. I shuddered as several eels brushed against my legs and stunned me with electric charges. Damu was the one who was clearly in trouble at that maddening moment. The eels were all over him, biting him and shocking him numerous times. I pulled myself from the gurgling lagoon. Struggling with my waning strength to pull him free and lay him down on the edge of the pool.

Most of the flesh on his legs was gone. The eels had tried to eat him alive. Miraculously, he was still conscious, but only barely. I looked into his pleading eyes. He could not speak but I knew he wanted me to let him go. He was ready to face his death, but I could not let him go. He was bleeding profusely. His eyelids fluttered, and he lost consciousness.

From the other side of the lagoon I heard Minkah's muffled screams. I quickly turned and saw the clay-born hoisting her over its rounded shoulder. The clay-born, busying itself with Minkah, paid scant attention to what happened in the lagoon. The creature had not noticed that I'd escaped the eels and pulled Damu's partially eaten body out of harm's way.

It is amazing what shock and adrenaline will do to the human mind. I was able to think with extraordinary clarity. I knew the clay-born's purpose—it wanted to take Minkah as its new companion, to keep her sheathed in clay so that it might start a new family.

Driven by eons and eons of loneliness, it was reacting to her feminine essence. Its romantic urges were stirred. I could not let the clay-born have Minkah. I truly loved her. It was now a case of the survival of the fittest. I knew what the clay-born would do. It would act upon its primordial instincts. And—I would act upon mine.

I knew I could not win a physical fight against the bigger, more powerful creature. But I had to

do something.

Now free of my clay coating, I realized I was naked. I vaguely remembered my clothes being ripped off. So were Damu's and Minkah's. The clay-born had removed our clothes so we would be better conduits for our telepathic journey.

Guessing I had only a few moments while the clay-born was distracted, I looked around the cavern. I saw my clothes lying in a shredded heap, along with Damu's. Moving carefully, so as not to draw attention to myself, I searched through the pile of rags and found my trousers. The pockets were intact. I withdrew the two iron ore pebbles I'd collected from the mountain alcove where we'd spent the night.

My Boy Scout training had taught me how to use stones as flints to spark a fire. I found some dry paper tissue in one of Damu's shirt pockets and made a fuse. Rubbing the two rocks together, I produced a succession of sparks. The sparks set the tissue on fire. I added scraps of our torn clothing to build up the fire.

Still on the other side of the lagoon, the clay-born placed Minkah's clay-covered body upright against the cavern wall and turned toward me. A moment later it started toward me. A shiver of dread went through me at its ambling, unwieldy march toward me.

Quickly, I broke one of the long sulfur sickles free of the cavern ceiling and wrapped one end with strips of cloth. I set my makeshift torch on fire and brandished in front of me. Still a good distance away, the clay-born drew back.

I'd remembered that during the fiery meteor storm, the clay-born had sought shelter—the creature was as afraid of fire just as it feared being immersed in water. It took another step back, hesitating at the sight of the burning torch.

I had to get to Minkah but the clay-born blocked the way. I did not falter. Giving my most fierce

warrior yell, I ran toward the creature, waving my crude torch.

The clay-born turned and lumbered away as fast as it could, well past the spot where it had left Minkah's clay cocoon. I chased the creature until I'd backed it against the far cavern wall. I had the advantage because it feared the fire, which burned and glowed with unruly ferocity. I realized then that the torch had burned through the cloth wrapping and the substance in the sulfur sickle fueled its blaze.

It was my luck—and the clay-born's doom—that the cave walls were mostly composed of sulfur, the primary component of matches. I recognized that, with the tons and tons of sulfur in the cavern walls and floor, combined with the sulfuric liquid in the lagoon, if I didn't douse the torch, the entire mountain top could soon explode like a colossal firecracker soaked in kerosene.

I laid the burning sulfur torch on the cavern floor and a wall of fire arose, instantly. The clay-born was stuck on the opposite side of the flaming partition. It would not dare breach the blazing barrier.

I raced back to Minkah, lifted her clay cocoon, and dragged her around the lagoon to where I'd left poor Damu. I had to free her from clay, but the only thing that would rapidly remove it was complete submersion into the sulfuric brine of the lagoon. Considering what the eels had done to Damu that would be tricky at best.

But how could I dip Minkah into the lagoon without subjecting her to the onslaught of vicious eels?

Almost as if on cue, Damu regained consciousness. He pushed up on one arm and saw me wrestling Minkah's cocoon. He gave a blood-curdling scream and, with all of his remaining strength, flipped his nearly half-eaten body into the chaotic pond. Instantly, the eels overwhelmed him.

A thought hit me like a spike in the heart. Damu was offering himself as a sacrifice. He was giving his life to distract the eels so I could free Minkah.

I lifted and lowered Minkah's cocoon into the hot liquid sulfur water. She struggled and began to moan but I refused to let her go. The clay coating was beginning to dissolve.

"Only a few more moments, Minkah," I whispered. "Please hold on."

She responded by arching in my grasp and shaking free of her remaining clay confinement—and not a moment too soon.

The voracious eels had finished with Damu and were moving in a piranha-like pack toward Minkah's kicking legs. I pulled her out just in time. The eels darted and swirled; not yet realizing their prey had escaped.

"We have no time, Minkah. I pulled her up and steadied her on her feet. "We've got to get out of here."

I clasped her hand and we ran like hell toward the soft, muddy membrane in the cavern wall. As we rounded the lagoon, I could see the clay-born. It was furious, heaving itself from side to side, forward and back, looking for a way through the flames. Just as I pushed Minkah ahead of me through the membrane, the clay-born hurled itself at the wall of flames.

I pushed Minkah through the membrane of mud and eagerly followed her to the other side. My last image of the cavern was seeing the clay-born stumbling crazily toward us, its sulfur and clay flesh engulfed in flames.

Minkah and I escaped the fissure and fled down the slope of the mountain. Naked, but driven by the urge to survive, we ran for our lives, happy to be alive, impervious to the frigid air, unaffected by the rocky terrain.

When the mountain blew, as I knew it would, the concussion knocked us to our knees. The pulverized top of Mount Margherita lit up the sky like a giant Roman candle, but we'd descended far

enough to be safe.

There was no lava flow and only a slight plume of ash rose from the volcano's cone. The sulfur fire sparked a minor volcanic eruption that was not volatile enough to endanger the natives living in the villages clustered throughout the foothills, but the blast vaporized the clay-born's ancient lair, a conflagration that the creature could not survive.

Several hours later Minkah and I stumbled into the same village where Minkah's father had once startled the natives who thought he was the ancient mud man. We were naked, unashamed and grateful to be alive. We had just returned from the moment of creation and we'd found safety in Africa's garden of human origin.

I felt like we were Adam and Eve.

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